

A ministry of care in the midst of conflict
by [Bill Clemmer](#)



I remember the words of a Congolese woman during one of my trips to the eastern

region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. "I wish we were as poor as the rest of the country," she said, "then everyone would leave us alone." In the Eastern Congo there is Goma, a city of 400,000 persons situated on the banks of pristine Lake Kivu and surrounded on all sides by volcanic mountains whose peaks pierce the moisture-laden clouds. The lush tropical forest that comes up from the valleys contains not only some of the worlds' most endangered animal species but precious minerals such as gold, diamonds, crystalline, and cobalt; the latter mere rocks, strewn throughout the countryside; rocks which when crushed with a hammer yield a dull metal (coltan) that sells on the local market for \$22 a pound and outside these borders for ten times that amount; in a country where people make less than a dollar a day. These are the 'mineral elements' that augment the age-old tribal tensions and boundary disputes...escalating local conflicts to international clashes, bringing in armed elements from foreign nations, ostensibly bent on righting social wrongs but in reality raping the land of its resources... and many of its daughters in the wake.

Goma is a city where American Baptists have centered much attention on in past years; not on mineral resources but on human suffering. Through gifts such as White Cross, One Great Hour of Sharing, and support from American Baptist Women, we have supported local church partners and initiatives. One program is Heal Africa, a 200-bed holistic care facility which takes in the women victimized by the conflict, operates on their wounds, listens to their woes, respects their dignity,

removes their stigma, and in the end provides care for their orphans.



I was back in Goma last week; this time, again in the midst of conflict. All commercial flights into the city had been canceled as

the newest rebel troops were as close as three kilometers from the city's borders, fanning out on two fronts, sporadically (I was told) lobbing mortar shells into populated areas. The UN peacekeeping troops within the city had a mandate to hold the line. I was able to hop onto one of the 3-hour UN troop reinforcement flights from the capital city of Kinshasa to Goma along with two footlockers of surgical supplies requested by Dr Jo Lusi, Medical Director of Heal Africa, who was in Goma with his staff carrying on, unfettered by the threats around them. "I'll send a jeep with a flag to pick you up at the UN air base" Jo told me over the telephone, "...and can you find me an electric drill with some long bits and screws?" The number of orthopedic cases from bullet and shrapnel wounds had overwhelmed their stock of orthopedic surgical supplies. How would 'TSA' react if I was carrying this hardware through a US airport, I wondered, as overworked UN security forces just waved me and my heavy metal-laden foot-lockers onto the clearly marked, white with bold black letters, UN plane.



The city was calm despite events around it but I was told that even a single gunshot could send the population in panic as happened three days ago when there

was a rumor that rebels had taken the airport. There are over a quarter of a million refugees

outside of the city who fled their villages when fighting erupted. Some of those had made it into town, some were in the surgical wards that I visited with Dr Jo Lusi, but most were in camps outside the city or worse, were hiding in the forest, exposed to rain, insects, temperature extremes, and lack of food or water. If things were uncomfortable for me inside the city, I wondered how they were for the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons outside. I also had a ticket back to Kinshasa a week later, one of the 'lucky ones' whose physical time in Goma and the surrounding area would be short and temporary. I would be as always, shaken by the horrific stories, but moved by the faithfulness of those who lived lives of temporal misery with eyes focused on an eternal promise.



The latter part of the week, I took a boat across the lake and rendezvoused with our partner, Missionary Aviation Fellowship, who then flew me and members of our

medical team to other villages, hospitals, and clinics... a little less than 50km away from the active fighting but close enough to the misery. The nights, we were told, in the surrounding hills are full of horror. Soldiers from any one of the many ethnic groups, break into houses in the middle of the night...raping, killing, pillaging. I spoke to a man who was struck by a machete in the head and left for dead...when he awoke his wife and children were amongst the corpses by his side. Our driver told the story of his neighbor whose house was raided by soldiers during the evening who threatened to kill her children and husband if she didn't hand over all she had. She did...and five were killed none-the less, a boy age two, girls ages five and six...senseless, maddening, discouraging. People go to their fields to work during the day but retreat into the towns at night and sleep in clusters next to schools, churches, buildings.

I arrived back in Kinshasa three days ago and lingered longer than usual when Ann greeted me at

the door with a hug. I have a list of things that beckoned my attention while I was away...a pile of memos on my desk, a labor dispute, a diverted shipment of medical supplies. There is a leak in the porch roof and I misplaced the biopsy report of a skin lesion that I wanted to send to a colleague in the States. I have over 140 e-mails that I have not opened including one from our retirement account that cautions shareholders from 'making rash decisions in these uncertain days.' Somehow all my problems seem trite in the wake of the tragedies of the world. I will cling to the same promise, the same hope, and apply the same balm ... as these, our Christian brothers and sisters on the other side of this country; on the other side of this world. There is a Balm in Gilead. It is soothing, and healing and yes redeeming... because of a promise, of a hope, of a saviour named Jesus, who is desperately needed, as always in our world today.

- Pray for the many who are suffering in the conflict that is taking place in Eastern Congo.
- Pray for peace to come to that war-ravaged part of our world.
- Pray for all those who are laboring to bring help and healing and hope to the people living there.
- Pray for Bill Clemmer as he continues to serve in the name of Jesus in the midst of deep human suffering and loss as our missionary.
- Pray for his wife Ann and their children, Jasmine, Eli and Joel – in college in USA, and Cassie (15) – in DRC.