



RUNNING FOR THEIR LIVES

By Stephanie Riggs

The Democratic
Republic of Congo

Rwanda

The heart of Africa is shattered into a million pieces. A million people a year have died in the last five years in the Democratic Republic of Congo, more deaths than in Iraq and Afghanistan together. There is a dark, dirty secret in Congo, home to the deadliest conflict since World War II. Women and children ages 3 to 73 are the targets of this mind-numbing war, and rape is the weapon, giving Congo the title of rape capital of the world.

The genocide that wiped out nearly a million lives in Rwanda is literally bleeding into Congo. The Congolese Army is helpless against the rebels fighting over control of gold, diamonds, copper, tin, uranium and 80 percent of the world's coltan, a mineral needed to make our cell phones, computers and PlayStations work.

There appeared to be some hope last year with the first democratic election in 40 years, but it's falling apart. The United Nations was called in for the largest peacekeeping mission in history, but even its 17,000 troops can't stop the madness. While the media focuses on the crimes, the real questions is, Who is recruiting these oppressors, training them and giving them arms and munitions? It's clear that if you stop one of them, 10 new recruits will rear their ugly heads - desperate men who need money or food to survive. The result is the raping and pillaging of a country and unspeakable crimes against the most vulnerable, the women and children.

A half million people fill the UN camps, but even the camps aren't safe for women: Decades of brutality, dictatorships and corruption have given birth to a violence so dark, deadly and destructive that no female is safe. Three-year-old girls are being raped so brutally that they need colostomy bags. Entire hospitals are filled with young girls and women waiting for reconstruction after being brutalized. Women are raped and their families are forced to line up and watch. The soldiers use broken bottles and guns to torture these women and girls to the point that they can no longer control their bodily functions. The light has left their eyes; they carry such deep spiritual, physical and emotional pain that they have checked out as their bodies struggle to go on.

Women who escaped to Denver are still too afraid to share their last names. Annie, who is wanted in Congo for speaking out on the radio, came to Colorado after contacting organizers of a Christian conference she found online. A journalist in Congo, Annie now is working in housekeeping at a Colorado business. She used to shout on the radio, "Women, stand up, defend yourself, say, 'No more.'" She was so afraid at the airport as she left Congo that she never checked a bag and arrived with nothing but her voice. Now she wants the world to know that the soldiers had beaten her so badly before she escaped that she blacked out; when she came to her ear had been ripped off and her body so savagely raped that she couldn't walk. Annie received political asylum but wants to go home and see the eight children she is still supporting, only one of whom is her biological child, now grown.

Annie was not just attacked once but raped a second time before she escaped. She, along with the rest of the world, read the story of another sister tortured in Congo in *The New York Times*. Here is an excerpt from the story by Nicholas D. Kristof, published: Feb. 3, about Generose Namburho, a 40-year-old nurse.

Generose's story is numbingly familiar: Extremist Hutu militiamen invaded her home one night, killed her husband and prepared to rape her. Then, because she shouted in an attempt to warn her neighbors, they backed off her leg above the knee with a machete.

As Generose lay bleeding near her husband's corpse, the soldiers cut up the amputated leg, cooked the pieces on the kitchen fire and ordered her children to eat their mother's flesh. One son, a 12-year-old, refused. "If you kill me, kill me," he told the soldiers, as his mother remembers it. "But I will not eat a part of my mother."

So they shot him dead. The murder is one of Generose's last memories before she blacked out, waking up days later in the hospital where she had worked.

Annie is not the only woman who made it out of Congo. Lutumba does housekeeping at the same Colorado business. Her father was part of the Congolese Army; he along with the rest of her family was murdered in front of her. Her sisters had been raped, she was pregnant and still doesn't know how she managed to survive. She is sharing a tiny apartment in Denver, thanks to a local church, with her daughter, now 11. They both feel that if we can help just one, then helping that one is better than sitting on our comfortable couches and doing nothing.

So I agreed to help these women and many others from Congo now in Colorado organize the Run for Congo Women 5k in Denver, June 27 at 8:30 a.m. in Washington Park. You can



register today at <http://www.active.com/running/denver-co/run-for-congo-women-denver-2010>

Our title sponsor, Shead's BBQ and Fish Hut at South Peoria Street and East Iliff Avenue, agreed to underwrite the entire race, so 100 percent of the profits from the run will go to Women for Women International, a group dedicated to educating and empowering women. It's one of the few hopes for women desperate to escape. The organization is helping women in Congo earn money, and learn to read and write, women like Annie and Lutumba, who says it was her only chance at a new life.

Annie, Lutumba and I invite you to come out and have the experience of knowing that you are literally saving lives with every step you take. That isn't a maybe. It isn't hypothetical or wishful thinking. I have met these women. I have seen their children. I have heard their stories, laughed with them, prayed with them, experienced the hope and joy in their singing and dancing. Over and over and over they say, "We have enough to eat now. I have the money to be treated, to get my child(ren) treated. My child is alive because of you!"

It's unbelievably powerful to be able to summon your courage and put yourself on the line to ask people to sponsor a woman for a month for just \$25 - that's all it costs to take care of a woman and her family. My prayer is that the run will be as big as the Race for the Cure and that if you show up, you will feel compelled to love someone more than you ever thought you could, even if that woman or little girl never knows your name. Where there is life there is hope, and our sisters in Congo need us more than most of us can ever begin to imagine. ☺

Stephanie Riggs is a veteran, award winning journalist, who hosts Denver's Movers and Shakers on VISTA TV, a new local lifestyle TV show on Comcast's channel 19, M-F at 7pm, Sat/Sun at 9:30am, or watch online at www.vistatvdenver.com. She also will host her own call-in radio show M-F at 1pm on 670 am KLTT in July.