

# Ageing in a War Torn Country



*Elderly patients in the Congo have increased access to basic health care as a direct result of your generous support of Help the Aged projects.*

Ageing is difficult anywhere, but no where more so than in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). After seven years of almost continuous war, over three million people have died, most of them civilian men, women and children. Tens of thousands of women have been raped and countless acts of torture have been reported. These acts defy our sense of how one human being

can inflict such pain on another.

Many died from the fighting but many more have died from malnutrition and lack of access to humanitarian assistance. Civilians are not unfortunate victims of 'collateral damage', but are in fact targeted unremittingly and remorselessly. Death and intense suffering have become the daily fabric of Congolese lives.

This is the milieu in which Help the Aged Canada has worked since 1996. Yes, it would be easier to work in other needy but less dangerous countries, but this is a country largely forgotten by the world. We are trusting that you will join us in this monumental but attainable task.

## Restoring Hope in the Congo

*by Sheldon Gilmer*

Help the Aged has been working in the DRC with the Communauté Evangélique de l'Ubangi-Mongala (CEUM) since 1996. The CEUM is a faith based organization which has helped to improve the lives of tens of thousands of people through it's health care, education and developmental programs.

Currently, we are partnered with the CEUM through assistance from the Canadian International Development Agency to help restore full health care services to three large hospitals and seventy community health clinics serving a total of 450,000

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*The fighting has stopped but the war in Congo has left much of the country devastated and without infrastructure. Bad roads like this are everywhere.*



Sheldon Gilmer has been involved with Help the Aged as a volunteer and a project manager for more than eleven years. He previously worked as a lay missionary in the Democratic Republic of Congo/Zaire for four years from 1986 to 1990. As our project manager, Sheldon regularly travels to the DRC to monitor our primary health care projects for the elderly and their communities in Northwestern Congo. Our current project will assist to restore health care to 117,000 people every year during the next three years.

# Joy in Spite of Terrible Circumstances

by Sheldon Gilmer

I am always humbled by how joyful the Congolese are in spite of their very difficult lives. The elderly grandmother in the photo below was disabled by the effects of leprosy but still radiated joy. What an example for Canadians!

Leprosy continues to infect many in the Congo. If the leprosy is not identified and treated in the early stages, then disabling damage is done. Often victims lose fingers and toes.

In the harsh environment of the Congo, a disability dramatically increases the difficulty of survival. While the Congolese families respect the elderly and are compassionate to their disabled, they also struggle to survive themselves and often do not have the resources to provide care.

It wrenches my heart when I see old women in their seventies (or older) struggling with heavy loads of firewood and water on their heads or swinging a hoe among the stumps and roots of their forest gardens. Their clothes are often shredded from wear, some women are not even able to cover themselves and are embarrassed to be seen.

We need to do more and projects like this one make it possible!



An elderly grandmother in Congo who has been disabled by leprosy.

## Restoring Hope (continued from page 1)

people. This is no easy task in a country where the economy has been devastated and infrastructures destroyed.

A short vehicle trip which would take you or I less than one hour to travel in Canada will take eight to ten hours in a four-wheel drive vehicle on treacherous roads which are nothing more than trails through savannah grasslands.

While life was difficult prior to the war for the Congolese, it is now almost unbearable. Hunger and disease are part of every day life and health care is only available to a fortunate few. Much of what we take for granted is a non-reality there. Forget about running water, electricity, good roads, stores to buy things, and health care. Instead, it's a long walk to the river or water source for unhealthy water, a smoky lamp for light, a trip to the forest for firewood and subsistence farming to meet all your basic needs.

**Can you imagine not knowing if your next dose of insulin will ever arrive?**



Sheldon visits Fiawe, an elderly diabetes sufferer.

During the war, over one third of the diabetic community died from lack of medical attention while hiding in the forest. Although Fiawe is in great pain, he is one of the fortunate survivors. It was moving as I listened to his plea for medicine to stabilize his painful diabetes. He had not been able to obtain insulin for some time.

Without electricity and good roads, it is difficult to get Fiawe's insulin to him. A complex "cold chain

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## Restoring Hope *(continued from page 2)*

system” must be set up throughout remote communities to store temperature sensitive medicines and vaccines in order to prevent spoilage. Our project is assisting to set up solar fridges in central locations and provide thermos boxes so critical medicines can be carried by medical staff on bicycle, motor bikes and four wheel drive vehicles to reach the patients.



*The Loko Hospital, supported by Help the Aged, is one of three CEUM hospitals which provides health care to the surrounding population and support to the remote community health clinics.*

Help the Aged supports projects which are environmentally sound and sustainable. To date, hundreds of acres of abandoned land has been rejuvenated through HTA sponsored projects and thousands of high quality fruit trees have been planted which will continue bearing nutritious fruit many decades from now.

### Basic agroforestry supplies for one elderly person:

• one machete	\$ 3.08
• one hoe	\$ 3.12
• one spade	\$ 3.06
• one grass cutter	\$ 2.97
• one rake	\$ 1.71
• one wheel barrow	\$ 44.00
• one pair of boots	\$ 4.62
• one watering can	\$ 2.85
• one pick	\$ 4.53
• one wood saw	\$ 6.54
• 200 tree nursery plants	\$ 7.50
• one water pail	\$ 2.25
<b>Total (Cdn.)</b>	<b>\$ 86.23</b>

## Trees of Life

In the Congo, trees are a vital part of everyday life. They provide firewood for fuel, building material, shade and fruit which is an essential component of everyone's diet. The sad reality in this once abundant tropical rainforest is that the forests are being cut at an alarming rate through slash and burn gardening.

The lack of proper agriculture techniques and crop rotation means that the soil is depleted quickly and every two or three years, slash and burn gardens must be abandoned and new ones cut. This means that some elderly people are walking four to five kilometers to reach their gardens as the forest recedes.

There is no retirement age in Congo. The elderly must work in the gardens until they can no longer physically continue with this task. In 1996, Help the Aged first partnered with the CEUM to assist the elderly with agroforestry gardens.

The project provides species of fast growing trees that replenish the fertility of the soil. The elderly are able to reclaim abandoned land near their homes in the once depleted soil. **These trees grow at the remarkable rate of ten to fifteen feet per year.** In two years the trees can be cut for firewood and building sticks.

Once the firewood is harvested, the elderly can plant corn, a vital staple of the Congolese diet, amongst the tree stumps and get a bumper crop of corn from

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*Mbio Ya Kotake, Director of Development for the CEUM, shows off several huge jackfruit from the successful agroforestry project sponsored by Help the Aged.*

## Grandparent Headed Homes

The conflict in Congo has been marked by the widespread use of children as combatants by all parties. The DRC is currently one of the countries of the world with the largest number of child soldiers. These children are often used as cannon fodder by the adult soldiers.

The trauma of the brutality they face and the atrocities they are forced to commit have a devastating effect on their physical and emotional integrity.

One of the impacts of the war in the Congo was the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS by marauding soldiers. This has led to the growing phenomenon of grandparent headed homes as many parents have died from AIDS leaving their kids as orphans. This is very traumatic for grandparents who have watched their children die and are now faced with the responsibility of raising their grandchildren at a time in their lives when their health is failing.

**They need our help!**



*The Democratic Republic of Congo has one of the highest incidences of child soldiers.*



### **Trees of Life** *(continued from page 3)*

the rejuvenated soil. By the time the corn is harvested, the trees have again started growing from the roots. This will work to rejuvenate the soil for another corn crop in two years. By rotating their plots, the elderly no longer need to make the daily trudge to far off gardens.

Another successful part of the project is the distribution of a select variety of fruit trees. These trees start producing fruit in just two years and provide fruit for both consumption and sale. The inclusion of fruit in the diets of the elderly helps to maintain their health. Extra fruit can be sold to acquire much needed clothing, tools, and health care.

*This is only one of thousands of jackfruit trees (close-up on page 3) planted five years ago as part of our Congo project. Thank you for helping us to expand this project!*

## ***Your Donations Multiplied!***

**Your generous gift to Help The Aged (Canada) for our work in the Democratic Republic of Congo will be tripled by matching funds from CIDA and the Alberta Wild Rose Foundation.**