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Pope Francis, left, meets authorities, civil society and diplomatic corps in the garden of the Palais de la Nation with President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo, Jan. 31 in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. (AP photo/Gregorio Borgia)



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Kinshasa, Congo — January 31, 2023
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Kicking off a six-day trip to two African nations on Jan. 31, Pope Francis delivered a terse warning to both world leaders and warring ethnic groups to stop exploiting the continent's vast natural resources and depriving its people of a "future of peace and prosperity."

"Hands off the Democratic Republic of the Congo!" Francis declared upon his arrival here in the Congolese capital city of Kinshasa. "Hands off Africa! Stop choking Africa: It is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered."

In a rousing speech at the country's presidential palace, the pope chided both outside powers and the country's political leaders to halt the endless cycles of violence that have defined the country's modern history.

"This country, so immense and full of life, this diaphragm of Africa, struck by violence like a blow to the stomach, has seemed for some time to be gasping for breath," he lamented.

The pope, going off script, added that the Democratic Republic of Congo has suffered a "forgotten genocide."



Pope Francis and Congolese President Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo attend a welcome ceremony at the Palais de la Nation Jan. 31 in Kinshasa, Congo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Francis centered his nearly 20-minute remarks around the image of the diamond. It is one of the country's most valued natural resources, but also at the root of widespread exploitation and seemingly endless war — from the time when early European colonizers sought to plunder the land over a century ago, to the various armed rebel groups competing over its resources today.

"Political exploitation gave way to an 'economic colonialism' that was equally enslaving," he said. "As a result, this country, massively plundered, has not benefited adequately from its immense resources: paradoxically, the riches of its land have made it 'foreign' to its very inhabitants."

"The poison of greed," said Francis, "has smeared [the country's] diamonds with blood."

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At the end of the 19th century, European explorers began to seize major swaths of land surrounding the Congo River, claiming an estimated eight to ten million local lives during their conquests. In 1960, the former Belgian colony — home today to some 95 million inhabitants — gained independence, with its fragile democracy constantly being tested by ongoing political, social and economic turmoil, particularly following the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda.

"May the world acknowledge the catastrophic things that were done over the centuries to the detriment of the local peoples, and not forget this country and this continent," Francis said, adding that the international community had seemingly resigned itself to what is happening in the country.

"We cannot grow accustomed to the bloodshed that has marked this country for decades, causing millions of deaths that remain mostly unknown elsewhere," implored the pope. "What is happening here needs to be known."

The pope's remarks were met with widespread praise, with the audience interrupting his remarks on over a dozen occasions, often with cheers and shouts of "amen."

People cheer as they wait for Pope Francis to pass on a road near the international airport Jan

People cheer as they wait for Pope Francis to pass on a road near the international airport Jan. 31 in Kinshasa, Congo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Francis' much anticipated visit — his fifth to the African continent since becoming pope in 2013 and the first papal visit to Congo since Pope John Paul II visited in 1985 — comes following a postponement in July 2022 due to the pope's ongoing issues with his knee.

As Francis arrived on Jan. 31, tens of thousands of onlookers cheered, danced and waved banners and flags bearing images of the pontiff as they lined the main road from the airport to the city center, along the pope's route through town.

After three days in Congo, Francis will travel to war-torn South Sudan for a historic visit with leaders of the Church of England and Church of Scotland for what Francis has described as a "pilgrimage of peace."



Pope Francis is welcomed by Prime Minister Sama Lukonde as he arrives at the international airport Jan. 31 in Kinshasa, Congo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

The pope's arrival in Congo comes after a highly contested presidential election in 2018, where the country's Catholic bishops were responsible for deploying some

40,000 election monitors in an effort to limit corruption and guarantee security. The closely watched election marked the first time since the country's independence that there had been a peaceful transfer of power to a new government.

At the presidential palace on Jan. 31, seated next to President Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo, Francis urged the country's civic leaders to commit to transparency, especially ahead of what is expected to be another divisive presidential election later this year.

"Those holding civil and governmental offices are called to operate with crystalline clarity, experiencing the charge they have received as a means of serving society," said the pope. "Power is meaningful only if it becomes a form of service."

The pope went on to call for "free, transparent and credible elections," that include greater participation of young people, women and other marginalized groups.

With ongoing war among various ethnic groups in the country's east and international superpowers like China, Russia and the United States vying for mining contracts for critical natural resources that are essential to transition to green energy, Francis charged the country's leaders to be good stewards of their land, which he said serves as one of the "great green lungs of the world."



Pope Francis and Congolese President Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo attend a welcome ceremony at the Palais de la Nation Jan. 31 in Kinshasa, Congo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

"May no one be manipulated, much less bought, by those who would foment violence in the country, and exploit it in order to make shameful business deals," said the pope.

During the seven-hour flight from Rome, the 86-year-old pontiff — making one of his most closely watched and physically demanding international voyages of his 10-year papacy — remained seated as he greeted journalists.

As the papal plane crossed over Algeria, the pope paused in silent prayer for the thousands of migrants who have died attempting to cross the Sahara Desert in search of what he called "a bit of freedom."

On Wednesday, Feb. 1, during his first full day in Congo, Francis will turn his attention to the country's rapidly growing Catholic population — the largest on the African continent — where he will celebrate Mass for a crowd expected to reach over a million participants.

Related: Congo is being 'martyred' for its natural resources. Will Pope Francis challenge the US, China?
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