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Pope Francis blesses Bijoux Mukumbi Kamala, her twin daughters and her friend Legge Kissa

Pope Francis blesses Bijoux Mukumbi Kamala, her twin daughters and her friend Legge Kissa Catarina during a meeting with victims of violence from eastern Congo in the apostolic nunciature in Kinshasa Feb. 1. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Kinshasa, Congo — February 1, 2023
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Pope Francis on Feb. 1 decried the "insatiable greed" fueling decades of continuing violence in eastern Congo, and spotlighted the plight of more than five million people who have been forced to flee the fighting on the second day of his two-country African tour.

In an emotional meeting with victims and internally displaced persons at the Vatican ambassador's residence, Francis listened intently as he heard unfiltered accounts of their harrowing recent past.

Sixteen-year-old Ladislas Kambale Kombi of Butembo-Beni told Francis of watching armed rebels use a machete to kill his father, before kidnapping his mother and leaving him and his three siblings orphaned.

Bijoux Makumbi Kamala, a 17-year-old from Goma, shared her experience of being raped several times a day for some 19 months, resulting in the birth of twin girls. Emelda M'karhungulu of Bugobe, 16, spoke of suffering daily abuse and even being forced to eat the human flesh of men killed by their captors.

After listening to their testimonials, Francis physically embraced the wounds and mutilated limbs of those who spoke, and both begged God for an end to the country's violence and blasted those who profit from Congo's instability.

"To every family that grieves or is displaced by the burning of villages and other war crimes, to the survivors of sexual violence and to every injured child and adult, I say: I am with you," said the pope. "I want to bring you God's caress."

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Over the last three decades, following the 1994 Rwanda genocide, more than 120 armed rebel groups have perpetuated ongoing cruelty and bloodshed among those living along Congo's eastern border. More than 5.5 million people have been displaced, as various groups have sought to profit over the country's bountiful natural resources through illicit mining practices.

"It causes indignation to know that the insecurity, violence and war that tragically affect so many people are disgracefully fueled not only by outside forces, but also from within, for the sake of pursuing private interests and advantage," said Francis.

"I turn to our Father in heaven, who wants us all to be brothers and sisters on the earth: I humbly bow my head and, with pain in my heart, ask him to forgive the violence of man against man," he prayed. "Father, have mercy on us."

During the hour-long encounter, the smiles and jubilation that defined Francis' celebration of Mass earlier in the day — drawing over one million Catholics from around the country to the nation's capital — turned to tears and sorrow as the pope turned his attention to the nation's east, saying the country would not experience a lasting peace until peace reigns in its eastern part.

"What a scandal and what hypocrisy, as people are being raped and killed, while the commerce that causes this violence and death continues to flourish!" Francis lamented.

Pope Francis caresses the cheek of a woman whose hand was amputated in the violence that

Pope Francis caresses the cheek of a woman whose hand was amputated in the violence that continues to plague the eastern part of Congo. The pope met victims of violence Feb. 1 at the apostolic nunciature in Kinshasa. (CNS/Vatican Media)

While the pope's initial itinerary for the visit, originally scheduled for July 2022, included a day-trip to Goma, a city on the border with Rwanda that has been a center of violence, such a visit was deemed unsafe due to the heightened violence and conflict since last fall.

Instead, the pope met with nearly 20 internally displaced persons at the residence of the Vatican's ambassador to Congo, where he told the country's majority Catholic population to lean on their faith and "demilitarize" their hearts against participating in violence.

"Remove all venom, reject hatred, defuse greed, erase bitterness, saying 'no' to all these," Francis pleaded.

And to those perpetrating or benefiting from the violence, the pope did not mince words.

"You are enriching yourselves through the illegal exploitation of this country's goods and through the brutal sacrifice of innocent victims. Listen to the cry of their blood," he demanded. "Put away your weapons, put an end to war. Enough!"

"Stop getting rich at the cost of the poor, stop getting rich from resources and money stained with blood!" Francis added.

As the pope wrapped up his second day in Congo's capital, Francis held a separate meeting with representatives of charitable and social service organizations that work to aid internally displaced persons and other destitute individuals in a country where more than 77 percent of the population live below the international poverty line.

"While so many today dismiss the poor, you embrace them," said Francis. "While the world exploits them, you encourage them."

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>
> — *Pope Francis*
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Ahead of the meeting, Sylvestre Kimbese, a project manager here for Catholic Relief Services, told NCR that the country's Catholic social service organizations serve as the backbone of the Congo

"The church family of God in the Democratic Republic of Congo, without substituting itself for the state, invests in everything that promotes the education of youth, socio-economic development, solidarity, peace, democracy and good governance," he said.

Kimbese cited the popular Congolese expression "a church is the middle of the village," which he said reflects the idea that the church is both a structure and a

community that welcomes, listens and consoles all in need and "reconciles everyone without discrimination and in the name of the Gospel."

Speaking to these church leaders on Feb. 1, Francis agreed, praising the example they set, especially to the youth of the nation.

"They need to see faces that overcome indifference by looking people in the eye, and hands that do not wield weapons or misuse money, but reach out to those who are down on the ground and raise them back up to their dignity," said the pope, "the dignity of a daughter and son of God."

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Congo and South Sudan** feature series. View the full series.