Opinion
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Pope Francis celebrates Mass at Ndolo airport in Kinshasa, Congo, Feb. 1. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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by Michael Sean Winters

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Pope Francis did not waste any time in naming the principal socio-political reality that threatens Africa. In his first address upon arriving in Congo on Jan. 31, he denounced the exploitation of the continent's vast resources: "Hands off the Democratic Republic of the Congo! Hands off Africa! Stop choking Africa: It is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered."

It is a remarkable fact of life in Africa today that the blessing of ample resources too often turns into the curse of powerlessness and poverty.

Steven Nabieu Rogers, executive director of the Africa Faith & Justice Network, said in a phone interview from Freetown, Sierra Leone, that in many African countries "multinational corporations buy land for pennies, with long-term leases that say if there is any legal problem, the villagers who granted the lease must go to court in Paris."

He said that 75% of the arable land in Ghana is in foreign hands, for example.

"Hunger has increased not only because of climate change, but because agriculture has declined," said Rogers. The multinational corporations that own the land, even if they put it to agricultural uses, focus on scale, not variety, and ruin the diversity of agricultural products the people need to sustain themselves.

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While there are tribal rivalries that serve as conduits for the violence in the eastern part of the Congo, the pope made a connection that is too easily overlooked in some Western accounts of the violence. "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 said during a meeting with war victims and internally displaced persons at the Vatican nunciature in Kinshasa.

Rogers echoes the pope's remarks. "Congo is one of the richest countries in the world," he told me. "It has been exploited more than most as well. Most of the war is about resource exploitation, not just tribal rivalries." He explained that many people see great profits in war. "The pope's words sent the message the world needs to here: There is greater profit in peace."

The pope also denounced the corruption that makes the multinational exploitation possible.

"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," he said Jan. 31 at the presidential palace. And, at the meeting with the war's victims on Feb. 1, he again spoke against local corruption: "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."

Women are seen walking as part of a group of 80 youth who joined a "Walking for Peace" pilg

Women are seen walking as part of a group of 80 youth who joined a "Walking for Peace" pilgrimage with Catholic Bishop Christian Carlassare of Rumbek in central South Sudan, Anglican Bishop Alapayo Manyang Kuctiel of Rumbek and Rin Tueny, the governor of Lakes State. Pilgrimage participants were walking 12 to 15 miles and

then driving 13 to 16 miles daily for nine days to meet Pope Francis in the capital of South Sudan, Juba, upon his arrival Feb. 3. (OSV News/Twitter/Courtesy of Sr. Orla Treacy)

Meeting with some 65,000 young people at a local stadium on Feb. 2, the pope returned to the theme. "Keep your hands clean. For hands that traffic in easy money get stained with blood," Francis told the crowd. He added, "If someone offers you a bribe, or promises you favors and lots of money, do not fall into the trap. Do not be deceived. Do not trust shady financial schemes that plunge you into the darkness."

Rogers recalled meeting with villagers in Ghana whose land had been leased to a Chinese company. "The company approached the paramount [tribal] chiefs, people who work with local government, and they corrupt the chiefs, who often have control over communities through various tribal rules and land ownership laws," he explained. AFJN's efforts at fighting these unjust landgrabs has been central to their work for many years.

In two instances, AFJN was warned in advance about an effort to sell land rights from villagers, but staffers got to the town in time, and explained to the villagers what the chiefs were trying to do. "They overthrew the chiefs who were working with the multinationals," Rogers said.

In another case, a Marriott resort was being built in Cameroon, precisely the kind of development Africans needs, with good paying jobs. But the construction threatened some ancestral lands. Alerted by some expats, AFJN contacted Marriott International and told them what the franchisee was doing. Rogers told the Marriott officials, "You have a great reputation, the last thing you want to do is ruin that reputation." He said the company pressured the franchisee, and the hotel was built, creating the jobs, and the ancestral lands were preserved as well.

"What we are doing is giving people the knowledge to learn how they can act to protect themselves," Rogers said. "Water, land, minerals, all can be exploited. Our job is to shed a light on corruption and exploitation."

This week, AFJN's spotlight got a whole lot brighter as the world's most recognizable pastor lent his voice to the same cause of shedding light on the corruption and exploitation. Said Rogers: "It really resonated well when the pope said, 'Hands of Congo! Hands off Africa!' "

Editor's note: *Due to a technical glitch, some readers who signed up for Michael Sean Winters' newsletter did not receive it. If you would like to sign up again, please click this link. And be sure to forward the link to friends or family who might also be interested in signing up.*

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