

# Experiences of Reconciliation

## ACTING FROM AND WITH PARTIES TO A CONFLICT

### Political negotiations in favour of reconciliation, justice and peace

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo SJ

#### Introduction

If you would like to know what a Jesuit does, it is generally enough to consult the catalogue to see his “position”. If you do that for me, you will find that I have been a priest since 1997 and since 2003 also a member of CEPAS.<sup>1</sup> In brief, nothing directly related to reconciliation. Yet, most of my work has been focused on human rights and the search for peace, justice and reconciliation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

In fact, since my ordination in December 1992, the situation in my home country has seriously changed the direction of my Jesuit vocation. I was teaching in a secondary school in eastern DRC when the Great Lakes region entered into crisis (assassination of the first democratically elected president in Burundi (1993), the genocide in Rwanda (1994), the invasion of DRC by Rwandan, Burundian and Ugandan armies (1996) and the assassination of my former provincial, the Jesuit<sup>2</sup> Archbishop of Bukavu).

It would have certainly been unusual if these painful events had not questioned my way (and that of my province) of understanding the “service of faith and justice”.

Before this upheaval, I devoted the mornings to teaching in secondary school and one afternoon a week to promoting human rights with Groupe Jérémie<sup>3</sup> of which I was co-founder in 1993. I was equally very involved in South Kivu<sup>4</sup> civil society in the struggle for democracy and against Marshal Mobutu. With the arrival of more than two million Rwandan refugees in

<sup>1</sup>CEPAS: Centre for Social Action and Research

<sup>2</sup>Monsignor Christophe Munzihirwa SJ, assassinated in Bukavu (DRC) on 29 October 1996.

<sup>3</sup>After Groupe Jérémie, my starting point in the service of democracy and peace, I began working with RODHECIC (a network of Christian-inspired human rights and civic education organisations) in May 1999. At the same time, I continued my work as a priest, my principle occupation. Here, a commitment to democracy and peace concentrates on the promotion of civic education and defence of human rights, in three main ways - teaching human rights, condemning abuses and making a commitment to the victims of human rights violations. It is chiefly to talk about this work that I have often been invited to national and international meetings (The Change Maker Award received from the Protestant Diakonia foundation in 2005 and the Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Prize from the Nippon foundation received in Tokyo in 2008). However, this work also gave me the opportunity to stay informed about important national events in the sphere of human rights. This information has proved to be a major asset in the service of peace and reconciliation.

<sup>4</sup>Province bordering Rwanda.

eastern DRC in 1994 (with the transformation of our sports fields into extensive refugee camps), the secondary school and the Jesuits were forced to adjust. Besides my work as a priest, I also worked with unaccompanied<sup>5</sup> refugee children and in the refugee camps.<sup>6</sup>

## 1. An impossible reconciliation?

As a civil society organiser in South Kivu Province in 1995 I was asked by a group of Belgian NGOs, to reconcile members of Rwandan civil society (those living in the camps and those in Kigali). One week of negotiations in Nairobi culminated in a deadlock. The drama of the genocide seemed to leave them no space for a route to reconciliation and peace, even among fellow citizens.

At the time, I had no idea that this type of activity would become the core of my apostolate for years to come.

In September 1996, the raging storm moving in from Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda broke over DRC. Ever since, DRC has been desperately searching for peace. Leaving the region in 1995, I was left forcibly with one conviction “the pastoral priority of the Church in Central Africa would have to be a commitment to work for peace, reconciliation, justice and forgiveness”.

Second only to the political establishment, the Church – due to its history, influence and financial power – was capable of playing a role in reversing the trajectory which history seemed to have taken in this region.

I enthusiastically developed these ideas in the two years I spent in the “Pedro Arrupe” Institute for Political Formation in Palermo.<sup>7</sup>

At peace conferences on the Great Lakes region which I attended frequently in Italy, I met members of the Community of Sant’Egidio, which after its success in mediation in Mozambique, began to look at the Great Lakes.

## 2. In the corridors of political negotiations

In 1999, when DRC was at war with Rwandan, Burundian and Ugandan-backed rebel groups, the president, Désiré Kabila, appealed to the Community of Sant’Egidio to mediate between DRC and the rebel movements.

Fr. Matteo Zuppi of Sant’Egidio asked me to help them in this task. The mediation also needed a meeting place. I appealed to my province and CEPAS, asking the Society to provide a framework for meetings between Congolese politicians, civil society and the mediators, the former president of

<sup>5</sup>One of the survivors is now a member of my family, and lives with my brother.

<sup>6</sup>I was the first Jesuit Refugee Service project director in Bukavu.

<sup>7</sup>Rigobert Minani Bihuzo SJ, *Existe-t-il une doctrine socio-politique de l’Eglise ?* (Does the socio-political of the Church exist?), Kinshasa, edited by Cepas, 2000, 208 pages.

Benin and representative of the African Union, Derlin Sinzou, and Matteo Zuppi of Sant'Egidio.

My role during the negotiations consisted in preparing the necessary documents, selecting and proposing speakers from political parties and civil society and taking notes during the encounters.

I was thus a witness and frontline actor from the beginning in what would later become known as “the Inter-Congolese Dialogue.”<sup>8</sup>

In 2002, I was nominated by presidential decree to the preparatory committee of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue, a process which would put an end to the war and lead the country towards a political transition and subsequently to elections. It was in this role that I was invited to the political negotiations in South Africa. After making objections to the quality of my contribution, my provincial then proposed I attend the South Africa negotiations as an expert, with the advantage that my name did not appear on any list.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Cooperation with Sant'Egidio

Since 2004, after the Inter-Congolese Dialogue in South Africa, DRC has once again asked the Community of Sant'Egidio to help resolve the problem of the presence of Rwandan refugees, former members of the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR), the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and former members of the “Interahamwe” militia in the country.

This is since the presence of these groups has been cited by Rwanda as the principal reason for waging war against DRC. I was involved in this difficult endeavour which consisted in proposing strategies to end the armed conflict.

I was responsible for the following -

- initiating high level contact with the Congolese authorities,
- defending peace strategies, developed by the community of Sant'Egidio, to the authorities,
- briefing foreign diplomats interested in Congolese issues,
- organising frequent secret visits to Rome by different actors (combatants, FDLR, members of the Congolese secret services, politicians)
- calling (secret) talks with political FDLR leaders in the West.

These negotiations led to the first FDLR declaration in Rome, announcing their decision to reject the military option.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, follow-up mechanisms for the agreement promised by the international community were

<sup>8</sup>The inter-Congolese dialogue established the transition government, focused on ending the crisis of legitimacy in DRC and opened the way towards the normalisation of the country.

<sup>9</sup>The various representatives present came from government, opposition, civil society and religious groups.

<sup>10</sup>« *Du pacte de stabilité de Nairobi à l' aide d' engagement de Goma* » *défis et enjeux de la paix en RDC*, (“From the Nairobi stability pact to Goma commitment assistance” peace challenges and stakes in DRC) edited by RODHECIC/CEPAS, 356 pages.

never put in place. After the return of some hundred combatants to Rwanda, the machine seized up again. These negotiations continue today in an unfavourable sub-regional and international environment.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Aspects of the conflict

The conflict which has ravaged DRC since 1996 can be described as multi-polar, given **the variety of elements** and number of actors involved.<sup>12</sup>

- In 1996, a coalition of countries<sup>13</sup> resolved to topple Marshal Mobuto's regime, in reaction to, among other issues, his support to Jonas Savimbi and UNITA in Angola and the regime of Juvenal Habyarimana. Habyarimana's airplane had been shot down in 1994 and his death opened the door to genocide in Rwanda.
- In 1997, this coalition brought Désire Kabila to power. Subsequently, the sponsors disagreed over particular interests and some decided to oust him from power by force.
- In 1998, the conflict developed into a clash between two groups (through the use of proxy rebel groups). The first comprised Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and South Africa. The second, made up of Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe, supported the Kinshasa government.

The principal cause of the conflict was explained by the United Nations: *"The conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has become mainly about access, control and trade of five key mineral resources: coltan, diamonds, copper, cobalt and gold."*<sup>14</sup>

The principal element in this conflict is the Rwandan accusation that DRC had sheltered their enemies, who, according to Kigali were responsible for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. This viewpoint was accepted by a significant part of the international community who felt Rwandan aggression against DRC, both the troops sent to eastern DRC and support for the rebel groups<sup>15</sup> formed, was "understandable." Today, eastern DRC continues to suffer war and repeated clashes involving multiple actors. This is a sophisticated conflict which began back in 1996.

I am still currently involved in peace initiatives to normalise the situation in the region. At the Goma peace conference I was asked to respond to the

<sup>11</sup>At present, most regional and international observers support the current military option as the only solution.

<sup>12</sup>For further information read Rigobert Minani Bihuzo SJ, *1990-2007, 17 ans de transition politique en RDC et perspectives démocratiques en RDC*, (1990-2007, 17 years of political transition in DRC and democratic perspectives in DRC, edited by RODHECIC/CEPAS, Kinshasa, 146 pages.

<sup>13</sup>Angola, Burundi, Namibia, Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe and South Africa, under the guidance of the United States.

<sup>14</sup>Report of the United Nations Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, published 12 April 2001, paragraph 213.

<sup>15</sup>Congolese Rally for Democracy, (RCD), National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP).

concerns of armed groups. In December 2008, the Congolese government asked me accompany and assist the negotiating teams, representing Laurent Nkunda's CNDP rebels, armed Congolese groups and the government. These negotiations took place under the auspices of the United Nations (President Obasandjo) and the African Union (President Mkapa). A peace agreement was signed on 30 March 2009 and I continue to support the committee's follow up work towards full implementation of the agreement.

## 5. Lessons learned from experience

- This work requires immense patience as results are frequently slow and sometimes appear inexistent. Above all, this should not lead to despair, particularly in accompanying "weak" actors, those who have lost the war but are still very dangerous or whose cause has not received any international support.
- From these experiences, both painful and exhilarating, I have learned that this type of work cannot be undertaken alone. It is important to unite forces with other institutional and non-institutional actors.
- Moreover, it has occurred to me more than once that the bulk of this work is done in a very informal manner hence there is a need to operate in a flexible and spontaneous way.
- In comparing different negotiation styles, I have noticed that starting from our Christian values makes it easier to shape agreements between participants. Bringing situations of suffering, humanitarian issues, respect for life and other fundamental rights to the negotiating table draws attention to the fact that beyond the search for strength and power are the lives of human beings to whom we must be accountable.
- It is an important guiding compass to keep the channels of ongoing "dialogue" open, promoting non-military solutions and bearing in mind the inequality at the heart of the conflict.
- Also important is having the courage to deal with underlying structural causes in the development of a conflict even when politicians try to avoid the steps necessary, deliberately forget events or distort the reading of the conflict.
- Negotiations must always be attentive to the poorest and marginalised, those suffering most from conflict. Being close to their suffering gives us the strength to carry on.

## Conclusion: support for Jesuit structures and interpretation of GC 35

Analysis of the context undertaken during our provincial days demonstrates that the whole province agrees the Society should get involved

in the effort to end the war. The entire province feels called by the enormous suffering of the population. All companions hope to help to put an end finally to the massive human rights violations, the rape of women and the use of children in the conflict. All are urgently committed to resolving the issue of peace in DRC, which puts national reconciliation at risk and delays economic growth and development.

However, as already stated, my superiors have never officially sanctioned my commitment to human rights and peace work. My province has always told me it is a “dangerous apostolate” for which a Jesuit commitment not involving Society institutions is preferable. Thus, every time there is a positive outcome, the Society celebrates. Every time attempts fail, the cross is carried alone. This is a heavy burden to bear.

Consolation in these circumstances comes from the texts of the Society. In fact, GC 35 is very explicit in relation to this type of apostolate: *“In a world torn by violence, strife and division, we then are called with others to become instruments of God”, D 3 no 16 and “This tradition of Jesuits building bridges across barriers becomes crucial in the context of today’s world”, D 3 no 17.*

This position is also reinforced by the last Synod on Africa which stated there is a great “need for the Church’s active presence...where decisions and questions are made which worry us” on globalisation, global governance, conflict resolution. “...All the root causes of ethnic conflicts in Africa must be faced without fear or favour ... be objects of a continental, pastoral plan of action ... reinforcing [the] presence of continental organisations (AU)...”<sup>16</sup>

The Society cannot thus get involved in a durable way in the construction of peace without rethinking, in the light of the recommendations of GC35 and the Synod, all our pastoral care, as many of our provinces bear the weight of institutions inherited from the past now overtaken by the challenges of globalisation. As the Synod asks, the Society in Africa is called to accompany **the pastoral care of the African Church’s socio-economic commitment. This will require courage, tools, structures and know-how to articulate a word of life at the heart of the darkness of conflicts and violence.**

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*Original French  
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<sup>16</sup>General report of the Synod.