

Coalition brings the Congo back onto the radar

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The Coalition for a Conflict-Free St Andrews, which is the first university group of its kind in Europe, organised a thought-provoking discussion on the evening of Tuesday, 24 April. The talk focused upon putting the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) onto the public agenda. Bennett Collins (STAND member), Callum Bryce (President of Left Society), Elena Georgalla (President of Feminist Society) and Jamie Marshall (Amnesty International member) jointly organised the talk, which saw two representatives of the Scottish Congolese Coalition give harrowing accounts of the current situation following the December 2011 Congolese elections, which were widely believed to have been rigged.

Despite the DRC being extraordinarily resource-rich, for instance despite the country having 64% of the world's coltan and 30% of the world's diamonds, the Congolese people themselves are amongst the poorest on earth. The country was ranked 187th out of 187 countries in the 2011 Human Development Index, and in the last fifteen years an estimated eight million people have died. This brings the gravity of the Congolese conflict to a much higher level than the ongoing Syrian crisis, which is currently receiving vast media attention. The talk aimed to unravel these seemingly incomprehensible facts.



Bennett Collins became involved with the Coalition when he became the DRC Education Coordinator for the Student Anti-Genocide Coalition (STAND) from 2010-2011. Before introducing the four speakers, Collins pointed to the ignorance of the global media regarding the harrowing conditions of many Congolese people, and also to many European and US-based Multinational Companies' blatant disregard for basic human rights when mining for 'blood minerals'. These include the extremely sought after columbite-tantalite, or coltan, a metallic ore used in the mass-manufacture of electronic devices such as mobile phones, DVD players and computers.

Beneath a banner which depicted two Apple iPhones with crossed machine guns, the first speaker, Dr Mattia

Fumanti of the School of Philosophy, gave a condensed historical explanation of the current lawlessness in the country, pointing to Belgian colonialism's extremely detrimental effect upon the lives of millions, and the political turmoil which ensued post-independence in 1960. It was revealed that the current violent scramble for the rights of coltan mines, as well as copper and diamond mines, was a direct cause of Multinational Companies (MNCs) trading unashamedly with the warlords who rule the country by force. Dr Fumanti also pointed to the disillusion felt by many Congolese regarding the United Nations' (UN) peace mission which was deployed in November 1999 and has failed to prevent the bloodshed and, most worryingly, on occasion has caused it.



Following Dr Fumanti's succinct historical introduction, Mr Jean Paul Kasusula, a representative of the Scottish Congolese Coalition, took the stage. Mr Kasusula gave heartfelt thanks at the beginning of his speech for the impressive audience turnout, stating that he and his colleague, Mr Gregoire Watupa, had previously felt "lonely" thus far in their struggle to spread awareness about the Congolese plight to the Scottish population. Mr Kasusula denounced the current Congolese President of eleven years, Joseph Kabila, and was visibly exasperated when stating that the DRC was ranked as having an alarmingly high global hunger index in 2010. Mr Kasusula added: "Congo is a country where you only need a seed to get food, the rains come every year, the sun shines... so why is there so much starvation?" Mr Gregoire Watupa then went on to discuss the recent December 2011 elections, which were widely believed to have been rigged. Showing gruesome images of opposition party members shot dead, Mr Watupa pleaded to the audience to raise awareness about these atrocities as much as possible, saying, "We are helpless, please help us".

Professor Mario Angular, of the School of Divinity's Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics, and an expert on politics of the African continent, encouraged the audience to join the Coalition, to put pressure on the University to act, and also on the Foreign Office. Professor Angular suggested that: "Pressure needs to be put on the Foreign Office about the atrocities that are taking place in the Congo".

Following questions about whether the Congolese province of Katanga should become independent, and disagreement amongst the panel regarding this, the panel closed the discussion by collectively agreeing that there was a need to improve awareness and to disentangle the powerful MNC lobbies which currently fund many Western governments. Dr Fumanti added: "Unfortunately, you need a lot of money to be elected, and the MNCs and lobbies try to make them take this money".



After a meeting on Friday 27 April, the Coalition for a Conflict-Free St Andrews told The Saint: “The talk produced an enormous amount of positive feedback. At the end, Jean Paul Kasusula, a former legal adviser for the Congolese parliament, said it was the ‘best day he had ever had in the UK, since he arrived here several years ago.’ We have received multiple emails off people wanting to get more involved, since many have never realised how severe the situation in the Congo has been.

The Scottish Congolese Coalition is more established as an organisation within Scotland. They have political connections but have never found the opportunity to reach out to the community. We are hoping that we can work with them to possibly draft legislation on conflict minerals and fill that gap in community outreach, while also maintaining an impartiality to the SCC’s political views. Nonetheless, the Coalition is composed of groups who look to defend universal human rights, so we will connect with the SCC on that basis”.

The Coalition has met with the University of St Andrews’ Principal, Louise Richardson amongst many other prominent figures, and looks set to make an impact, as Bennett Collins summarised: “Today, we have over 2,000 signatures on our petition: we have met with MP Menzies Campbell to discuss Conflict Minerals; we have been in contact with, and have received support from, MEP Michael Cashman, who has worked to address the issue in European Parliament; we have met with Louise Richardson to discuss our requests; we have been working closely with Patrick O’Hare, who officially submitted our motion before the Sustainable Policy Group a couple of weeks ago. In the meantime, we have released an open-letter video to the three CEOs of the University’s main electronics suppliers and even had a chance to ask the Vice President of Global Sales for HTC what the company was doing about conflict minerals when he came to visit St Andrews”.