

December 10, 2008

Zawadi Nikuze and AGLI Activities in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo

Dear Friend,

Recently the escalating conflict in North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has hit the headlines. The major city of Goma with perhaps a million people was almost taken by the rebel warlord, Laurent Nkunda. He stopped at the outskirts of the city, I think, because if he had taken the city he would not have had the resources to secure it. When the Congolese army was trapped in Goma, they looted, raped, and killed the people they were supposed to protect. The United Nations forces called MONUC did nothing.

Zawadi Nikuse is AGLI's presence in North Kivu. When the fighting first erupted, she fled to Kigali and then returned to the small border town of Gisenyi in Rwanda. Each day she would cross the border in the morning in order to go to work and each afternoon by four o'clock she was back at the border to re-enter Rwanda for the night. Her parents supported her in this daily movement, but as they are older and not in the best of health, they stayed at home in Goma.

"Zawadi" means "gift" in Swahili and I asked Zawadi's father, Jeremy, why he gave her that name. He said that he and his wife had four children and then unexpectedly a number of years later had her. She was for them, then, a gift. And truly she has been a gift to the work in North Kivu. Her most astounding attribute is that she is completely fluent in Kinyarwanda (the language of Rwanda), Swahili, French, and English. Frequently at international meetings she is asked to translate as she moves effortlessly from one language to another. Zawadi, like most of the people who work for AGLI in Africa, are most of the people who work for AGLI in Africa is young.

AGLI's partner in North Kivu is called "Peace Center for Healing and Reconstruction of Communities" and is an alliance of the various Quaker programs in the province. Zawadi is the coordinator of the Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities program in North Kivu. Other programs are Alternatives to Violence, mediation (also supported in part by AGLI), and change agents for peace (a micro-enterprise program). These programs work together in four of the IDP camps near Goma. Each camp has 10,000 to 20,000 people so they are dealing with large numbers. As we learned in the Kenya relief, you help those that you can since every little bit helps—people are so appreciative.

The big NGOs, World Food Program, Catholic Relief Services, World Relief, etc, bring in large quantities of food and other supplies to meet the needs of the displaced. But they all seem to overlook the psychological needs of the traumatized people. This is where Zawadi fits in.

(Please turn over)

She told me that every day she tries to go to one of the IDP camps and talk with people, mostly women. They tell her their sad stories. Usually it is something like a mother has just learned that her son was killed in the fighting. Or that the woman had been raped and can't talk to anyone about it. Zawadi says that she just tries to encourage them, calling this "accompaniment." I think that this is very important, but forgotten, work for those who have been displaced.

In the last month she has organized six of the Healing and Rebuilding Our Community workshops. The problems here are different than in Rwanda and Burundi where the conflicts are over and healing can be a linear upward progress. In the North Kivu IDP camps traumatic experience continue so that people who are on the road to healing, easily get discouraged and fall back into their old, negative attitudes.

Why doesn't Zawadi just leave Goma and go to a more peaceful place either inside the Congo or elsewhere? I think the answer is that North Kivu is her home, where her parents live and she grew up, that she has a most supportive group that she is working with at the Peace Center, that she has direct contact with people outside of North Kivu that encourage her in her endeavors, and that the people she deals with are most appreciative of her listening and whatever she can do for them. Zawadi has a very warm, positive attitude and this is essential in keeping up her spirits as she does this most difficult work.

AGLI would like to give Zawadi and the Quaker team there in North Kivu more support. We would like to have some funds so that women who have been raped can be tested to see if they are HIV positive. We would like to have a larger presence in the IDP camps with hiring an assistant for Zawadi so that she doesn't have to work alone. We also would like to do more Healing and Rebuilding Our Community workshops and particularly regular follow-up days for those who have attended the workshops and work with children traumatized by the events they are witnessing.

I have enclosed a description of the very complicated conflict in North Kivu. It was written by Andrew Peterson, AGLI's person in Burundi.

I hope that you are able to help Zawadi with this daunting work in North Kivu. Please send a donation, earmarked for "North Kivu Relief," in the enclosed envelope or by going directly to the donate button on the AGLI webpage, www.aglionline.org.

Peace,

David Zarembka, Coordinator
African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams