



The Rev. Edmond Kivuye (left), head of African Revival Ministries in Burundi, and the Rev. Dave Martin, Broken Arrow, sit on the "stage," an earthen mound, surrounded by 35,000 Banyamulenge tribesman.

# CONGO REBELS GIVE THANKS

## African Christians assemble after civil war

Story and photos by Bill Sherman  
World Night Editor

Editor's Note: Tulsa World Night Editor Bill Sherman was one of three Americans at a four-day Christian conference in rebel-held territory in eastern Congo.

**MINEMBWE MOUNTAINS, Congo** — When 35,000 Banyamulenge tribesmen met on a high mountain plateau in rebel-held eastern Congo to give thanks for surviving the war that split their nation, a white man from Broken Arrow was the main speaker.

Many of them had never seen a white man. "The tribal people of this area are highly committed, focused Christians," said the Rev. Dave Martin, who took a three-man American team to the Banyamulenge's four-day conference recently.

"Living in primitive conditions, they've been protected from so many of the distractions that we have in America. They seem to have only one purpose, and that is to seek the face of God."

Martin said the conference in the Minembwe Mountains was a life-changing experience for him and for many of those who attended.

"When you get this many committed, spirit-filled Christians together at one time in one place in one accord, you have a stage set for God to work," he said. "The presence of God was awesome, and it just kind of permeated the entire mountain area."

He said his experience on the mountain left him with a profound sense of peace and well-being.

The Banyamulenge are descendants of the Tutsi tribe of Rwanda and Burundi.

Their ancestors moved into the mountain region of the eastern Congo more than 200 years ago, and have prospered there. The tribe numbers about 400,000, many living high in the Minembwe Mountains without roads, electricity or running water.

They are a tall, proud people, known as expert cattlemen and fierce warriors. About 90 percent are born-again Christians.

They were a key part of the coalition of rebels led by Laurent Kabila who two years ago overthrew now-deceased Zairean president Mobutu Sese Seko, then Africa's richest and probably most corrupt dictator. After the coup, Kabila changed Zaire's name to Congo.

The Banyamulenge and other tribes in the eastern Congo quickly found Kabila's leadership no better than Mobutu's, and, assisted by Uganda and Rwanda, drove Kabila's armies out of the eastern Congo this year, essentially splitting the huge central African nation in half.

A fragile ceasefire signed in August shows signs of unraveling, with the Congo government and the rebels each accusing the other of violations. Government and rebel leaders said last week the United Nations' recent effort to enforce the peace agreement may have come too late to succeed.

The Americans — including Martin and the Rev. Ed Orsburn of Broken Arrow — became involved in the Banyamulenge conference when the organizers asked the Rev. Edmond Kivuye, the head of Burundi-based African Revival Ministries, to help them find an outside speaker for the conference. Kivuye recommended Martin, who had spoken widely in Rwanda, Burundi and the Congo, and is one of few men to conduct religious services for thousands in refugee camps there.

It took Martin's team four days to get to the conference, flying from Tulsa to London to Nairobi to Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, then driving a Land Rover northwest through the mountains of western Rwanda and into the Congo. From Bukavu, Congo, they took a chartered cargo plane over 12,000-foot-high peaks to a grassy meadow at the remote mountain site, 6,600 feet high.

While the Banyamulenge in the cities of eastern Congo are modernized, life in the mountain regions has changed little in the past two centuries. Value is measured in cows, and distance is measured in days' walk. Those attending the conference walked, sometimes for three or four days, to get to the site.

Even the conference organizer, Lazare Rukundwa Sebiteroko, walked for three days from his home in the city of Uvira to get to the event.

Despite the lack of modern communications, news of the conference had spread throughout the several thousand square miles of mountain by word of mouth, Kivuye said. Whenever Banyamulenge people meet on a path, they stop to exchange the latest news, as well as to find out how they are related.

When the American team landed on the plateau, a handful of people and a few dozen thatch-roofed round mud houses were visible, widely spread out over the broad plateau.

But as the singing began on the first day, people began streaming out of the mountains from every direction, a flow that kept up for hours, until 35,000 people were seated tightly together on the ground around a raised dirt "stage." A head count was taken by giving each person one bean. The beans were collected and counted.

Worship began early, and continued all day, broken up by speakers from Rwanda, Burundi and the Congo, in addition to Martin and another member of his team. Various groups of singers led the worship, accompanied by wood and skin drums and a percussion instrument of beans inside what looked like an old one-gallon tin gasoline can.

"The worship was some of the most incredible I've ever experienced," Martin said. Tragedy marred a Banyamulenge conference held on the same site two years ago to celebrate the overthrow of Mobutu, and the end to that war. The airplane bringing the conference speakers — some of the top Christian leaders of the area — crashed and burned while landing. All 21 on board were killed. Participants held the conference anyway.

Several of the widows of those crash victims were honored at this year's conference. Flowers were spread on the mass grave, and conference leaders joined the widows for a time of reflection at the crash site on a nearby hill, where the tangled wreckage of the plane remains.

Martin said there were some very unusual events surrounding the plane crash. Banyamulenge prophets 30 years ago foresaw not only the crash, but the recent wars. And several of the widows of the crash victims reported that their husbands had premonitions that they would die on the mountain, but decided to go anyway.

Martin said he is making plans to go back to the mountain. "There's something special there."

The Banyamulenge in the Congo and their Tutsi brethren in Rwanda and Burundi hope that peace with the Kinshasa-based Congo national government will help end years of fighting, and decades of persecution at the hands of the Hutu and other Bantu tribes common to the area.

"The Banyamulenge are like the Jewish people," said one Burundi pastor who accompanied the American team to the conference. "Wherever they go they prosper, and wherever they go, they are persecuted."

Many thousands of Tutsis were killed in pogroms following Rwanda's independence from Belgium in the 1962. In 1981, Mobutu stripped the Banyamulenge of citizenship, and periodic persecution continued over the years.

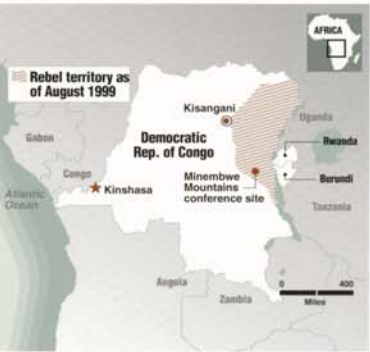
In 1994, more than 600,000 Rwandan Tutsis were killed when a radical military faction in the majority Hutu tribe attempted to wipe them out. The Banyamulenge also were victims of the Hutu militia who were driven out of Rwanda into the Congo by the Tutsi liberation army which took over Rwanda, ending the genocide.

When Kabila took over the Congo two years ago, the Banyamulenge again became scapegoats for the Congo's many problems. Hundreds were killed or thrown into prison in Kinshasa, and others fled the western part of the country.

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A tribesman (above) stands in front of the Catholic mission, the only substantial building in many miles. The Banyamulenge are tall and thin, and are known as cattlemen and warriors. Both men and women often live to be over 100 years old. The women (below) wears typical tribal attire.



In a region without roads, cars or electricity, many of the Banyamulenge tribal people walked three or four days to get to the four-day conference celebrating the end of civil war in the Congo. About 35,000 Banyamulenge, who are Congolese descendants of the Tutsi tribe, attended the conference.

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