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Colonial terror, the pillaging by the kleptocrat Mobutu and the incompetence of his successors have reduced the Congo to a state in ruins. British journalist Tim Butcher has drawn up a masterly portrait.

There is hardly an Africa correspondent who travels to the eastern Congo lightheartedly – the risks are incalculable, the hostile militia groups and their alliances inscrutable. Countless are the gruesome war crimes: tens of thousands of people have been beheaded, chopped to pieces or burned alive; more than 100,000 women and children have been raped and then mutilated with broken glass, arrows, spears or machetes. All in all, probably more than five million people have been killed. And the killing goes on, because marauding militias, government soldiers and other criminal gangs continue to fight for control of territories and natural resources in this totally desolate country, regardless of a peace treaty and internationally recognized elections.

As a rule, Africa correspondents visit the comparatively safe provincial towns of Goma, Bukavu,

Beni or Bunia to report from the scene of today's worst war. The more audacious of them drive a couple of kilometers out into the country, hoping not to be attacked and abducted, as it recently happened to a reporter of the daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

Not so Tim Butcher: When you start reading his report, "Blood River: A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart," recently also available in Germany, it is hard to believe that he really went on this trip, considering that nobody, neither Congolese nor foreigner, has traveled the full length of this route for the last 20 years. But the correspondent of the London Daily Telegraph actually traversed the entire Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire, from east to west, following the Congo River from Lake Tanganyika on the border to Tanzania to the Atlantic Coast, as the adventurer and writer Henry Morton Stanley had done in 1874-1877. Butcher journeyed 3,000 kilometers through the probably most inaccessible region of today's world, traveling by motorcycle, native pirogues or chartered United Nations boats, never sure if he was to survive the next stage or whether there would be someone left in the next settlement who could help him on the next leg of his route.

Africa's broken heart

Blood River – a journey through a Congo in agony

By Michael Bitala



Tim Butcher followed in his tracks: Henry Morton Stanley.

Butcher's travelogue is more than 300 pages long, and the account of his struggles through the jungles of Central Africa, his repeated success in finding someone to help him along, his fleeing from soldiers and militiamen is enough to keep one occupied right to the end of the book. But what makes his story special is what it tells you about the heart of the Congo.

The author calls the country "Africa's Broken Heart" – a name much too trivial for the horrors he encountered almost everywhere along his way. People told him about night-time raids by unbelievably brutal gangs that come out of nowhere and disappear into nowhere after committing their massacres. And Butcher saw only the remnants of horror, countless human bones and skulls strewn across the paths and the underbrush, so many that the survivors are too weary to bury them.

How massively the country has been ruined by decades of misgovernment and corruption becomes poignantly evident at one point of the book where Butcher arrives in a town with several tens of thousands of inhabitants who have neither paved roads, nor electricity, or hospitals or doctors. Butcher writes that this is the only region

of the world where the grandparents had known modern times and their grandchildren today have been cast back into the Stone Age.

Not only were there cars and motorcycles driving on paved roads in the 1950s and 1960s and trains running on tracks, there were also scheduled paddlewheel steamers plying the Congo River. Now there is no trace of them. The only relic of those past times Butcher found was a single rusty hubcap of an automobile.

If Butcher's hair-raising account were only an adventure story describing the current conditions in the Congo, it would hardly have made the bestseller list in the UK. But the book shows how well this journalist knows his trade. The author links his own journey to Stanley's discovery of the Congo with the ensuing terrible rule by the Belgians and the complete collapse of the country under Mobutu Sese Seko and the two Kabila presidents so effortlessly, so full of information and suspense that even the great storytellers of our time are deeply impressed. John le Carré called Butcher's book, "A masterpiece."

Tim Butcher: "Blood River: A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart."

Homes for hope

A student initiative helps AIDS orphans in South Africa | By Christina Nack

The founders of Go Ahead! started small in their hometown and built up a nationwide network of 300 members. Meanwhile, the aid organization counts prominent artists and politicians among its supporters.

Like managers, once a week the young board members of the aid organization Go Ahead! hold a conference call with their headquarters. They live scattered to the four winds. They study politics, ethnology and international relations in Peru, the UK, Turkey and Germany and are working together for more justice in this increasingly globalized world. Their decentralized network is helping to give AIDS orphans in South Africa a new outlook on life. These young people have seen the catastrophic effects of the pandemic with their own eyes. After taking their university admissions exams, they spent a year volun-

teering for God's Golden Acre (GGA), an initiative for AIDS orphans in KwaZulu-Natal, one of the poorest regions in South Africa. Sixty percent of the working-age population is unemployed; many are starving; and corruption and crime are a part of daily life. Every third resident is infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Time and again, the 'left over' babies are dropped off at GGA. "It really shakes you up," says Jan Bildhauer, president of Go Ahead!

The impulse to found this aid organization came from a tour of the Young Zulu Warriors organized by German volunteers in 2006. The young Zulus are dancers and musicians involved with GGA. In a musical, they tell their stories, calling attention to the poverty in their homeland while collecting donations. The response to their countrywide performances was absolutely overwhelming, and their success inspired the GGA helpers. "We simply had to carry on," Bildhauer recalled.

This led to the foundation of Go Ahead! in 2007. Nowadays, the network has about 300 mem-

bers. "This isn't about us clever Europeans telling the poor Africans what they have to do," said Johannes Hillje, who is currently studying politics and media in Istanbul. "We want to meet them as equal partners, mutually learn from one another and help them help themselves."



Go Ahead! supports four preschools in the South African provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. About 150 children attend these schools and all receive a warm meal each day. As part of the "Homes for Hope" project, German students built a residence for needy people working with locals and they are planning to build a similar facility in Uganda this year.

Construction on a Learning Center is moving ahead in South Africa. Go Ahead! has already collected €55,000 in donations

for it. It is planned as a walk-in center for 400 AIDS orphans. The Learning Center will be staffed by trained social workers who will assist the orphans with their schoolwork and help them organize their leisure time. Using a grant from the Baden-Württemberg state endowment, Go Ahead! also developed a program to train 'young ambassadors' from the poorest social classes in South Africa. This year, the first 12 candidates will be taught how to organize themselves and how to effectively champion their causes to politicians.

Private sponsorships are being organized for needy children, making regular school attendance possible and securing nourishment for them. All of these projects are functioning in cooperation with local partners, like the relief agency Heartbeat.

"We cannot eradicate HIV, you cannot put out a conflagration with a watering can," said Hillje. However, the enthusiasm he and his comrades-in-arms bring to their hometowns in promoting and seeking support for these projects is infectious. They espe-

cially hope to continue attracting young people, to enlighten, sensitize and encourage them to act independently. They have created a national network of local high schools and youth groups who then initiate their own informational events, exchange programs and donation campaigns.

In the meantime, the altruistic engagement by Go Ahead! has also made the rounds among prominent Germans. Actress Cosma Shiva Hagen serves as an ambassador for the organization. Politicians like former Minister President of Schleswig-Holstein Heide Simonis, former Finance Minister Hans Eichel, and Siegfried Kauder, a Christian Democratic politician, belong to the group's most well-known supporters. But the founders are most proud of the greeting penned by Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu, who sincerely thanked them for their commitment.

In Cape Town, they have another important advocate – Stefan Hippler, a priest at the German-speaking Catholic parish there. His book entitled "God Aids Africa," co-written with

Bartholomäus Grill – one of the executive editors of The African Times – created quite an uproar in the German Bishop's Conference. Hippler accused his church of moral failure in its handling of HIV/AIDS and calls for new moral teachings.

"We never dreamt that Go Ahead! would make such a large impact so quickly," says Hillje. For him, the success is also a sign that German youth do not have a "couldn't-be-bothered" attitude. On the contrary, many are aware of injustices in far-flung corners of the world and are willing to show solidarity daily. "We need mental connections, need real connections between people," he said. "Only these will lead to a reciprocal give and take."

"We can learn a lot from Africa," Hillje adds, namely equanimity, the appreciation of family and community and respect for elders. Additionally, he believes the Africans convey a joy for life that stands in staggering contrast to the harsh reality of their everyday lives.

www.goahead-organisation.de