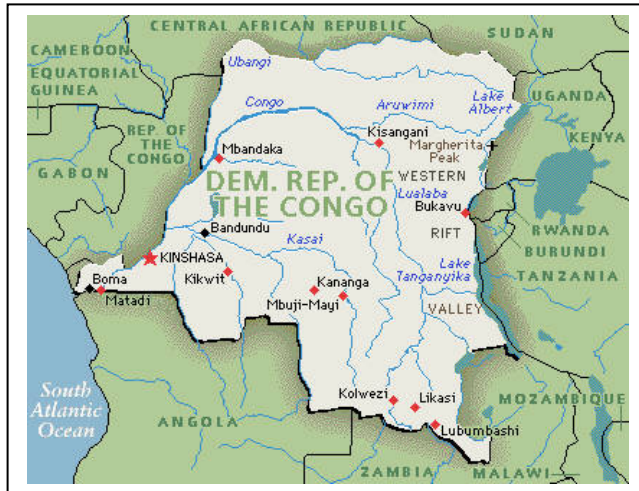


## Democratic Republic of Congo / Congo - Kinshasa



### History / Trauma

In the early 1990s, The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), once named Zaire, became home to over a million Rwandan Hutu refugees seeking asylum from a vicious civil war in Rwanda. Once in Zaire/DRC, some of these Rwandan Hutu refugees formed militias and began killing the indigenous Zaire Tutsi people. Rebel Tutsi groups developed in response and the country saw the beginnings of its own civil war. Throughout the past

decade, numerous attempts have been made to create peace treaties. While some of these have decreased fighting in certain regions, civil war continues to be a tragic reality in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The war is considered one of the world's deadliest conflicts since World War II, killing over 5.4 million people and displacing hundreds of thousands of people. The frequency and intensity of rape and other sexual violence towards women in the eastern Congo is described as the worst in the world.

In 2000, Congolese refugees began arriving and resettling in Vermont, predominantly in Chittenden County in the Burlington area. Since 2000, almost 200 Congolese refugees have arrived in Vermont.

### Language

There are an estimated total of 242 languages spoken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Out of these, only four have the status of national languages: Kikongo (Kituba), Lingala, Tshiluba and Swahili. From the 1960s to the 1990s French was the official language of the country. It is now meant to be an ethnically neutral language, to ease communication among the many different ethnic groups of the Congo.

### Religion

Christianity is the majority religion followed by about 80% of the population. Of the remaining 20%, half are Muslim, and the rest follow traditional beliefs. Traditional religions embody such concepts as monotheism, animism, vitalism, spirit and ancestor worship, witchcraft, and sorcery and vary widely among ethnic groups. Many people often merge Christianity with traditional beliefs and rituals.

### **Mental Health Perspective**

Many Congolese believe that both physical and mental illnesses are brought on to an individual by a curse or punishment from God. Many believe that mental illness will never go away and that it is a permanent curse on that particular person's entire family.

Traditional healing methods are very common in the Congolese culture. Often Congolese consult elders, churches and sorcery for methods of healing. Sometimes Congolese will even consult both physicians and traditional healers for the same issue. Herbs, plants and prayer are common cures for various ailments. It is common for sick people with limited or no access to health facilities to sit in churches waiting to be cured by God. The first reaction to a physical or mental illness is to practice sorcery or prayer to overcome the spell. Generally, it is only as a last recourse that the Congolese will consult a psychiatrist.

After the war, issues of mental illness, including depression, post traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) and drug addictions quickly emerged. Child soldiers and women are among the most vulnerable victims of Congo's war. Some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) attempt to offer mental health services to children; however, their informal training, combined with their often brief interventions aren't as effective as services from professional psychologists and psychiatrists. Very often, girls and women are reluctant to come forward to share their experiences as victims of sexual violence, even when in a safe environment.