



International Peace Institute Presents: A Conversation with Dr. Denis Mukwege

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Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed colleagues, and advocates for peace,

It is an immense honor to stand before you today, not only as a doctor who has spent decades tending to survivors of sexual violence but also as a citizen of a land blessed with immeasurable beauty and riches, and yet cursed by a long and brutal history of suffering. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a paradox—a country of unparalleled natural wealth in minerals but plagued by some of the gravest human rights atrocities of our time.

Today, I wish to address three interlinked issues: **human rights, economic drivers of conflict**, and the **Congo's impact on our interconnected world and environment**.

Together, these topics outline the fight for Congo's future and its profound relevance to the global community.

First, we must acknowledge the continuing violation of human rights in my country. The atrocities committed in the eastern DRC have made it the deadliest conflict since World War II, with over 6 million lives lost, 7 million people displaced, and countless women subjected to unspeakable violence. This violence, especially the weaponization of sexual assault, is not random but deliberate. It aims to terrorize, humiliate, and destroy communities.

In 2010, the United Nations released a groundbreaking document: the UN Mapping Report. This report meticulously documented 617 incidents of severe human rights abuses committed in the Democratic Republic of Congo between 1993 and 2003. It brought to light some of the darkest chapters in our nation's history, revealing brutal mass killings, the weaponization of sexual violence, and egregious war crimes against humanity, and even acts that could amount to the crime of genocide. The report was intended as a turning point, a guide for the international community and Congolese authorities to develop and implement a comprehensive transitional justice strategy to defeat the culture of impunity.

Yet, over a decade later, we find ourselves facing an unbearable reality: the report's recommendations have remained largely unimplemented, its pages gathering dust in a forgotten drawer at the United Nations. The crimes that were meticulously documented have not been prosecuted, and the architects of terror continue to live freely, often even

holding positions of power. This inaction has not only denied justice to victims but has perpetuated a cycle of violence that grips the people of the Congo to this very day. We cannot build peace upon mass graves, nor can we hope for reconciliation without truth and justice.

It is imperative that the international community supports the call for a new Mapping Exercise. But this time, we must do things differently. A renewed Mapping Report must come with a guarantee that its findings will be translated into concrete action. This means creating specialized judicial mechanisms, such as an International Criminal Tribunal for the DRC, and/or mixed or hybrid chambers within the Congolese judiciary, to prosecute those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. These judicial bodies must be empowered to operate with independence and the resources necessary to deliver justice effectively. We must also ensure that the recommendations lead to meaningful consequences, including targeted sanctions on perpetrators and their enablers, and structural changes that address the roots of impunity.

However, accountability alone is not enough. Lasting peace in the DRC requires sweeping reforms in our security and justice sectors—systems that have too often been complicit in or overwhelmed by the cycles of violence. The security sector must be rebuilt to prioritize the protection of civilians rather than serving political or economic interests. This requires comprehensive vetting and training of military and police forces, establishing strict oversight mechanisms, and ending the practice of integrating former militia members into national forces without accountability. We must foster a professional, ethical, and disciplined security system that can secure our communities and uphold the rule of law.

Equally urgent is the reform of our justice system. For too long, our judicial institutions have been under-resourced, susceptible to corruption, and unable to address international crimes effectively. We need to build a robust, independent judiciary that can hold even the most powerful accountable. This includes increasing investments in judicial infrastructure, training judges and prosecutors in international humanitarian law, and implementing measures to protect witnesses and survivors who risk their lives to testify. We must also ensure that survivors of violence have access to comprehensive legal support, so their voices are heard, and their rights are upheld.

Our people have endured enough. It is time to transform our institutions into instruments of justice and peace, rather than pillars of impunity. I call on global leaders and all defenders of human rights to support this vision—not through empty promises, but through concrete action that brings life into the recommendations of a new UN Mapping Report. We owe it to the victims, to the survivors who show unparalleled resilience, and to future generations who dream of a Congo free from violence and defined by dignity and hope.

The path ahead is not easy, but it is necessary. The fight for justice and security sector reform is not only about healing the wounds of the past; it is about protection of civilians, building a rule of law, and developing a foundation for a future where every Congolese citizen can live in peace, free from fear and full of hope. The world has turned a blind eye to our suffering for too long. Now is the time to act boldly, with courage and compassion, to bring an end to this cycle of violence and impunity once and for all.

But let us be clear: the conflict in the DRC is fundamentally an **economic war**. Congo is home to an estimated \$24 trillion worth of untapped minerals, including cobalt, coltan, and lithium—resources vital for the world's green transition. The paradox is heartbreaking: while the world races to build a future powered by clean energy, it does so at the expense of Congolese lives.

The proliferation of militias like M23, often backed by neighboring states, such as Rwanda and Uganda, and driven by economic motives, exacerbates the violence. These groups control strategic mineral-rich areas, terrorizing communities through systematic sexual violence and other war crimes. Meanwhile, the illegal exploitation of these minerals fuels global supply chains, from our smartphones to electric vehicles.

Businesses, therefore, have an enormous ethical responsibility. It is not enough to claim a commitment to corporate social responsibility while benefiting from minerals stained with blood. I urge companies to audit their supply chains rigorously, invest in ethical sourcing initiatives, and support Congolese-led reforms. Business leaders must advocate for regulations that prioritize human dignity and uphold OCDE duty of care requirements for mineral supply chains.

This economic war demands an economic solution. Businesses can be a force for peace, turning Congo's mineral wealth from a curse into a blessing, provided there is genuine investment in transparency, governance, and local empowerment. Otherwise, the so-called green and clean energy transition will remain red with the blood of Congolese women and children and soiled by the criminal activities of armed groups.

Finally, let us consider the environmental dimension. The Congo Basin is often called the "second lung of the world," a critical carbon sink second only to the Amazon. It regulates global weather patterns and stores billions of tons of carbon. Yet, its survival is intrinsically linked to the well-being of the Congolese people.

As demand for critical minerals accelerates in the face of climate change, we must not repeat the mistakes of the past. We cannot address a climate crisis by sacrificing the Congo's ecosystems and communities. The future of our planet and the fate of Congo are

interconnected. Responsible mineral extraction and environmental stewardship must go hand in hand.

I stand before you today not only to highlight these stark realities but also to call for urgent, coordinated global action. We must end the exploitation of Congo's resources that perpetuates suffering and jeopardizes our planet. We must invest in sustainable, ethical practices and ensure that the benefits of the green transition are shared by those who have long borne its cost.

To the international community, I say: stand with us in this fight. Demand justice, promote ethical business, and work toward a future where Congo's immense wealth is a force for development and environmental preservation—not violence and despair. Let us ensure that our collective drive for progress and sustainability does not come at the cost of human lives and dignity.

The Congolese people deserve peace, justice, and the chance to thrive in their homeland. Your solidarity and action can help make this a reality.

Thank you.