

## **Ambush**

by Sagamba Muhira and Dr. James Page

I am a refugee from the Congo Wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo and am now an Australian citizen. I have been in Australia since 2011, although one day in December 2004 still stands out in my memory. It was a Friday, and it was the day I was returning to my hometown of Sake, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, after the final week at school before Christmas.

But perhaps I should give some indication of what happened in the week leading up to that day. At the time, I was spending weekdays in the nearby regional city of Goma, about 20 kilometres away, attending school, and returning home to my family at the weekends. As usual, on the previous Sunday night, I'd enjoyed a family meal at my home in Sake. My parents and all four kids were there. We ate a traditional African stew, made of green bananas, beans and other vegetables.

I cannot remember much of the conversation that night, only that we didn't talk about anything unusual. Strangely, it doesn't bother me now that I cannot remember exactly what we talked about. My Papa (father) gave me some money to pay rent, food, and fees for school, and my Maman (mother) presented me with a special woollen jumper that she had been knitting for some time.

“Now, son, this is for you. And you make sure that you study hard at school”. I can recall her smiling at me when she said this, as, like most mothers, she was pleased

that she was able to give me something. I think she also saw in me something of a hope for the future, in what was a difficult time.

My Maman loved knitting, and the woollen jumper was blue, with a white stripe along the middle. I do not know where the jumper is now. I said goodnight to my parents, before going to bed. I didn't know this at the time, but it was the last time we would eat together, and indeed the last time I would see them alive. I have thought about this many times afterwards. What happened in a few days would change my life forever.

In the morning, I awoke and gathered my clothes together to travel to Goma, including my new woollen pullover. My Maman had already left to go to a nearby farm when I awoke. This was not unusual, as she often helped out with the work. I wrote a brief note and left this on the table. I do remember what I wrote: "Hi Maman, I'm off to school, and see you when I return". That was never to be. I left the house in Sake and walked towards the Sake bus-station. It was the last time I would see my home in Sake.

That year I'd started studies at an art college, a specialist institution within Goma secondary school. A friend had told me about the college, so I went along at the beginning of the school year, and paid my fees. It was a practically-oriented college, with instruction in sign-writing, screen-printing, making badges, as well as more basic forms of training in art such as painting, drawing, and sculpture. We also practiced traditional art exercises, such as still life drawing, and drawing and painting the human body. As with my other secondary studies, during the week I stayed in

Goma at student accommodation, and normally only travelled back home to Sake on the weekends.

Classes during the week went without incident. On Friday afternoon, I waited in line to catch a mini-bus back to Sake, from Goma. It was a journey I had taken many times. I didn't recognize any of the other people at the bus-station. The price with the driver of the mini-bus was agreed on, and it was late in the afternoon we left Goma, with about 14 of us crammed into the mini-bus. I remember the day was cloudy, and there had been some light rain. However, ominously, the radio and TV news had been full of reports of massacres and killings of my ethnic group, and thus I felt uneasy being in a public place.

The passengers were from all ethnic groups, not that this should have mattered. For this particular journey, however, there was none of the usual talk and chatter amongst those waiting for the mini-bus. The only talk consisted of brief ethnic insults and slurs towards the two of us from my own ethnic group – one older man and myself. Most of these insults were muttered under people's breath, but just loud enough for us to understand. A standard strategy in such a situation is to ignore such insults, and this was the strategy I employed. I just remained silent and, once on the mini-bus, just looked out the window.

One of the common means within Africa of indicating contempt for another person is to look at them and make a hissing noise, through breathing in, and then to look away. I experienced this on that day, as I had done previously on many occasions.

The mini-bus left Goma in silence, but I was happy that in another half an hour we would be at Sake. After about 15 minutes, as we were coming around a hill, we could see there was a large tree across the road ahead. Naturally, the bus slowed, and turned off the road to detour around the tree. It was then, as the mini-bus was travelling only at about 5kph, troops emerged from behind the nearby trees. There were five in all. They were dressed in camouflage uniforms, with caps and gumboots, as was often the case with soldiers and militia. The gumboots made the soldiers look a little ridiculous - but the AK-47s they were carrying were real, and the soldiers were holding these at the ready, with fingers on the triggers and with bayonets fixed. The dress may have looked comical, but the demeanour of the soldiers dispelled any sense of comedy. They looked very serious.

One of the soldiers stepped in front of the bus, holding up his hand. The mini-bus stopped, at which point the other soldiers closed in. One banged on the door of the mini-bus:

“OK. Everyone is to get out and stand at the side of this bus!”

Those in the mini-bus stood up, about to leave as commanded. In circumstances like this, it is wise to do exactly as you're told, and thus passengers arose and started to move towards the bus door. I noticed then that there was a mixture of government troops and *Interamhamwe* or irregular militia. I know they were government troops, as they were speaking to each other in Linguala, the local language. I remember praying “God, be with me”. I knew what was likely to happen.

The first passenger the soldiers pulled from the bus was an old man, a farmer from a local village - the other person on the mini-bus who was a member of my ethnic group. The fact that he was a member of my ethnic group was clear from his appearance. He was pushed to the ground. I can remember him calling out “No! No! No! I’m innocent. Please!”, as if he was aware of what was about to happen. Very quickly, a group of soldiers gathered around him, and started beating him with clubs, smashing his head. Soon there was no sound from the old man. The rest of us in the bus could do nothing about this. The feeling of helplessness in such a situation is perhaps the worst thing of all.

My mind at that moment told me that I would be next. I too was going to be killed. The fact that I was a member of the ethnic group the soldiers were targeting was obvious. So, instantaneously, I made the decision that I might as well try to escape – better this, than be slaughtered like an animal. At times like this you really don’t have time to think. You switch to instinct. Survival takes over.

Nobody within the mini-bus was saying anything. You don’t want to attract attention in a situation like this. The soldiers standing outside the mini-bus were now yelling and gesturing to all of us to hurry up, and to line up by the bus, and, without speaking, we started to leave through the door of the mini-bus. Outside of the bus, there were two soldiers beside the door. As I came to the bus door, I made up my mind – as soon as I stepped out of the bus onto the ground, I would simply start running.

The moment I was out of the mini-bus, everything happened very quickly. I started running. At the very moment, I remember one of the soldiers beside the bus door making a grab at my shirt. I remember swinging my elbow around and hitting him in the face. I'm not sure whether this was instinctive, or part of my martial arts training as a kid. I do recall now that in martial arts training we were taught that the elbow can be used as a weapon.

I didn't have any specific objective when I started running. I cannot even remember what direction I was running – only that it was away from the government troops there. My thinking was that I would die if I didn't escape, so there was no real alternative. It was just instinctive. When your life is at risk, acting on instinct becomes a very powerful factor.

Things were happening so fast, that I'm not quite sure what stopped me running further. I think someone threw something at my legs, perhaps a chain or some rope. I think I covered about ten metres, before I fell to the ground. I struggled to get up, to remove the entanglement around my legs, and to keep running, but wasn't quick enough. In seconds, I was surrounded by a group of soldiers.

Soon they started beating me. I am not sure what they were beating me with - it was probably with a *ubuhiri*, a short club, sometimes with nails in the end, but probably also the butts of their AK-47 automatic rifles. Some were kicking me and stomping on me. I was screaming at the time – I am not sure what I was saying, but I think I was calling for my Maman.

I can remember trying to roll around on the ground to avoid being hit. I also pulled my arms around my head, as I was rolling around the ground trying to avoid the blows. I'm not sure whether this was instinctive, or whether I knew that the head is the most vulnerable part of the body. One or two started stabbing with their bayonets. I only know this because later I could see the scar-tissue where the bayonets connected with me, including my fingers, where I was shielding my head. They hit me all over my body, in the head, on my chest, shoulders and arms, but especially on my legs.

I can remember them joking: "Hey, boy, try to run now!"

During the attack, the sound of the rifle butts hitting me sounded like thunder. It was like this was happening to another person. I looked down, and I could see white bones from my legs sticking out at angles. And there was blood spurting everywhere. Strangely, I didn't feel pain at the time – I think I was in shock. At the time, I prayed, "My God, am I now about to die? I will die without any children". One of the reasons I prayed this was the importance of children within African culture. I then lost consciousness.

One obvious question is why the soldiers didn't simply shoot us. The answer lies, at least in part, with the Rwandan Genocide. Part of the rationale behind the culture of killing in the Rwandan Genocide was that bullets were expensive. By clubbing or stabbing people to death, the killers were saving money. This, yet again, this was an example of the killing in the Congo being an extension of the Rwandan Genocide.

I regained consciousness that day only briefly. I came to in what I now know was a four-wheel drive being driven by MSF, otherwise known as *Médecins sans Frontières*, an international organization of medical volunteers. I could recognize them by their large red logo on their hats and jackets. I was familiar with teams of MSF working in the Congo, due to their work in vaccination and water projects. But their major work was in rescuing and treating victims of war. And now they were taking me to the Goma Hospital. I looked around me, and one MSF staffer, probably a doctor, was trying to get me to talk. He kept asking my name, but I couldn't answer. I noticed that I was breathing blood, and then lost consciousness again.

Later I would learn that asking an injured person his or her name is a standard way of determining whether the person has brain injury. I had facial injuries due to the beating, despite my attempts to shield my head. Yet my placing of my arms around my head and my action in rolling around is probably what saved me from brain injury or death. I would also later learn that the beating damaged my shoulder, which would continue to become easily dislocated. At the time I wasn't aware of this.

Sometimes I don't want to remember that day. But it is important to remember, because there were and still are many people in similar situations around the world, and I think it is important for the truth to be told. The Congo War started because the world was not concerned enough to stop the war, and conflict continues because people do not want war and violence to cease. At least, they do not want war to cease enough. We need to tell the truth about what happens in war, that ordinary people and



not just the soldiers get killed and injured. Many people have experienced much worse than I did, but I know from experience what war is really like.

We need, somehow, to say: never again. We need to heal and overcome the violence of the past. And we need to take action so that war and violence ceas to be seen as a way of resolving our problems.