Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Social Justice



Women sit outside a dwelling amid concerns about the spread of the coronavirus disease March 23, 2020, in Goma, Congo. (CNS/Olivia Acland, Reuters)



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My country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC, is one of the largest areas in the world that mines cobalt for cellphones and other electronics. In the past, we were famous for copper mining, and then cobalt was discovered — as technology kept expanding, it was needed worldwide. This boom brought great changes, including increased conflicts, lasting for years. It is a complex situation, with political and economic reasons made worse by armed militias. All three factors reflect the desire for power and control of national resources for personal gain.

Along with tribal and ethnic controversies, neighboring countries involve themselves in these same interests. Unfortunately, even COVID-19 has not lessened the conflict — much of which occurs in the eastern provinces, including Katanga, where we Ursuline Sisters have four communities. In a recent local conflict, some of our friends were killed, so conflict is close by.

Contrary to what one might think from the constant conflict, the wealth accumulated from cobalt mining offers very little benefit to the ordinary person. Cobalt mines were first owned by the government agency, La Generale des Carrieres et des Mines, or GCM; it gradually ceded many of its quarries to independent mining operators. The practice of these independent companies, to make money for themselves, has been to hire workers on renewable contracts which permit easy firing.

Because of the unreliable employment, families are turning to artisanal mining. Women, men and children work in abandoned mines at their own risk. Frequent landslides are a constant danger, and when serious injuries or deaths occur, families have no health or life insurance safety nets, leaving many families even more at risk in the pandemic.

Lubumbashi, where my community lives, is a city in this eastern part of the country, a center for cobalt mining. We have several communities and a novitiate in the area. There are 27 other congregations of sisters in the Katanga province, and all have struggled with the impact of COVID-19 in their education, health care and social services.



Novices, professed sisters and students work in the volcanic soil in the fields of Goma, Congo. (Courtesy of Pétronille Chibelushi Tisa)

Our Ursuline mission work is primarily education, but some of our sisters are nurses who worked at the local hospital during the lockdown. Thankfully, at first there were few cases of coronavirus, but then there was a second wave. Before COVID-19 reached the DRC, the sisters asked their students to pray and make sacrifices for our sisters and brothers around the world who were suffering from the disease. Each one took her turn to pray aloud for this intention in front of her companions, and we taught them how to protect themselves from the disease. Thank goodness, as of the time of this writing, we have not had any illness or death among us.

When COVID-19 struck, our educational mission was greatly disrupted from March until October, when we reopened our schools. We began with remedial classes to make up for all that was missed since March. We did not have access to technology to hold classes online, and students had forgotten much of what they had learned.

Even though schools have reopened, it has been a slow start and enrollment is cut in half. Parents lost their jobs when the pandemic struck, and have no income for school fees; some young women caught at home with nothing to do have not returned because of unplanned pregnancies. Some of these were married off and — having a child to care for — probably none of them will ever return to school.

Schools and universities were closed again Dec. 10, 2020, due to the second wave of the coronavirus. We do not know when they will be reopened again, though students would like to study. Life is getting harder and harder for us too, their teachers and professors. Since that date, there has been a curfew from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. The people are getting poorer and poorer because they lack work.

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I work in our Ursuline social center, where we welcome marginalized young women or those who are unable to follow a secondary school course. I normally have 40 students, but the numbers keep decreasing. Many of these women live with relatives or tutors as their parents' homes are far away. Their hosts demand high boarding fees — which they use to pay their own children's school fees — leaving the boarders without fees they need for school. So, even though the social center fees are minimal, we have lost more girls.

The students at the center study literacy, sewing, religion, civics, health, life skills and homemaking. At the end of the three-year course, each student is tested by a jury, and, if she passes, receives a social certificate issued by the Provincial Division of Social Affairs. This qualifies them for employment in private tailoring workshops or for self-employment. Those still living with their parents who have financial means can continue an advanced sewing course to receive a state diploma.

Most of the women who graduate from the social center are strong in tailoring skills, but weak in French and math. So, during the COVID-19 confinement period, I loaned them books to strengthen their reading and French skills. Some of them also worked with tutors.



Ursuline novices weaving baskets, which cannot be sold in the current economy (Courtesy of Pétronille Chibelushi Tisa)

COVID-19 disrupted economies, not only for families but for sisters too. Without the income from school fees, we wonder how to pay the teachers who worked from October through December. We sisters raised chickens and ducks and cultivated vegetable gardens, to provide ourselves with food, but hot temperatures have hardened the ground and now water is scarce, so our produce has decreased. We eagerly await the rainy season. Our novices weave beaded baskets and placemats, hoping for a sale — but shops and markets that are now open have no customers. People do not have income.

COVID-19 also impacted our community's spiritual life. Our general chapter theme for this year was going to be "Live a new life in Christ." Though the chapter could not be held because of the pandemic, our confinement gave us more time for silence, prayer and exchange, allowing us to deepen this theme personally and communally. We came to know and appreciate each other better through our prayer at midday, rosary of mercy in the afternoon, evening worship and days of recollection. We shared spiritual reading books and had time to learn new liturgical music.

Our prayer became more universal: for Pope Francis and pastors who need the light of the Holy Spirit during these difficult times; for the sick and those who have died,

our national and local leaders; and for all families suffering in so many ways.

As the confinement ended, we opened our chapel to anyone wanting to participate in daily and Sunday Eucharist. Parishes added Sunday Mass times, and to accommodate the numbers, Mass is celebrated in the schoolyards. Throughout confinement, all churches in the area rang their bells at 6 a.m., 12 p.m. and 8 p.m. to invite families to prayer.

We are so inspired by the faith of the people that never wavered during the months without Mass. We can only hope and pray their faith will continue to be strengthened. We continue to be challenged by the situation, but we feel confident that God is guiding us.