



CONFERENCE OF LEADERS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES IN NEW SOUTH WALES CLRI (NSW)

ABN: 52 476 362 010
Member of Catholic Church Religious Group

Mr. Stephen Smith MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

Dear Mr. Smith,

The Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (NSW) has over three thousand members. The organisation, through its social justice committee, works to support and advocate on behalf of poor and disadvantaged people.

Recently, a number of our members heard Lulu Mitshabu, African Programs officer for Caritas Australia, speak about the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Ms Mitshabu, herself a refugee from the Mobutu era of violence, says that the country is declining each day.

In her recent report for Caritas Australia, *Forsaken Voices: Desecration and Plunder in the Democratic Republic of Congo* Ms Mitshabu gives a few of the devastating statistics associated with DRC: 20% of children die before their fifth birthday; 1200 people die each day from conflict, hunger and preventable diseases; 2000 women reported rapes in one province during the month of June.

Rape is a major weapon of the civil war raging in Congo. Women, old and young, little girls no more than five years of age are raped by militia on all sides of the conflict. In many cases rape means expulsion from the community and a resulting exposure to further violence, hunger and homelessness. Ms Mitshabu calls this "the worst humanitarian crisis in the world".

The present government, we know, has pledged to increase overseas aid and many of our members have had very positive and constructive talks with Mr. Bob McMullen, Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance. We are aware of Australia's commitment to Sudan and Zimbabwe but we urge you to extend this to Democratic Republic of Congo. The people of the Congo need, at the very least, \$20 million in emergency aid and strong support at the United Nations particularly in regard to ensuring the protection of women and children. Caritas Australia, the overseas aid and development agency of the Catholic Church, has programs in DRC and would, I am sure, be happy to work in partnership.

CLRI (NSW) looks forward to hearing from you on this very urgent humanitarian crisis.

Yours sincerely,

Libby Rogerson ibvm
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