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Featuring: **God's Country: The Struggle for Non-Belief in Nigeria**
Tex Pasley

Also Inside: *The Fortress* • *A United Turkey* • *"A Terrible Mistake": The Rise of SWAT*

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God's Country: The Struggle for Non-Belief in Nigeria

Tex Pasley
Annapolis '11

"Religion in Nigeria means hate," claims Charles Obia of Abuja, Nigeria. "And that has led to many crises like the burning of worship places and loss of lives. And we sometimes vote on religious grounds, putting aside people's integrity." "Nigerians are very religious and superstitious," he continues. "It is almost taboo to be an atheist, and even if you are, you don't say it publicly."

"Initially when my parents found out that I was an atheist – an out of the closet atheist – they said I had disappointed them," Leo Igwe, the founder of the Nigerian Humanist Movement, which calls itself "an association of non-religious people who seek a rational, constructive approach to human affairs," remembers. "My born-again sister and her pastor husband were alarmed; they demonized me and tried to reconvert me to God. Many friends and relations wanted to have nothing to do with me. There was this lady I was dating and wanted to marry but when the mother found out that I was an atheist she called me on the phone and asked me to stay away from her daughter or she would get me arrested."

"I don't think in Nigeria anyone would knowingly allow their kids to marry an atheist," adds Anna Oluwo of Lagos, Nigeria.

The stakes are high for Nigeria in its growing religious conflict; as Africa's largest country, its development is crucial to the continent's future success. One major obstacle to progress is the country's fractured ethnic boundaries. There are more than 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria, with no one group representing more than 30% of the total population. And this variance carries over to religious beliefs – there is a nearly even split between Muslims and Christians, with another 10% of the country holding an indigenous belief system.

"There are no atheists in foxholes, and Africa is one massive war zone," says Shina Owolabi of Lagos, Nigeria. And Nigeria certainly lives up to this billing. In a poll conducted in 2004 by ICM, a British polling group, 100% of Nigerian respondents answered "yes" when asked whether they believe in God or a higher power. Yet, while all Nigerians might have faith, there is some debate on the specifics.

It is not uncommon for this "debate" to boil over into something far more troublesome. The two main religions in the country are split into a Muslim-dominated north and a Christian-dominated south. The city of Jos, which lies in the middle of this divide, has experienced three major conflicts between the two religious groups since 2001, leaving thousands dead. The most recent fracas occurred this past December.

Obviously, religious conflict will hinder investment and growth. And although Nigeria possesses sizable oil reserves, religious conflict, along with disruptive militant groups, make oil companies wary of doing business in Nigeria.

The persistent conflict has influenced a small group of non-believers to try and promote a more secular approach to governance and everyday life that, they think, will significantly improve Nigeria's quality of life. One of the early leaders in Nigeria's secular movement was Tai Solarin, who founded the Mayflower School, a school meant to educate students in practical skills and self-reliance, which is noted for the quality of its graduates. Solarin was also very outspoken about the effect superstition had on Nigerian culture. "Nigeria today is dying of religion," he told *Free Inquiry* magazine in a 1993 interview. "The worst bane of African nondevelopment is chronic dependence on the deity to solve all earthly problems."

In the 17 years since that interview (Solarin died in 1995), reliance on religious beliefs by the general population has remained strong. When Nigeria became a democracy in 1999, Islamic Sharia law took effect as legal code for many Muslim states in the north. Of course, religion is certainly not uncommon globally. In the previously mentioned poll, 91% of respondents in the United States answered the same question affirmatively. The difference, though, for Nigeria, is that its minority of non-believers are more isolated; it was not uncommon to find people, when interviewing for this story, who did not know a single person who publicly expressed a lack of belief in God.

"It was in 1996 I went open and public with my atheistic views," recalls Igwe. "But I did that gradually, bearing in mind that atheism was a taboo. The initial reaction of people was that of outrage, disappointment, hatred. Some couldn't believe it. Some said I must be joking, 'no you can't call yourself an atheist' they said. Others said I had gone mad; that I was out of my senses."

And beyond simply being regarded as an oddity, which isn't uncommon in the United States, atheists in Nigeria experience a sort of discrimination that actively disrupts their lives, placing them in a cultural strata similar to that of homosexuals, where "coming out" is the term often used to describe the moment when an atheist reveals his or her beliefs to a wider audience. This decision can have serious social consequences.

What is the cause of this overwhelming religiosity? No one can really say for sure, although poverty is often cited as a reason for the volume of religious fervor.

"There is poverty in the land and people find hope in religion instead of seeking for knowledge," says Obia. "And the religious leaders keep smiling to the bank at the expense of the majority poor. Politicians who lack ideas on how to move the nation forward use religion to get power."

But some, such as Igwe, who possesses his own bias, see more insidious reasons for the voracious grip of religion on Nigerian citizens.

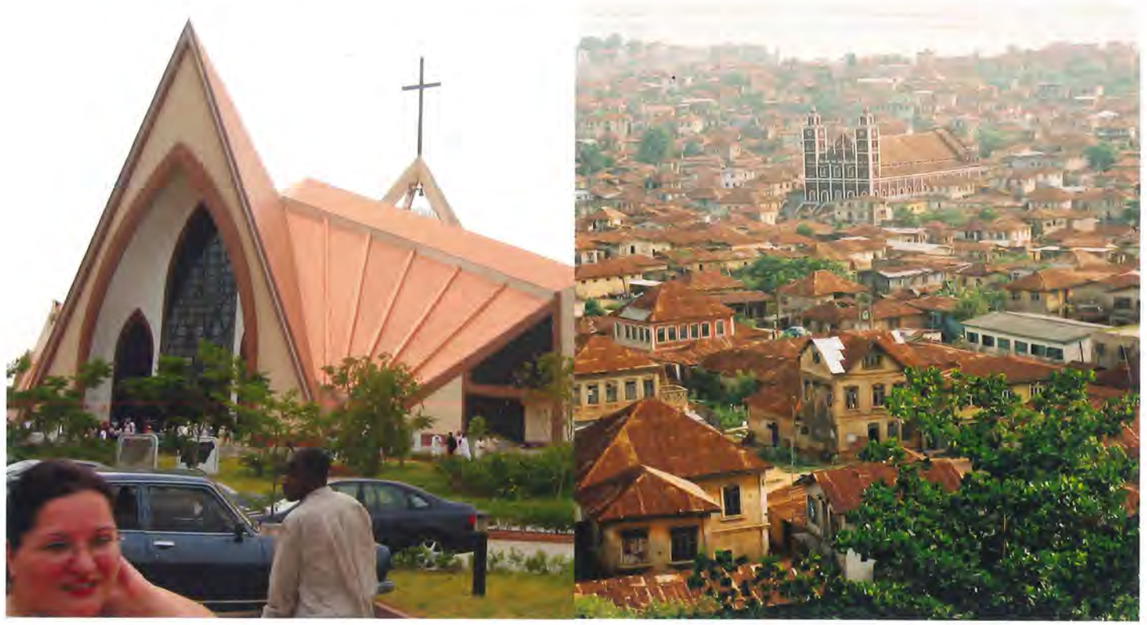
"Nigeria is so religious because of religious indoctrination from the cradle to the grave which they are subjected to," Igwe says. "From childhood most Nigerians are infused with religious and spiritual nonsense that darken and direct their minds conscience and attitudes. Nigerians are so religious because of the school system. The educational system in Nigeria was introduced by Christian missionaries who used it as an evangelizing tool. So the school system in Nigeria is religion based. The school system does not encourage debate, doubt, free inquiry, free thought and criticism of religious claims. In Nigeria there is no separation of religion and education of church (mosque) and schools. There is no separation of church (mosque) and state."

It's unclear what benefit would come if Nigeria were to see an increased secular voice, or if it can progress as a spiritual country. However, Nigeria suffers from a lack of dialogue, preventing the consideration of these issues which could potentially determine Nigeria's future.

"[I have] a friend [who is atheist] and we just differ on religious beliefs," says Anna Oluwo of Lagos, Nigeria. "But I know a lot of people who stopped talking to him as soon as he became an atheist. Churches here encourage you to associate with Christians and believers only."

It is unclear whether the religious majority in Nigeria is moving toward a point of greater acceptance of and support for alternative voices. Some actually think people in the country are increasing the level of discrimination against atheists.

"With the proliferation of churches and mosques publicly displaying miracles on TV and radio, atheists are seen as demented people," states Obia. "Except for people like Wole Shoyinka (a prominent Nigerian author), other atheists who are not prominent people are discriminated against and religious leaders are increasing it."



The conventional wisdom is that, as Nigeria's economy grows, and people become more prosperous, they will place less trust in religious superstition after seeing the value of secular gifts, namely money.

"[Economic progress] is not being felt by the majority," says Obia. "So people await miracles when they can't afford health care or other basic needs. The indicators for economic progress are not pleasing for now."

The difficulty seen from the perspective of atheists like Igwe and Solarin, though, is that it's necessary for Nigerians first to shed the yoke of religious superstition before Nigeria can begin making serious economic progress. This might be an extreme viewpoint, but it poses an important question. If a more secular society is synonymous with economic prosperity, which one comes before the other? And is it possible for there to be too much religion, to the point that it actively inhibits economic progress?

"The only answer to the issue of fanaticism is education, and jobs," adds Owolabi. "It's poverty that provides the fodder for fanatics and radical preachers. If people had enough to eat, and a future they felt they had to protect, then most religious conflict would be dealt with."

The potential for a shift in religious tolerance, however, still remains. As with any change in society, fresh ideas often emerge in a more youthful demographic. And like many other cultural shifts, globalization is often seen as a catalyst.

Oluwo believes, "With the younger generation maybe we might start seeing different views… A lot of Nigerians that lived abroad have started returning home and we have started seeing new things like gay rights, etc. So anything at this point is possible."

Even with these indicators, it is uncertain whether the younger generation will naturally gravitate away from religion, especially given the extreme religiosity that has been evidenced.

"[The solution for progress is] changing the perception of the new generation to de-emphasize religion and judge others by whom they are," says Obia. "The older generation are heavily entrenched in it. The target for now should be the youth."

This is not to say that progress cannot be achieved without a complete secular intervention. There already exists a bloc of the moderately religious – those who don't see an issue with a significant proportion of non-believers populating the country. And along with this bloc are those who don't see a shift in the religious makeup of the country as something that will be necessary for greater holistic improvement.

"[Greater acceptance towards atheists] has no value here at all," claims Owolabi. "Is that going to feed people and give them their rights? A better life? I doubt it. Social justice is what we need and we are on the path to it. I believe beliefs are irrelevant. It's what you do with it that matters." ✳

Interviewed:
Anna Oluwo - Citizen of Lagos, Nigeria
Leo Igwe - Founder, Nigerian Humanist Movement
Charles Obia - Citizen of Abuja, Nigeria
Shina Owolabi - Citizen of Lagos, Nigeria

EUROPE

ICELAND • A caretaker government put in place in January was officially voted into place in elections on April 25. The new government has a much more liberal flavor, a response by voters to the recent financial collapse, in which Iceland's three largest banks liquidated. The new prime minister, Johanna Sigurdardottir, is in support of Iceland joining the European Union.

MOLDOVA • Large protests erupted, spurred on by young people, after elections on April 5 kept the Communist party in power. Europe's poorest country, young Moldovans are frustrated by the need to leave the country to find jobs.

TURKEY & ARMENIA • In the first diplomatic action on the issue in more than a decade, the two countries released a statement saying that progress had been achieved on improving relations between the two countries, stemming from a failure by Turkey to recognize the Armenian genocide. The timing of the release coincided with a visit to Turkey by Barack Obama.

CYPRUS • Hopes for reunification between the Turkish-controlled north and the Greek-controlled south of the island stalled when the National Unity Party, which is strongly opposed to reunification, took the majority of parliamentary seats in the Turkish-controlled half in an election on April 19.

COUNTRY FOCUS: SWITZERLAND

The Fortress: Seeking Asylum in Switzerland

Chelsea Adams
Annapolis '12

Fahad Khammas is famous. He is twenty-four years old, and he is the star of a 2008 documentary that won the top prize in its class at the Locarno International Film Festival held annually in Switzerland. For Khammas, however, the attention and stardom is secondary to a much more profound plight.

Fahad Khammas is an Iraqi, one who aided the United States Army as a translator in Baghdad. By "collaborating with the occupier" during the Iraq War, Khammas put himself at great risk. Considered a traitor by many Islamists in his home country, Khammas fled from Iraq when he began to receive threats upon his life.

"In Iraq, people hate anyone working with the U.S.A.," says Mehdi Kussay, resident of Baghdad. Kussay's testimony reveals what he feels to be the ugly side of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the ongoing military occupation that began over six years ago. "The way we see it," says Kussay, "is that when you come to help someone, you ought to help them, not kill them or steal their government. The troops have done both of these things to us." Kussay has heard of Fahad Khammas, though he claims it is better for him to forget the names of those who are known to have aided American and European forces. "I am sorry to talk about the U.S.A. this way. You have to understand that I lost three of my best friends in the war. I cannot be expected to feel pity for this man who helped to kill my friends." Reports from Amnesty International detail that perhaps as many as 300 translators known to have worked with the U.S. Military have been killed in Iraq, by Iraqis, since the war began.

The Iraq War has had a profound impact upon the political landscape of the European Union. As thousands of refugees pour out of Iraq, E.U. legislators adapt accordingly. Hundreds of stories such as Fahad Khammas' have been masked by the European Union as it rushes to protect itself from potential terrorism. Stemming from a European Union law known as the Dublin Convention, Switzerland has enforced a stringent policy aimed at those seeking asylum within its borders. To protect itself from potentially harmful or threatening refugees, the Swiss Federal Department of Justice and Police denies refugee status to anyone who has unsuccessfully applied in another E.U. signatory country. After traveling through Greece, Khammas sought official refugee status in Sweden at the beginning of 2008, but was denied asylum. From there he moved to Switzerland and began the process of seeking asylum for a second time, with success unlikely.

It was in Switzerland that Fahad Khammas met Fernand Melgar, the filmmaker who would propel his case to the forefront of a world debate. Melgar has made documentaries investigating anti-Semitism, the psychology of minority groups within Switzerland, and the process of Swiss emigration. When he set out to film "La Forteresse" (The Fortress), Melgar uncovered a legislative nightmare.

Upon entering Switzerland, a foreign national can submit a written or oral request for asylum to any Federal Office for Refugees reception center. At this time, an applicant must also produce official proof of identification, presumably the same identification with which he or she entered the country. If the application is not dismissed as "abusive," an applicant will be randomly assigned to a particular district for further proceedings.

Switzerland is a federal republic divided into 26 administrative divisions called *cantons,* similar in function to states or provinces. These cantons are responsible for refugees during the time the government deliberates over particular refugee cases. Cantons are self-sovereign up to the point of interfering with federal law. Refugees have described the process of being assigned a canton as a "lottery with very slim chances." The system is not impartial. Certain cantons are more liberal or more conservative than others, and refugees can only hope that their cases will be heard by a canton whose liberality in granting official refugee status in asylum cases has been established.

Fernand Melgar's documentary follows Fahad Khammas and other applicants through their 60 days (the maximum time allotted to asylum cases) in the detention center in the Swiss town of Vallorbe. With the number of cases granted official asylum standing at close to 1%, many of the people appearing in the documentary have since been forced to leave Switzerland, though in his film, Melgar never reveals who is granted asylum and who is not.

Fahad Khammas's case, though now the cause of much protest, met with rejection in a surprise decision in late March of 2009. During a routine check-in, Khammas was arrested and placed on a plane heading to Sweden, the country in which he first applied for asylum. Swiss authorities guaranteed that Khammas would be given aid upon his arrival in Sweden, and the Swedish

Achieving Political Asylum in Europe

June 15, 1990
The Dublin Convention is signed in Ireland by member nations of the European Economic Community.

June 5, 2005
Switzerland becomes a signatory to the Dublin Convention and the vote to ratify passes by a slim margin.

March 23, 2009
Fahad Khammas is arrested at a Federal Office of Migration Checkpoint in Switzerland.

1990 — 2009

November 1, 1993
The European Economic Community becomes the European Union.

Summer, 2007
Fahad Khammas, Iraqi translator for the U.S. Army in Baghdad, flees from his country after receiving threats upon his life.

April 2, 2009
Swiss authorities announce the deportation of Fahad Khammas; the asylum seeker is flown to Sweden.

government had pledged to allow Khammas to appeal its initial decision to refuse asylum. In Sweden, he played the waiting game again, hoping that his popularity as an icon for foreign refugees will be enough to win his case.

As with any bureaucratic debate, the Swiss government has given a multitude of reasons supporting its tough legislation. Though the Federal Office of Migration declined direct comment, its website states that many illegal immigrants must be denied asylum because they "invent dramatic stories of persecution for the hearing by the authorities" and that "on the basis of their situation, they clearly belong to the group of migrants." Those who have not been displaced by war or persecution do not fall under the protection of the European Union's asylum laws.

Though the Swiss government has made efforts to reach out to humanitarian organizations and work with them in order to establish avenues through which foreign nationals can seek asylum, many cite ambiguities in the asylum policy as cause for concern. "The method is to pretend to be open-minded and then give a refusal in the end," says Thomas, who works in the Swiss Federal Customs Administration. Thomas asked that his last name be kept hidden for political reasons. Though Swiss opinion of people like filmmaker Fernand Melgar varies widely with political persuasion, Thomas says that these activists are "tackling profound Swiss problems." Thomas has "had his experiences with the Federal Office of Migration," and doubts that the current system reviews cases in an unbiased manner. "So much for Swiss neutrality," jokes a man who is an official in the Swiss government.

Others are less concerned with Swiss policy. "I don't really pay that much attention to it, since there are constant applications for asylum," says Edward Werner, an American living in Switzerland. "Unfortunately many are of a mostly economic nature." Many Swiss share the opinion that the amount of migrants coming into Switzerland should be restricted. Switzerland's unemployment level has risen with the number of unskilled laborers flocking to the country as a result of war and conflict in the Middle East, Asia, and other parts of Europe.

As Switzerland's Federal Councilor, Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, continues to encourage votes for more limitations, some activists are speaking out against what they call the veiled doctrine of racism that has permeated European Union asylum and immigration policy for years. The "criminalization of migration," or so it has been called by non-governmental organizations operating in European Union countries, has been on the increase since the beginning of the decade. Sweden, for example, has made efforts to speed the deportation of Iraqi foreign nationals, making Fahad Khammas a likely candidate to be returned to his native country.

Antony Spalton works for the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. He has years of experience as a Senior Officer with the International Federation of the Red Cross, where he worked with developing countries to forge paths to economic and governmental stability. Though unfamiliar with the Fahad Khammas case, Spalton spoke about what he calls "Fortress Europe" and the many difficulties facing refugees. "[Seeking asylum] is hard, and it is getting harder. We have so many people moving. Economic pressures, war, conflict, and even climate change contribute to the exoduses. There are not enough resources to go around, and there is a scramble for what little there is. Fences will be climbed and oceans crossed."

The United Nations has pledged much funding to assist refugees moving through partner nations, but the current economic instability has meant budget cuts across the board. "There have been big bucks promised to deal with these disasters," says Spalton. "But not much money is actually forthcoming. There is too much rhetoric behind debates in the United Nations."

As nations battle over the fate of thousands of refugees, Fahad Khammas awaits an appeal ruling in Sweden. His story exposed the fortress as cold and uncaring, but the attention he generated has shown that the stronghold is not without a key. Even if he is sent back to Iraq, Khammas' fight may not have been in vain. ✳

Interviewed:
Mehdi Kussay - Citizen of Baghdad, Iraq
Edward Werner - Citizen of Geneva, Switzerland
Thomas - Swiss Federal Customs Administration, Zurich, Switzerland
Antony Spalton - Representative of the United Nations, Geneva, Switzerland

A United Turkey: Nationalism and the Kurdish State

Erin Shadowens
Annapolis '12

While the Democratic Society Party (DTP), a Pro-Kurdish political group, staged an all-night protest in Turkey's Parliament, Baran Jiyan sat in his Dubai home and thought about his uncle.

"The state killed my uncle," Jiyan says, a Kurd and citizen of Turkey. "I don't like the Turkish state."

Jiyan's uncle, and approximately 30 others, were the victims of a fire in Lice, Turkey, a village in the southeastern Anatolia province. Turkish soldiers entered the village on Oct. 22, 1993 in response to alleged attacks by the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party), a militant organization dedicated to establishing an independent Kurdistan. Two days later, only one house still stood in Lice.

Almost sixteen years later, no definitive report exists for Lice. Several human rights inspections, international criticism of the Turkish government, and the diminution of the PKK has only sustained cultural dissonance between the Kurdish community and the rest of Turkey.

Dlovan, a Kurd from Northern Iraq, empathizes with the Turkish Kurds.

"They have nothing, no human rights," says Dlovan. "They have the right to do what they need to do. They should have their own schools...They deserve their own nationality."

This very desire for cultural autonomy struggles amidst Turkish nationalism. Until 1991, speaking the Kurdish language could mean a prison sentence. Currently, all schools require students to speak Turkish. While predominately Kurdish communities attempt to open ethnically congruous schools, they consistently face an intractable opposition in the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, municipalities cannot offer services in any language besides Turkish, even in primarily Kurdish areas.

Today, Kurds must pose a continued pressure to assimilate with their own cultural integrity. For some, like Ahmet Onal, the equilibrium is possible.

"We are all living on the same soil," Onal says. "There is only our flag. We are all brother and sister. For us, the tongue [language] is not making a different race."

Indeed, Onal insists that his Kurdish identity is in tandem with the country he calls home.

"I am a Kurdish person, [but also] Kurdish and Turkish. Two are my language. There isn't a difference."

Mehmet Altuntas, a freshman at

Kurdish-Turkish Relations Through the Years

1984
PKK begins guerrilla warfare in Southeastern Turkey.

2003
Parliament increases Kurdish language rights.

2004
First Kurdish television channel is launched; Kurdish activist Leyla Zana is released from prison.

2009
Members of pro-Kurdish party, DKP, are arrested.

1980 — 2009

1999
PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan is captured.

2005
Turkey begins EU negotiations.

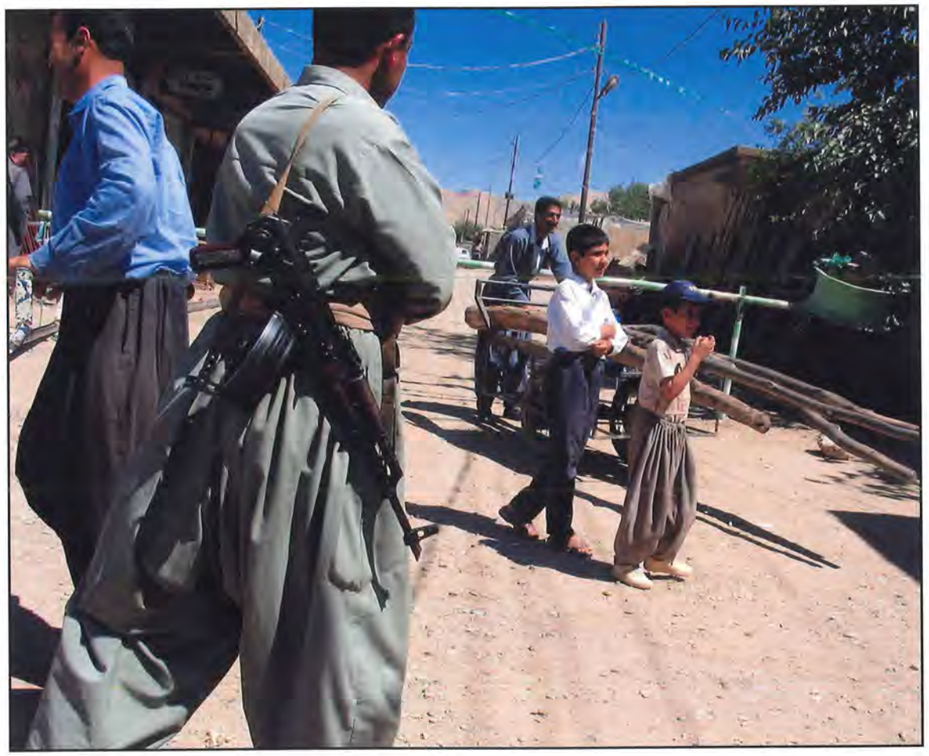
2007
Turkish army enters Northern Iraq against Kurdish rebels.

St. John's College and Turkish citizen, shares Onal's outlook.

"[Turkish] culture is kind of a mix of everything. If I think about the culture I was raised in and my family, if someone says hi to you, you should say hi back. If someone gives you a hand, you should shake it...you should always be as friendly as you can."

Altuntas expressed an admiration for Mustafa Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey. Ataturk conceived of a secular, constitutional republic that transcended religious and cultural concerns - concerns that threaten to fracture a country.

"In Turkey we have this expression 'guest of the gods,' not guest of Allah," says Altuntas. "I met this guy from Saudi Arabia. I asked him what the Muslim rate was, do you have any minorities in your country? He said fifty-percent were real Muslim and the other fifty were Muslims being Muslim. I asked him what do you mean? He said, because one half goes to mosque because they wanted to go and the other half because they were oppressed. But in Turkey that doesn't happen. You do not have to go to mosque."



Nevertheless, the secular vision of Turkish unity articulated by Ataturk has come at an expense, an expense evident in the assimilation procedures employed throughout the 80's and 90's. Procedures included strict regulation of language, compulsive migrations, and a prohibition against any insubordinate groups. Moreover, minority groups, such as the Kurds, cannot form ethnic political parties under Turkey's constitution. The frustrations surrounding economic hardship in Kurdish regions and political helplessness led to a militant solution, the PKK.

"The PKK is very democratic," Jiyan argued, "for Kurdish people to make war."

"It's so easy to convince people," Altuntas claims, "because they don't have jobs, they don't have anything, just like Al-Qaeda. It's easy to recruit people to be terrorists. This is what PKK does."

Most European countries and the United States label the PKK a terrorist organization. Its object, through whatever political or violent means, was to establish a separate and independent Kurdistan. Chiefly active throughout the nineties, the US State Department estimates thirty-thousand casualties due to fighting. Recently, there have not been direct en gagements between the PKK and Turkish Armed Forces; rather, the group has to turned IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices). All the same, the group does not demonstrate the same activity compared to ten years ago.

"When I was 11 or 12," Altuntas says, "my father told me a story from when I was a newborn baby and my sister was two years old. We were on a family trip in the winter and the bus drivers were PKK supporters. They tried to kick us out in the mountains because they knew he was a soldier. My father and them argued, so it didn't happen. When he told me this story, he told me I was lucky that I didn't get killed as a baby by PKK terrorists. He said, enjoy your overtime. I was shocked because it showed me the real face of the PKK."

However, fewer incidents do not obscure Kurdish discontentment. The DTP has emerged as a political tool for Kurdish grievances. Established in 2005, the DTP has gained a considerable following in east and southeastern Turkey. Local elections prove overwhelmingly successful, particularly this last March. Still, arrests of fifty DTP members last week project a difficult road ahead for Kurdish political power within the current system.

Despite a clear divide within Turkey, Altuntas defends Turkish solidarity.

"My father told me he was talking to this Kurdish guy. And this Kurdish guy, he supported PKK, and my father was a soldier...And he was talking to this guy, and this guy was sort of poor. He was with his son and they were having a conversation and his son was asking him to buy something, but he couldn't buy anything because he didn't have money...he wanted to buy something for my father and sister because they were his guests...My father said it's because he's Turkish and I'm Turkish, we're supposed to be his friends. We're still the same culture."

Turkey, it seems, can obtain a cultural harmony - a harmony perceived by Altuntas and Onal alike.

"As I heard from journalists, it was frowned upon to speak Kurdish. That was messed up," admitted Altuntas. "But now things are getting better."

The repercussions of a perpetual Kurdish conflict go beyond Turkey itself. Dlovan describes his own sense of cultural uncertainty as a Kurd living in a non-Kurdish country.

"The Kurdish should have a separate state. For me, I would like to have a country with other people of the same language and culture. My own country. I don't have a country."

An independent Kurdistan would effect not only the Kurdish populations in Turkey and Northern Iraq, but Syria, Iran, and Jordan as well.

"PKK as a terrorist group will never get what they want," Altuntas believes. Clearly, Turkey cannot ignore the human rights and political demands of the Kurdish community. Some concessions have been made in light of legislative conditions to join the European Union, such as state-run Kurdish television and radio broadcasts. Nonetheless, wounds persist among those of the previous generation, which, if left untended, threaten to perpetuate an identity crisis that can manifest in either violence or political seclusion.

"I was born in Malatya, a city in Southeastern Turkey. My grandma and my mom call me their Kurdish son, because I was born in Eastern Turkey. And when I was eight or nine years old, one day I asked my father if I was Kurdish. And he said originally our family is Turkish, so I was Turkish. And he said, there's nothing wrong with being Kurdish. In Turkey, the people don't scorn Kurds. They are no different. There's a phrase, 'Love and respect the creature because of the creator.' That shows that every human being is respected for being a human being," Altuntas says. ✳

Interviewed:
Mehmet Altuntas - Turkish Citizen and St. John's student
Jiyan Baran - Kurdish Turk living in Dubai
Ahmet Onal - Turkish Citizen and Kurdish tradesman
Dlovan - Kurd living in Kurdistan, Northern Iraq

AMERICAS

"A Terrible Mistake": The Rise of SWAT

John Vining
Annapolis '11

"Right now, what we have are probably 11,000 police departments with 11,000 different SWAT teams doing whatever the hell they want, whenever the hell they want," says Peter Kraska, a professor in the Criminal Justice and Police Studies department at Eastern Kentucky University.

The law defines a SWAT team as "a special unit composed of two or more law enforcement officers within a law enforcement agency trained to deal with unusually dangerous or violent situations and having special equipment and weapons, such as rifles more powerful than those carried by regular police officers."

The use of SWAT teams has become increasingly controversial, especially in states where SWAT raids affecting innocent people have been reported in the media. As research is continually conducted and different stories are reported about raids which have gone wrong, more and more people are beginning to look into the "inappropriate" use of SWAT teams.

In Maryland, the case of Berwyn Heights, Maryland Mayor Cheye Calvo brought the current practices of SWAT teams into both the public eye and the Maryland legislature.

"On July 29, 2008, my family and I were terrorized by an errant Prince George's County SWAT team," Calvo told the Maryland senate. "This unit forced entry into my home without a proper warrant, executed our beloved black Labradors, Payton and Chase, and bound and interrogated my mother-in-law and me for hours as they ransacked our belongings."

It would later be revealed that drugs were shipped to the Calvos' house that morning, and Calvo, unaware, accepted the box. Drug dealers will often ship drugs to a house they believe to be empty, and have the intended recipient pick up the package off the porch before the house's owner returns home.

The police, unaware that he was the mayor of the town, saw him accept the package, and proceeded to storm his house.

"As I was forced to kneel, bound at gun point on my living room floor, I recall thinking that there had been a terrible mistake," Calvo continued. "However, as I have learned more, I have to understand that what my family and I experience is part of a growing and troubling trend where law enforcement is relying on SWAT teams to perform duties once handled by ordinary police officers."

After trying to clean up his house, and attempting to make his innocence clear to friends and citizens of Berwyn Heights, Calvo began work on a Maryland bill which would make statistics about the activity of SWAT teams more accessible to government officials.

The bill addresses, for Maryland, a problem which the whole country faces. There is very little data about how often SWAT teams are used, how often they kill or injure people, and what they are deployed for.

"It's certainly a huge positive first step in establishing some kind of data and information for the purposes of accountability," says Kraska, who was able to gather some statistics privately in the late 1990's. "City governments, county governments, state governments don't know what they're up to. They don't know how many deployments they're going on. They don't know how many shots were fired or how many people were shot or how many officers were injured."

Established in 1966, SWAT grew rapidly in the 1980's.

"SWAT teams, both in number and in frequency of use, have grown dramatically since SWAT was created in the 1960s, but especially since 1981 when the drug war started to really escalate under Ronald Reagan," according to David Borden, the Executive Director of Drug Reform Coordination Network (DRCNet). "In 1980 there were fewer than 3,000 reported SWAT raids. Now, the number is believed to be over 50,000

The Rise of SWAT Teams in the U.S.

1966
The SWAT program is started, mostly due to the efforts of LAPD police chief Daryl F. Gates. The idea is based of a special unit in Delano, California which was created after the uprisings led by Cesar Chavez.

1989
Dick Cheney, then secretary of defense, declares, "The detection and countering of the production, trafficking and use of illegal durgs is a high priority national security mission of the Deapartment of Defense."

1965 — 1995

August 1966
SWAT teams begin to pop up in larger urban areas after a Texas man barricades himself at the top of a University of Texas clock tower and fires at people below for 90 minutes, killing 15.

1986
President Regan issues a national Security Decision Directive stating that drugs were a threat to U.S. "nation security."

1994
The Deptartment of Defense allows the transfer of military equipment to state and local police. Congress then creates a program to facilitate this transfer.

per year...About 3/4 of these are drug raids, perhaps more by now, the vast majority of them low-level."

Kraska's research in the late 1990's was concerned with the increasing use of SWAT teams. Much of that work is over a decade old, and was conducted at a time when most police departments which wanted a SWAT team had already gotten one.

"There wasn't much growth left in terms of number of agencies," Kraska says, referring to the nearly saturated market for new SWAT teams. "But really, the more significant measure of the growth of SWAT is the activities. You can have lots of units that are doing very little work. Unfortunately we don't have new data."

Although Kraska was able to collect his data fairly easily in the late 1990's, he imagines that if he had done the same thing now, it would have been much harder.

"I did [my research] through surveys," Kraska says. "Long before SWAT became controversial, long before anybody recognized that it was growing exponentially and becoming normalized into police departments—so, long before it was on anybody's radar, I sent surveys directly to police departments and I asked them very simple questions like 'Do you have a SWAT team?,' 'When was it formed?,' 'How many deployments do you go on per year?'"

Almost 80 percent of the surveys he sent out were returned.

"It's because no one really cared, or was suspicious about what was happening, so the SWAT community didn't mind coughing up that kind of information. Now, I suspect I'd get probably a 30 percent response rate."

When Calvo was working to sort out the confusion he faced about the raid on his house, a friend mailed him a report called *Overkill: The Rise of Paramilitary Raids in America*. That report, written by Radley Balko for the Cato Institute, is an updated look at the proactive, instead of reactionary use, of SWAT teams.

In that report, Balko argues that "SWAT teams should not be executing search or arrest warrants, conducting routine police patrols, or engaging in similarly proactive police work."

He argues instead that they ought to return to "defusing those rare, emergency, situations in which a suspect presents an immediate threat to someone's life or safety."

Whereas Kraska was able to get police departments to self-report on their usage of SWAT, Balko began by collecting reports of specific incidents, or "isolated incidents," as they are called by supporters of the move to paramilitary policing. Balko's report contains summaries of many of these incidents, and the Cato Institute is continuing to collect them on their website.

This research has lead Balko to believe that "[botched raids are] the inevitable consequence of a flawed, overbearing, and unnecessary form of drug policing."

On their page for this topic, Cato quotes a 2006 ruling by Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, saying "If a widespread pattern of [knock-and-announce] violations were shown . . . there would be reason for grave concern."

Balko believes he has found that pattern. Calvo's bill, which has been approved in the Maryland Senate and House of Delegates, may find a pattern even more conclusively when enacted.

Calvo's bill requires that police departments in Maryland which have a SWAT team must record and report the number of times that team was deployed, the reason, arrests made, evidence gathered, and any injuries suffered by police, people in the house or animals, among other facts.

It asks that each agency with one of these SWAT teams reports its uses to the Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention biannually starting in 2010. It lays out a specific format which each police department must use.

When discussing the bill with the Maryland senate, Calvo said his bill "will provide this information in a responsible, standardized way and will encourage law enforcement agencies to exercise sound judgment in deploying these special tactical units."

When made to justify the use of special tactical units in serving warrants, police departments most commonly cite the possibility that the suspect would be violent, or might attempt to destroy evidence quickly upon hearing the police.

"The whole idea—the operational justification for the use of a SWAT team for something like this is that the evidence could be destroyed, so they have to do it quickly," says Kraska. "And there's some sort of indication that the persons involved in drugs are armed and might be dangerous."

The use of a SWAT team has often been justified by suspicion of there being a firearm in the house. Mike Hasenei, a Maryland resident, was suspected of stealing multiple items from a police car. After the raid, once it was clear that he had not stolen them, it was revealed that a SWAT team was used because one of the items was a rifle.

His house was only one of three raided that night in search of the stolen goods.

SWAT raids are often dangerous for police officers as well. In a case made famous by Balko, a man named Corey Maye was sentenced to life in prison for shooting an officer during a no-knock raid. In the confusion, Maye shot an officer, Ron Jones, who he thought was an intruder. Jones later died.

The case of Maye, who quickly surrendered his gun when he discovered they were police, shows the potential dangers to police officers of a SWAT raid. Others think police officers might be in more danger on the whole if they used traditional police tactics.

"There's nothing that guarantees that a gun-owner or a concealed-carry permit holder is going to be law-abiding," says Ladd Everitt, the Director of Communications for the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence. "As I said, you can have a long, violent, misdemeanor history and still buy a gun in this country, and it's been seen time and time again."

Everitt thinks that the threat of a violent suspect should not be ignored.

"I'm going to take response to situations where you might have to take someone who might be armed seriously, and I'm not going to go in there in a manner that's going to put law enforcement officers at risk," he says. "Cops are finding themselves out-gunned as a matter of course these days."

"What I do know for sure is these guys are extremely highly trained to do these things, this is not something like getting a concealed carry permit where there's a four hour class and you're done," Everitt continued. "These guys train and retrain in how to assess these situations. Are mistakes ever made? Yeah."

Kraska has a more cynical view of SWAT teams.

"I've seen SWAT teams form where two officers in a police department meet and go watch a few videos, talk the chief of police into attending some for-profit Blackwater-type training camp week and the come back and make a 12-15 office swat team. That's it," he says. "They have no more training, no more expertise, and all

of a sudden, within a few month period, they have a fully operating SWAT team. There's a complete lack of regulation with these things."

Kraska explains that some SWAT teams are composed of people who work exclusively on SWAT, and others are comprised of normal police officers with special training.

"I think you run the real risk of having dedicated SWAT teams, where people on the team are very myopic and develop a distinct subculture from the rest of the police department, and that has dangers," he says. "But at the same time, having 30 officers of a dept. with say 200 officers, and 30 are on the SWAT team, and they're intermingling with the rest of the officers on a day to day basis and they're doing patrol work and all that. You can certainly envision how that might act to create more of a SWAT mentality for the entire department, rather than just being segmented and contained within a small unit."

The SWAT mentality he is discussing is a complex set of ideals and attitudes which SWAT members subscribe to with varying degrees of seriousness.

"It's difficult to characterize because if you start talking about SWAT teams as these wannabe soldiers and these goons, it's really a mischaracterization," he explains. "Most people on a SWAT team take this very seriously and they're professional and all that kind of thing. But that kind of talk also misses the larger point that sub-culturally these teams and the people on these teams are really attracted to the notion that the police are all about fighting serious crime and waging real war on drugs and crime. It's a militaristic attitude."

The "militaristic attitude," as Kraska describes it, comes with a sense of "us versus them." This attitude, many argue, makes it more difficult to properly serve the community, since police sometimes begin to think of citizens as the enemy. This attitude alone is cause for concern, but, according to David Borden, these attitudes are being facilitated by grants from the federal government.

"[SWAT raids] are mainly a systemic problem, that problem being massive overuse," says Borden. "Pentagon giveaways and the aforementioned federal grant programs are major culprits."

The federal grants Borden is referring to are the Edward Byrne memorial grants and the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grants.

"The exact details on how Byrne and COPS grants are distributed has not been studied, at least not to my knowledge, but an examination of grant applications by one of my colleagues found that they overwhelmingly focus on the number of arrests made, particularly drug arrests," he said. "Byrne grants also fund the purchase of equipment for SWAT teams."

According to an interview with the DRCNet, David Doddridge, a 21-year veteran of the LAPD said that "with Byrne, we got Velcro vests and holsters, we got Kevlar helmets, all that stuff. Now, there are thousands of SWAT teams across the country. They don't have a lot to do, so they end up serving drug warrants now."

Prince George's County, MD, the county whose SWAT team raided Calvo's house, has received the second largest amount of Byrne grant money in Maryland, second to Baltimore County, for at least the last four years.

Yet there is some question as to whether or not this money could sustain a SWAT team.

"State and local agencies don't use grant funds for their SWAT teams because grant funds are not a reliable source of money," says Gale Farquhar, the State Policy Advisor for Maryland at the Bureau of Justice Assistance, which administers the Byrne grants. "That's not to say grant funds aren't used for 'tactical' equipment used by SWAT officers."

In an effort to make communities safer, these grant programs seem to have made them more dangerous in some cases. And, even when SWAT teams raid houses of criminals, their continued focus on fighting criminals, many of whom are not violent, does not help to protect their communities.

"Town residents and many others told me how they did not leave their homes for days and how they and their children were gripped by fear knowing that the police would do this to an innocent family, much less the mayor of the town," Calvo told the Maryland senate. "I also have had many conversations with people who live in high-crime areas where these types of police interactions are not uncommon and distrust between the community and the police makes it all the more difficult to improve public safety." ✳

Interviewed:
Peter Kraska - Professor, Dept. of Criminal Justice and Police Studies, Eastern Kentucky University
Ladd Everitt -Director of Communications, Coalition to Stop Gun Violence
David Borden - Executive Director, Drug Reform Coordination Network
Gale Farquhar - Maryland State Policy Advisor, U.S. Bureau of Justice Administration

AFRICA & MIDDLE EAST

Country Focus: Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Fallout of Genocide

Shikshya Adhikari
Annapolis '12

"What takes me by utter surprise is the way they are raped," laments Shaileshwori Sharma, a student of Women's Studies at Wesleyan College. "After raping five or six women at the same time, these people shoot a gun into the women's vagina. They basically mutilate the victims."

The women in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have become silent sufferers of acts which are inhumane and brutal. Who and what is causing this kind of violence against women? The responsibility lies tangled somewhere within a complicated and continuous war.

The war began with Hutu militias committing genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Hutu extremists planned and carried out genocidal attacks against the Tutsi community. As a result, an estimated 800,000 people were killed. The Hutu militias then fled to neighboring DRC, joined by large numbers of Hutu refugees. In response, the Kigali regime, a primarily Tutsi government, started a war against DRC in 1996 and slaughtered many refugees, considering them to be 'genocide criminals'. Although a peace agreement was reached in 2002 and a weak transitional government has power at present, the war has not technically ended beyond Kinshasa's limits. As a result, a large number of innocent women have become the targets for rape by the armed forces. In a war with so many participants, it is the women who suffer daily.

"The armed forces generally attack the villages late at night", says Junior Eric L, a native of DRC who has been living in Canada for five years. It is reported that after plundering the villages and it is the women who are torn into pieces day by day, they return to abduct the women and children by force and reduce them to sexual slavery. It has also been reported that sometimes the militants enter a house, kill the husband and the children and gang-rape the women. In some cases, the women have to undergo utter humiliation and shame, being raped in front of their husbands and children. There have been reports of pregnant victims, unusual tactics—such as guns and tree branches—and genital mutilation.

"Cases like these take place on a regular basis. Every other village is attacked every other night by not only one party but many parties. And every group has a different way of attacking the people. One armed group has a group of soldiers rape one woman. Another group rapes men as well as women. Also, there are some who torture women until their last breath", says Sharma.

"Women are really suffering in the hands of these people and the situation is much worse than what people hear in the news", Kennedy, a citizen of DRC claims. What scenario can be worse than this? "If we cringe just hearing about these attacks, the situation of women who have to bear something more horrific than this is unimaginable", Sharma theorizes.

What happens to the women who manage to survive?

"The people who take fancy on committing these violent attacks on women, certainly do not take precautionary measures. Most of these men do not use contraceptives. As a result, they spread AIDS on a regular basis", says Eric L. It seems that the women who survive these horrific acts live lives that are utterly painful. The likelihood of being infected with HIV is just one issue of concern for those who escape death.

The women's economic conditions do not allow them to make use of the health services. "It is not surprising that a country which has been infected by war for such a long time will have a poor economy and consequently poor health services", Sharma adds. Therefore, even if the women manage to scrape together some money to receive treatment, the health services fail to provide any kind of help. It is estimated that 30 percent of raped women in DRC are infected with HIV. To make matters worse, the hospitals are in poor condition. For instance, it is reported that there is a hospital in Kibombo which has a total of six wards, four of which are empty, while the other two have three iron framed beds without any mats. In addition there is only one doctor for 25,000 square kilometers.

The saturation of the HIV virus and people's misconceptions on the subject through ignorance have made the lives of these women a living hell. "I have

the impression that the women are rejected by their families if they are found to be infected by the virus", adds Eric L. Many still think that HIV can be transmitted through everyday contact and would prefer to stay away from anyone carrying the disease. Therefore, at a time when raped victims need the most compassion, they are left on their own, alone and uncared for. "They need love and affection not only when they catch the HIV virus, but also when they are raped in the first place because the trauma is not easily recoverable," says Sharma. However, it looks like the women of DRC are far from receiving any such kind of care and support. Associating with rape victims is still a taboo in underdeveloped countries. Thus, these women are shunned by their families and societies, and have no place to go and no one to turn to.

What kind of condition are they in then? "Once they are raped, one mode of survival is to engage in prostitution", adds Kennedy. "Also, if an unmarried woman is raped, nobody will be willing to get married to the woman. If a married woman is raped then she is considered vile and is therefore shunned by her husband. Women who have children sometimes move to other places. However, the worst case scenario is committing suicide," Eric L. reports. "They live miserably. In some cases a woman is raped after her husband and children are killed. What can a woman who is in so much physical and psychological pain do?" Hence, day-by-day, a large number of innocent women who are not associated with any of the parties are raped, mutilated, and murdered, while their families are brutally slaughtered. In fact, the death toll in DRC is so high that the number has surpassed the number of killings in Iraq, Afghanistan and Darfur together. It is said to be the most ruthless conflict since World War II and it is estimated that about five million people have died within the last decade. On average some 40 women were raped every day between October 2003 and February 2004 in and around the town of Uvira, which has a population between 200,000 and 300,000.

A soldier wears a pin in support of a UNICEF and V-day campaign to stop rape in areas of conflict

Women are raped in wars all the time. However, why with such frequency and in such a barbaric manner? "Usually this [the rape] is committed by people of both sides, the soldiers and the rebels. They usually use rape as a method of punishment because each party thinks that the people of the places that are attacked and captured are helping the other side," adds Kennedy. "Most of these villages do not have anything that the armed forces can capture. So, instead they take women." The situation is worse when these victims are treated like rag dolls not only by outsiders but also by members of their own families. "There are situations where men have offered their wives and children in order to protect themselves from being killed", says Kennedy.

"It seems like these armed groups find raping women and looking at them struggling and utterly powerless pleasurable. It gives the people a sense of power and a feeling that they can do anything," theorizes Junior Eric L. "Also, there is a plan to eliminate the whole population in some eastern regions. Rwanda is a small country with a big population. They need more land, and they can get that only from Congo."

Thus, women in DRC are reported to have been used as "weapons of war". Moreover, it is a civil war fought both with women and against women. Women are exploited for a show of power and also as shields to protect the lives of their husbands. "These docile beings have to live through each day in terror of being the victims of brutal acts which damage their physical condition and shatters their every hope of living," laments Sharma. "What can a woman do? Especially in a place where there is almost no empowerment of women at all". That the government not only fails to protect the lives and dignity of these women, but that they choose not to do so in the first place is the most tragic fact. "The government is fearful that they might end up not having soldiers to fight their useless wars if their 'needs' are not met," says Kennedy. If the people who have the highest authority choose to shut their mouths and kneel to the desires of these armed groups who choose to exploit the women continually, can these subjugated women foster even a small amount of hope?

Women have the option to pursue the matter legally. However, most women choose to stay put because they are afraid of being victims if the armed forces choose to plunder their village for the second or the third time. Nevertheless, hope in eastern DRC arises in the form of social service organizations. "German NGOs are helping raped women and conducting programs to integrate women into their families," adds Runyambo Irakiza, an employee of a Rwandan NGO. Many hope that the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, known by its French acronym MONUC, can play a significant role in restoring order and in providing training on human rights to Congolese security forces. It is reported that a network of eight local non-governmental organizations which are supported by the International Rescue Committee aids nearly 1000 women, girls, and boys who have been raped. Catholic parochial bodies also help in providing first aid to the victims.

There have been efforts by organizations from all around the world to aid these victims of war. However, UN peacekeepers are said to be involved in several cases of misconduct. Around 150 allegations of sexual abuse have been laid against UN peace forces. UN investigators have also found that civil workers and peacekeepers are paying $2 for sex with women in areas that they were assigned to protect. "There are donors who donate money to open centers to help these women, but the people who run these organizations are found to use the money for their own benefit," says Kennedy.

Who will help these women, who are forced to lie down to suffer rape by many men, stand up? "With so little facilities, there is only so much they can do. They have been trying to stand up with every ounce of their strength, whatever is left in them. The world should divert their attention to this horrific violence against women," adds Sharma. Irakiza states, "The government should take active measures, especially in education of the people about the situation of women in their country. If people in power fail to take appropriate measures, all we can do is pray for these women and hope for peace to prevail soon." ✳

Interviewed:
Junior Eric L. - Citizen of DRC living in Canada
Shaileshwori Sharma - Citizen of Nepal, student at Wesleyan College, GA
Runyambo Irakiza - Citizen of Rwanda, local NGO worker
Kennedy - Citizen of DRC, mine dealer

A History of Recent Ethnic Conflict in the DRC

1990

1994
Hutu militias commit a genocide which kills a large number of people in Congo.

1996
The Kigali regime of Rwanda starts a war in Congo.

1997
The rebels take Kinshasa, installing Laurent Kabila as president.

2002
A peace deal is established. Since this time, President Joseph Kabila has been sharing the authority with four other warlords.

2005

ASIA

IRAN • The Obama administration offered to talk with Iran about its nuclear program. As *The Epoch* goes to press, a response from Iran is planned, but yet to be revealed. Obama has considered softening insistence that Iran shut down all nuclear facilities.

PAKISTAN • A truce between the Taliban and the Pakistani government is being challenged after recent fighting. The past few months have seen increased pressure in dealing with the presence of the Taliban in the country as a whole, and specifically in the Swat Valley, where the capital, Islamabad, is located.

SRI LANKA • The Sinhalese majority appears to have finally subdued rebel Tamil forces, and has cut back on the use of heavy weapons and artillery in the prolonged civil war, which has taken over 100,000 lives. International response has been mixed, with humanitarian questions being raised over the treatment of the Tamil people, who comprise around 18 percent of the population.

THAILAND • A summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Bangkok was cancelled after protests which quickly turned violent, causing police to fight back. A state of emergency was declared by prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, whose unpopular leadership was a cause for the protests.

Country Focus: Cambodia

Even though they haven't been in power for 30 years, the first trial against a leader in the Khmer Rouge began this February. Khmer Rouge is the Commuist Party led by Pol Pot, which ruled Cambodia from 1975-1979, and killed 20 percent of the country's population during that time. Kaing Gaek Eav, nicknamed Duch, who ran the infamous S-21 prison camp pictured, is currently undergoing trial, where he has accepted responsibility for the executions which took place at the prison.

Through the Lens

In a Catholic church in Mexico City, church-goers pray for the sick. Many people in Mexico have taken to wearing face masks to prevent the spread of swine flu, which originated in the country.

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