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Neema Namadamu, Congo's visionary peacemaker

John Dear | Oct. 15, 2013 On the Road to Peace

Since 1996, warfare in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has killed 6 million people. Approximately 400,000 women are raped there each year. Most nations have given up on Congo. The U.S. has poured tons of money into Congo for development, but not toward a peace process. It's hopeless, most think.

But not everyone has given up. Around the world, grass-roots movements are raising up astonishing, visionary leaders who point the way toward a new future of peace, and that's true even in Congo.

Last week, I was thrilled to attend a reception honoring Congo's leading voice for peace, Neema Namadamu. She ranks with Leymah Gbowee, the Nobel laureate from Liberia, and Mairead Maguire, the Nobel laureate from Belfast, Northern Ireland, two of our greatest living peacemakers. What an inspiration she is!

"The vision for my life is to create a new Congo," Neema told us. "Women have to rise up and start leading."

Neema has been leading all her life. She contracted polio at age 2, and though she walks with crutches, she never lets it hinder her. Neema is determined to empower women, so she has founded many projects and organizations, starting with Maman Shujaa, a national woman's group. The name means "Hero Women." She has acquired a nationwide telecommunications license to set up a new national telecommunications network so the Congolese people can communicate with one another and the world and, in particular, so women can tell their stories. Already, she has transformed and empowered many women.

She was recently selected as one of three grass-roots journalists from around the world to participate in "Voices of the Future," an 18-event speaking tour of the United States sponsored by World Pulse, where she addressed huge audiences at the Clinton Global Initiative, the Women's Nobel Initiative, the U.S. State Department and CNN, among others. Because of her efforts, the Obama administration has named a special envoy to Congo.

"The U.S. has and continues to invest billions of dollars in DR Congo, but has not $1 in real return," Neema told interviewer Roxanne L. Scott [1]. "The Maman Shujaa of Congo are encouraging our powerful friends to invest their influence, their experience, and their wisdom. We're asking them to put the "human" into their humanitarian aid. We don't want to need aid. We, the Maman Shujaa of Congo, would love to be able take our future into our own hands; all we need is peace. [We want] our influential friends to help establish a process, an environment (along with the United Nations Special Envoy and the African Union) wherein true Peace can be achieved."

Neema compared the greed and corruption in Congo to polio.

"But there is a cure," she said in the interview. "In fact, the cure is so powerful it is spreading faster than the disease. Health has come over us and immunity to these ills has taken hold in our midst. The cure was light; the light of love. Love for one another has opened our eyes and built us up with a profound strength. Love for each other has caused us to respect each other's community. Love and respect for each other's community has bound us together in hope, in possibility. Love and respect for each other's community has given us a passion for our

country, and a vision for its people."

Once, Neema's daughter was beaten by soldiers, and Neema felt a strong desire for violent revenge.

"Somehow I could see that the way of revenge only brings about more avenging," she says in the interview. "I wanted to break the cycle. I wanted my daughter to heal, to be in health, in life. I knew there was no life, no peace, no satisfaction in anger [or in revenge]. And as that realization came over me, I let all of those negative things go. When I did, the most amazing thing happened. Love filled my heart and consciousness. Love for all, including those who would be my enemies. I went and met with those soldiers. I told them I was their mom and I expected better of them. They asked me for forgiveness and begged me to come visit them often. I realized that love is the most powerful weapon of all, especially coming out of the heart of a mother."

"And so," she told us last week, "we don't fight with the men. We are fighting the system. And my job now is not to raise money but to connect people, to propose solutions and to empower women, especially through technology."

While she spoke of the killings and the suffering of women who have been gang raped and now have HIV, she also talked of the rape of the earth. Congo has the second largest rainforest on the planet, she pointed out, and while the nations dismiss Congo, it actually holds the key to our common future.

"Climate change is a global issue, and we all must take action together for a solution. So this is not a problem for Africa, but for the planet. We must find a solution for future generations, for the earth itself."

Later, I asked Neema where she found God in all these crises and struggles.

"Everything is God," she said with a smile. "I call God 'The Coordinator.' This is not about us. It's all about God. God is using us. We are just instruments for God.

"Someone said to me in New York recently, 'You have no power, no money, no weapons -- how can you expect to make a difference?' 'Yes,' I told him, 'we have no power, no money, no weapons, but we have God, so we are going to change the world.' "

Neema Namadamu is a visionary leader and charismatic speaker who, despite all, has an abundance of faith, hope and love. I urge everyone to learn more about this extraordinary peacemaker, my new friend Neema, by visiting namadamu.com [2] or by making a contribution to her work through earthtreasurevase.org/donate [3].

Together, we can help her -- and The Coordinator -- bring about a miracle of peace.

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, is now available at paceebene.org [4]. Next year, John will undertake a national book tour. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or peace group, go to his website [5] or contact the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene [6]. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [7] and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [8], *Put Down Your Sword* [9] and *A Persistent Peace* [10], are available from Amazon.com.]

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