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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in South Sudan (Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Peace in South Sudan) (31 January to 5 February 2023) – Meeting at the Apostolic Nunciature of Kinshasa with victims of violence in the east of the country

This afternoon, at 16.30, in the hall of the apostolic nunciature in Kinshasa, the Holy Father Francis met with victims of the violence in the east of the country.

After the initial hymn and testimonies from a victim from Butembo-Beniu, a victim from Goma, a victim from Bunia and a victim from Bukavu and Uvira, the Pope delivered his address.

At the end, before the final blessing, the commitment to forgive on the part of the victims present was read out.

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father during the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

Thank you. Thank you for your courage in offering these testimonies. We continue to be shocked to hear of the inhumane violence that you have seen with your eyes and personally experienced. We can only weep in silence, for we are left without words. Bunia, Beni-Butembo, Goma, Masisi, Rutshuru, Bukavu, Uvira: these are places that the international media hardly ever mention. In those places, and elsewhere, so many of our brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of our one human family, have been held hostage to the whims of the powerful, those with the most potent weapons, weapons that continue to circulate. Today my heart is in the east of this immense country, which will have no peace until peace reigns there, in its eastern part.

To you, dear inhabitants of the East, I want to say: I am close to you. Your tears are my tears; your pain is my pain. To every family that grieves or is displaced by the burning of villages and other war crimes, to the survivors

of sexual violence and to every injured child and adult, I say: I am with you; I want to bring you God's caress. He gazes upon you with tenderness and compassion. While the violent treat you as pawns, our heavenly Father sees your dignity, and to each of you he says: "You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you" (*Is* 43:4). Brothers and sisters, the Church is and will always be on your side. God loves you; he has not forgotten you. But men and women should remember you too!

It is in God's name that, together with the victims and all those who work for peace, justice and fraternity, I condemn the armed violence, the massacres, the rapes, the destruction and occupation of villages, and the looting of fields and cattle that continue to be perpetrated in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As well as the murderous, illegal exploitation of the wealth of this country, and the attempts to fragment the country in order to control it. It causes indignation to know that the insecurity, violence and war that tragically affect so many people are disgracefully fueled not only by outside forces, but also from within, for the sake of pursuing private interests and advantage. I turn to our Father in heaven, who wants us all to be brothers and sisters on the earth: I humbly bow my head and, with pain in my heart, ask him to forgive the violence of man against man. Father, have mercy on us! Console the victims and those who suffer. May he convert the hearts of those who carry out brutal atrocities, which bring shame upon all humanity! And may he open the eyes of those who refuse to see these abominations or walk away from them.

These conflicts force millions of people to leave their homes, cause very serious violations of human rights, break down the socio-economic fabric of a nation, and inflict wounds that are difficult to heal. They are polarizing struggles in which ethnic, territorial and group dynamics intertwine; conflicts that have to do with land ownership, with the absence or weakness of institutions, and with animosity and hatred marked by the blasphemy of violence in the name of a false god. Yet it is, above all, a war unleashed by an insatiable greed for raw materials and money that fuels a weaponized economy and requires instability and corruption. What a scandal and what hypocrisy, as people are being raped and killed, while the commerce that causes this violence and death continues to flourish!

I make a heartfelt appeal to all the people, to all the internal and external organizations that orchestrate war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in order to plunder, scourge and destabilize the country. You are enriching yourselves through the illegal exploitation of this country's goods and through the brutal sacrifice of innocent victims. Listen to the cry of their blood (cf. *Gen* 4:10), open your ears to the voice of God, who calls you to conversion, and to the voice of your conscience: put away your weapons, put an end to war. Enough! Stop getting rich at the cost of the poor, stop getting rich from resources and money stained with blood!

Dear brothers and sisters, what can we do? Where can we start? How should we act in order to promote peace? I would humbly propose starting again with *two ways of saying "no"* and *two ways of saying "yes"*.

First, to say *no to violence*, always and everywhere, with no "ifs" or "buts". No to violence! Loving one's own people does not mean harbouring hatred for others. On the contrary, loving our own country means refusing to get involved with those who foment violence. The use of hatred and violence is a tragic lie; hatred and violence are never acceptable, never justifiable, never tolerable, all the more so for Christians. Hate merely breeds further hate and violence further violence. We must say a clear and strong "no" to all those who seek to perpetrate violence and hate in God's name. Beloved Congolese people, do not let yourselves be seduced by individuals or groups that incite violence in his name, for God is a God of peace, not of war. Preaching hate is a form of blasphemy, and hatred always corrupts human hearts. Indeed, those who live by violence never live well; they think they are saving their lives, yet they become engulfed in a maelstrom of evil that leads them to fight their brothers and sisters with whom they grew up and lived for years, and ends up killing them inside.

To say "no" to violence, however, it is not enough to avoid acts of violence. We also need to eliminate the roots of violence: greed, envy and, above all, resentment. As I bow in respect before the suffering endured by so many, I would like to ask everyone to behave as you, our courageous witnesses have suggested to us, have done and have the courage to *disarm the heart*. In the name of Jesus, who forgave those who pierced his hands and feet with nails, hanging him upon a cross, I ask everyone: please disarm your heart. This does not mean we should stop being indignant in the face of evil or denouncing it; no, this is our duty! Nor does it mean granting

immunity or condoning atrocities, carrying on as if nothing had happened. What *is* asked of us, in the name of peace, in the name of the God of peace, is to *demilitarize our hearts*; to remove all venom, reject hatred, defuse greed, erase bitterness. Saying “no” to all these things may seem like weakness, yet in fact it sets us free, for it gives us peace. Yes, peace is born of hearts set free from resentment.

Now we turn to our second “no”: saying *no to resignation*. Peace calls us to combat the discouragement, despondency and distrust that lead us to think that we are better off distrusting others, living apart and far away, rather than offering a helping hand and walking together. Again, in the name of God, I once more invite all those living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo not to give up but to commit themselves to building a better future. While a future of peace will not rain down from heaven, it can come about if we remove from our hearts all fatalism and resignation, all fear of involvement with others. A different future will come about if it is for all and not just for a few, if it is *for* and not *against* others. A new future will come about if we see others, whether Tutsi or Hutu, no longer as adversaries or enemies, but as brothers and sisters, and if we believe that in their hearts, however hidden, they cherish the same desire for peace. Even in the East, peace is possible! Let us believe this! Let us work for it, without delegating it to others!

The future cannot be built by remaining closed in on our particular interests, or within our own ethnic groups or families. A Swahili saying teaches us: “*jirani ni ndugu*” [our neighbour is a brother or sister]. Dear brothers and sisters, all your neighbours, then, are your sisters and brothers, whether they be Burundian, Ugandan or Rwandan. All of us are brothers and sisters because all of us are children of the same Father. That is the teaching of the Christian faith professed by a large part of the population. Raise your eyes to God, then, and do not remain prisoners of fear, for the evil that everyone has endured needs to be converted into good for all. May the discouragement that disables us give way to a renewed ardour, to a courageous struggle for peace, to fearless projects favouring fraternity, to the beauty of crying out together, *never again!* Never again violence, never again resentment, never again resignation!

And so, we come to the two ways of saying “yes” for peace. First, *yes to reconciliation*. Dear friends, what you are about to do is something marvellous. You desire to commit yourselves to forgiving one another and to rejecting war and conflict as a means of resolving differences. And you wish to do so by soon praying together, gathered around the tree of the Cross, under which, with great courage, you wish to place the signs of all the violence you have seen and suffered: uniforms, machetes, hammers, axes, knives... The cross was itself an instrument of torture and death, the most terrible in use at the time of Jesus, yet, transformed by his love, it has become a universal means of reconciliation, a tree of life.

To all of you, I would like to say: Be *trees of life!* Be like those trees that absorb pollution and give back oxygen. Or, as a proverb says: “In life, do as the palm tree does: it receives stones, it gives back dates”. Indeed, Christian prophecy means responding to evil with good, to hatred with love, to division with reconciliation. Faith brings with it a new concept of justice, which is not content to punish and rejects revenge, wishing instead to bring reconciliation, to defuse new conflicts, to eliminate resentment and to offer forgiveness. All these things are more powerful than evil. Do you know why? Because they transform reality *from within*, instead of destroying it *from without*. Only in this way can we defeat evil, as Jesus did on the tree of the cross, by taking it upon himself and transforming it by his love. In this way, pain turned into hope. Dear friends, only forgiveness can open the door to the future, for it opens the door to a new justice that, without ever forgetting, puts an end to the vicious cycle of revenge. *To be reconciled is to create a new day*. It is to believe in the future rather than to stay anchored in the past; it is to wager on peace rather than resigning oneself to war; and it is to escape from the prison walls of our own way of seeing things, in order to be open to others and together with them, to taste freedom.

Finally, the decisive “yes”: *yes to hope*. If we think of reconciliation as a tree, a fruitful palm tree, then hope is the water that makes that tree flourish. This hope has a wellspring, and that wellspring has a name, which I wish to proclaim together with you: Jesus! With Jesus, evil no longer has the last word over life; with Jesus, who made the grave, the last stop on our human journey, the beginning of a new history, new possibilities constantly crop up. With Jesus, every tomb can become a cradle, every Calvary an Easter garden. With Jesus, hope is born and constantly reborn: for those who have endured evil, and even those who perpetrated it. Brothers and sisters of the east of the country, this hope is meant for you, and you have a right to it. Yet it is also a right to be earned.

How? By patiently sowing peace day after day. Let me return to the image of the palm tree. As a proverb says: "When you eat the date, you see the palm tree, even though the one who planted it has long since returned to the earth". In other words, to attain the fruits for which you hope, you must work in the same spirit as those who planted the palm trees, looking to future generations and not to immediate results. To sow goodness is good for us: it sets us free from narrow concern for personal gain and gives us a reason for living each day: it seasons our lives with liberality and it makes us more and more like God, the patient sower who tirelessly sows seeds of hope.

Today, I think of, and I bless, all the sowers of peace who work in this country: the individuals and institutions that are generous in providing aid and in responding to the victims of violence, exploitation and natural disasters, the men and women who come here motivated by a desire to advance people's dignity. Some have lost their lives in the service of peace, like Ambassador Luca Attanasio, his military escort Vittorio Iacovacci and his driver Mustapha Milambo, who were killed together with him two years ago in the east of the country. They were sowers of hope and their sacrifice will not be lost.

Brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of Ituri, and of North and South Kivu, I am close to you; I embrace you and I bless all of you. I bless every child, adult, elderly person, all those wounded by the violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in particular every woman and every mother. And I pray that women, every woman, maybe respected, protected and esteemed. Violence against women and mothers is violence against God himself, who from a woman, from a mother, took on our human condition. May Jesus, our brother, *the God of reconciliation* who planted the tree of life of the cross in the heart of the darkness of sin and suffering, Jesus, *the God of hope* who believes in you, in your country and in your future, bless and comfort all of you. May he pour out his peace into your hearts, your families and upon the entire Democratic Republic of the Congo. Thank you!
