In the following pages, you will find information regarding the history of the country that your refugee partner once called home. We recognize that it is impossible to encompass the whole story of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 8 short pages, nor is it our story to completely tell, but we hope that you will find this a good introduction and primer as you begin to develop a relationship with your new friend. Don’t forget to ask questions, but respect boundaries as he or she processes a transition that is often fraught with trauma.

Please note: We have done our best to present the history and cultural tips in an unbiased manner. You may find different sources with alternate perspectives, but know this is our best effort at providing impartial information.

What’s in a Name

Zaire? The Congo? The Democratic Republic of the Congo? These names all refer to the same region in central Africa. During the colonization of Africa, border lines were drawn arbitrarily by the colonizing powers, with little consideration to the ethnic groups of the area. As various leaders came and went, the name of what is now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the DRC or the DR Congo) has changed many times. These names now can serve as indicators of time. Be sure to note that the Democratic Republic of the Congo is not the same country as the Republic of the Congo, a neighbor to the northwest. Both are named for the Congo River that flows between them.

“RefugeeOne received me and helped me to find a job at Eli’s Cheesecake. I have been here for 20 years and they have been good to me. Eight million people have died in the conflict of Congo. I would have been one of them, but someone stood up and did something. [RefugeeOne] is...changing lives. I am proof of that.”

Elias Kasongo
Congolese refugee
Resettled by RefugeeOne

Virunga National Park / Christophe Courteau/WWF
Prior to Belgian colonization, the area that is now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo was home to three main kingdoms: Kongo, Luba, and Lunda.

When the Belgian King Leopold seized control of the region in 1885, he established the Congo Free State. What followed was a brutal period of exploitation as the local population was forced into the production of rubber. Millions of people died due to extremely harsh conditions, disease, and cruelty. In 1908, the area became known as the Belgian Congo.

After almost a century of colonization, the Congolese people achieved independence in 1960. The area was renamed the Republic of the Congo (a name also chosen by the neighboring French colony). Five years of political turmoil followed as various parties vied for power. In 1965, Colonel Joseph Mobutu (later known as Mobutu Sese Seko) gained control and renamed the country the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 1971, he again changed the name to the Republic of Zaire in an attempt to further distinguish the country.

The next 32 years were marked by gross corruption, sham elections, repression, and severe human rights violations as Mobutu embezzled funds and aid money, held on to power, and was supported by the U.S. and its allies in their fight against communism during the Cold War.

Mobutu remained in power until 1997 when opposing forces pushed him to flee the country during the First Congo War. He was replaced by President Laurent Kabila, who again renamed the country the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Kabila was supported by Rwandan and Ugandan forces that formed following the Rwandan genocide. The conflict between the Hutus and Tutsis flowed into the Congo during this time as well.

The Second Congo War occurred a year later in 1998 as tensions rose again when Kabila’s rule was challenged by a supposed puppet of Rwandan president, Paul Kagame. This challenge was also supported by Rwandan and Ugandan forces. In 2001, Kabila was assassinated and his son, Joseph Kabila, succeeded him. Joseph Kabila demanded peace talks with the assistance of the United Nations. Finally, in 2006, after all foreign military forces had left the region, there were multi-party elections and Joseph Kabila was officially elected president.

Tensions have remained as the long-seeded conflict continues, often driven by colonial-era divisions between the Hutus and Tutsis, and propel various groups to vie for control.
General Info about the DRC

**Population:** 83.3 million (as of July 2017)

**Area:** 905,3534 square miles (about \( \frac{1}{4} \) the size of the US)

**Capital:** Kinshasa

**Leader:** Joseph Kibala, President

**Ethnic Groups:** Over 200 ethnic groups. Majority are Bantu. Four largest tribes make up about 45% of population, and they are Mongo, Luba, Kongo (all Bantu) and Mangbetu-Azande (Hamitic).

**Languages:** French (official), Kiswahili, Lingala, Kingwana, Kikongo, Tshiluba. 700 different languages and dialects.

**Religion:** Christian 95.8% (Roman Catholic, Protestant, Kimbanguism), Muslim 1.5%. Folk religions and other groups make up the rest of the population.

*Many people retain aspects of their traditional religions, incorporating them into their lives as Christians. For instance, ancestors continue to play a significant role in their spiritual lives. The belief that illness may be tied to witchcraft persists as well.*

**Economy and Industry:** The strongest industry is mining (copper, cobalt, gold, diamonds, coltan, zinc, tin, tungsten). The DRC primarily exports copper, as well as other minerals, wood products, crude oil, and coffee. Other industries include mineral processing, textiles, plastics, footwear, cigarettes, metal products, timber, cement, commercial ship repair, processed foods and beverages.

**Agricultural products:** The Congolese produce a great deal of coffee, sugar, palm oil, rubber, tea, cotton, cocoa, quinine, cassava, bananas, plantains, peanuts, root crops, corn, fruits, and wood products.

**Infrastructure:** There are few well-maintained roads and railways. The health and education systems are in ruins as well. Corrupt businesses and leaders may attempt to divide ethnic groups and to smuggle public funds.

**Education:** Adults may have some formal education, but secondary schools are limited. Literacy ranges from illiteracy to multilingual literacy; females have a lower literacy rate.

**Healthcare:** Most Congolese people generally accept and trust Western medicine, but also believe in the power of prayer to cure disease. They may turn to traditional healers and medicinal plants.

**Family roles:** There are strongly defined gender roles within the family unit. Men protect, provide and make decisions. Women take care of the children and the home, but it has become more common for women to work and earn money, too. Families are usually large, as children are seen as a sign of prosperity. Girls and women may marry young.

*Statistics gathered in this section were compiled from the CIA World Factbook and the PEW Research Center.*
A Refugee Story

Fazila’s family fled the DRC in 2001

Resettled by RefugeeOne
May 2013

“I fled my home in Congo due to war and lived in a refugee camp in Uganda for many years. When I first came to the United States alone I was seven months pregnant with my baby, Azalia.

“When I had my baby, RefugeeOne went with me to the hospital for my checkups and gave me baby clothing, formula, and furniture. They taught me how to care for my child in the U.S. I also wanted to learn English in order to find work and support my new baby.

“Because of RefugeeOne’s English classes, my English has improved greatly since I arrived. Azalia and I are now living a safe and happy life.”

The Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The 1994 Rwandan genocide bled into the Democratic Republic of the Congo after both Tutsi and Hutu génocidaires took refuge there. The resulting conflict escalated into the First Congo War (1996) when Rwanda invaded the DRC in search of the perpetrators of the genocide. The Second Congo War, the deadliest conflict since World War II, began in 1998. The conflict was furthered by the struggle to control natural resources.

The 1998 war is sometimes called “Africa’s World War,” as it involved many countries. A peace accord was signed in 2003, but there is still a lot of unrest as groups fight over areas for control and resources (armed groups amongst themselves, and against the central government).

News coming out of the DRC include reports of unlawful killings, disappearances, mass rape, and torture. Sexual violence continues to be used as a weapon of war and is common in the eastern region of the DRC. The people continue to experience forced labor and sex trafficking, perpetrated mostly by armed groups and rogue government forces.

In June 2017, in the Kasai region, the killing of a traditional chief by government forces launched an insurrection calling for the departure of government forces. Since October, violence in the area has killed more than 3,000 and displaced more than 1.3 million.
Most refugees are from the ethnically diverse eastern DRC region. The following groups are seen as not native to the DRC and have been denied citizenship rights in the past. They are also discriminated against because of a perceived association with Rwandan-backed rebels, which many blame for the region’s unrest.

- Banyamulenge, sometimes called Tutsi Congolese, settled parts of eastern DRC in the late 1800s and have faced discrimination throughout history in their country.
- Banyarwanda, or “People from Rwanda”

**The Congolese Refugees**

- As of 2017, there were about 3.8 million internally displaced Congolese people.
- The first countries the Congolese refugees flee to are often Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Burundi.
- Some have spent more than a decade in the camps, and those long stays can lead to a breakdown in social order as well as violence, prostitution, school dropouts and early pregnancy. Harsh, unhealthy, and unsafe conditions and waves of new arrivals strain the aid that is already in place in many of these camps.
- Many refugees are young -- 55% are under the age of 18. A third of the children have been forced to be child soldiers.
- The DR Congo is home to many refugees from elsewhere: about 220,000 from Rwanda, 182,000 from the Central African Republic, 89,000 from South Sudan, and 44,000 from Burundi.

**UNHCR Worldwide Fast Facts**

65.6 million forcibly displaced people

*which includes:*

- 40.3 million internally displaced people
- 22.5 million refugees
- 2.8 million asylum-seekers

*UNHCR statistics as of 2017*
Helpful Tips—DRC

Helping someone to adjust to his or her new life in the United States can be a very rewarding experience. However, there is no clear roadmap on how to do it. How you relate to your refugee partners may change over time, as they better understand American culture, integrate into this country, and become self-reliant.

There are different philosophies on how to best assist in that integration. Some recommend just being your self, however you define that culturally, because the refugee needs to learn how to interact with Americans. Another school of thought might recommend a more gentle approach by adjusting your behavior and dress to be culturally sensitive to your partner’s values upon arrival, and especially when visiting in his or her home. One’s home should be an oasis, a place that feels safe and familiar. As time goes on, you can explain more and more about American culture in general and expected behavioral norms outside the home.

Consider the following tips as you embark on this journey. Please use your best judgment as to how to apply them in your relationship with your partner.

Greetings
Be careful of physical contact with someone of the opposite sex. Not sure whether to shake hands with someone or not? Simply observe and respond to your partner’s cues. Also, please note that constant eye contact can be seen as intimidating.

Religion
Remember that this group is mostly Christian, not Muslim. They do drink alcohol; beer is an important part of social interactions and ceremonies. If appropriate, help Christian Congolese connect with churches.

Familial relationships
Know that people may refer to a friend as a son, daughter, brother, sister, etc.

Children
Acceptable punishment of children in their own culture may include spanking, hitting with a rope or stick, denying permission to

Mwasiti and Betty at RefugeeOne’s After School Program / RefugeeOne
play, or refusing a meal. Be sure to explain what is deemed as appropriate discipline here. Also, in the DRC and in the refugee camps, children spent most of their time outside and roamed freely among neighbors’ houses. Talk about the level of supervision required here.

Variety of backgrounds
Do not assume that all people from the DRC will get along with each other, trust or respect each other, or have had similar experiences, as they come from many ethnic groups and refugee experiences.

Timeliness
Time is very fluid for them, and they may be late or not show up at all. In addition to making clear the importance of punctuality, explain the expectations for sick days and other absences from school and jobs. Other countries have more lax rules about missing for illness, but doing so improperly here may lead to being fired from a job.

Hygiene
Review basic U.S. hygiene expectations, such as bathing regularly, using deodorant, and keeping an apartment clean. Also discuss dental health, which is not a big priority in the DRC due to poverty.

Appliances
Some might not have ever had a refrigerator or a stove, so talk about how to maintain those. After long stays in refugee camps many will need help getting acquainted with modern technology.

Domestic Abuse
Be very clear about what qualifies as domestic abuse in the United States and the protection available for families, as well as the judicial system and how those issues can be sorted out. Many women have experienced sexual or domestic violence but don’t speak out.

Mental Health
Be aware that many have experienced or witnessed violence and that rates of PTSD, anxiety, and depression run high. Tread carefully when discussing mental health; there’s a strong stigma surrounding mental health and counseling. They may view it as a curse or punishment from God that can’t be treated. *If you become concerned about the emotional health of your refugee partners, please encourage them to contact someone in RefugeeOne’s Wellness Program for support.*

Orientation
RefugeeOne provides newly-arrived refugees with a cultural orientation which they must attend. Feel free to review the topics we cover in this orientation:

- General information about Chicago, including public transit and shopping
- How to access public benefits, healthcare, and RefugeeOne services
- Laws regarding smoking, alcohol use, and safe driving
- What to do in an emergency, how to interact with the police, and how to maintain personal safety
- Rules for childcare, family life, and other relational guidelines
- How to maintain personal hygiene and keep a clean home
- Payment of rent, utilities, and other home care procedures
Final Words

While there is much more to learn, we are confident that much will be revealed through the continued development of a friendship with your refugee partner. We hope this is a helpful tool as you begin down this road of mentoring or tutoring.

About Us

Since 1982, RefugeeOne has helped more than 18,000 refugees build new lives in Chicago fleeing war, terror, and persecution. Alongside donors and volunteers like you, RefugeeOne is there to greet refugees at the airport, support refugee children in school, help adults learn English and employable skills, connect them to their first jobs, and assist with integration into American culture. With your support, a refugee will begin his or her journey to self-reliance this year.

Sources

Material for this handout was gathered from the UNHCR, BBC, CIA World Factbook, PEW Research Center, Queensland Australia Metro South Health department, Arizona Department of Health Services, Center for Applied Linguistics Cultural Resource Center, and Al Jazeera. Reviewed by Congolese staff members at RefugeeOne.

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