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While filming a television documentary in the Democratic Republic of Congo, **PEADER KING** was appalled by the conflict there – and even more appalled by our indifference

BY ANY MEASURE it is an astounding figure. Between August 1998 and April 2007, 5.4 million people died from violence or war-related hunger and illness in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 2007, as many as 45,000 people died each month. The fighting is still going on, and the largest country in equatorial Africa is now home to the deadliest conflict since the second World War.

Few people in the West have heard about it. Yet when an aircraft crashed in the Democratic Republic of Congo in July last year, killing at least 48 people, it was widely covered by the media. It was a devastating, painful loss for the families of the people killed. But no more devastating or painful than their losses must have been for the families of the 5.4 million Congolese.

Why did the crash get so much more coverage? Is it because we can identify with the crash victims? People, for the most part, like us. People with enough money to fly. Businesspeople. Senior government figures. Nongovernmental workers. The rare tourist. The even rarer journalist.

I was on one of those flights earlier this year, filming a television documentary. We travelled from the capital, Kinshasa, at the western end of the country, to Goma, the centre of the current conflict, on the border with Rwanda. No street hawkers were aboard, no subsistence farmers, not one of the tens of thousands of people who visibly carry the physical wounds of the conflict that has blighted the country ever since the Belgians first set foot in the Congo, during the great scramble for Africa, in the 1870s.

In many respects that flight epitomised DR Congo’s great divide. A disproportionate number of white people. Burly businessmen with bulging briefcases. Women dripping with gold. The all-pervasive presence of senior army figures. And sycophantic foot soldiers to do their bidding.

It is easy to caricature what is happening in DR Congo and in Africa as a whole. But, equally, it is easy to turn a blind eye to the excesses and corruption that continue to plunge the country into penury and conflict. Notwithstanding its extraordinary mineral reserves– the source of much of the conflict, and now estimated to be worth €17.5 trillion – DR Congo is sliding into even greater poverty. It is already the poorest country on the planet.

But to reduce the conflict there to yet another example of mindless black-on-black violence would be to succumb to the laziest of stereotypes. The violence of the present is rooted in a peculiar kind of colonialism that resulted in the Congo becoming the personal fiefdom of King Leopold II of Belgium. Under his tutelage, a country that he described as a magnifique gâteau africain became a virtual Gulag of shocking proportions.

And his meddling, along with that of the Belgian government, fuelled the interethnic tensions that spilled over the border after the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

The chicotte, a whip made from sun-dried hippopotamus hide cut into razor-sharp strips and used to flay what were regarded as recalcitrant natives, became the symbol of Leopold’s reign. By the end of his 23-year rule he had become one of the richest men in Europe, and the Congo had lost half of its population, as many as 10 million people. The splendour of Brussels, the political and administrative centre of the European Union, still stands as a monument to the rape and pillage of the Congo.

One of the few voices to publicise Leopold’s genocide was Roger Casement, the Irish nationalist, in one of the first human-rights reports. “We begged the white man to leave us alone,” one of the rubber pickers told him in 1904. “You are only beasts, we were told, you are only meat.”

Now, when DR Congo needs the white man to take notice, the white man chooses to leave the Congolese alone. Not that white westerners (and the Chinese) have ceased to benefit from the country’s rich resources: the cobalt that goes into every mobile phone we carry is testimony to that.

But when it comes to the struggles of the current generation, the oppressed and the dispossessed, the world has largely forgotten the Congolese. There are some notable exceptions, mainly nongovernmental agencies and some missionary groups, as well as the Irish Times Foreign Correspondent, Mary Fitzgerald, who last November covered the presidential election that failed to bring any respite to the people. But these are the exceptions.

Meanwhile the turmoil continues. More than two million people displaced: the highest number since 2009. Rape routinely used as a weapon of war. Child soldiers, on lethal cocktails of drugs and alcohol, committing some of the vilest crimes imaginable. And the death toll of 5.4 million people being added to year by year.

At the start of the 20th century, the Polish-born novelist Joseph Conrad wrote Heart of Darkness, a book that became a metaphor for the whole of Africa, and one that was influenced by Casement’s human-rights work.

Kurtz, its main narrator, cries out at the horror. That cry has been replaced by silence. Silence at the genocide that continues, albeit to a lesser degree. Silence at western culpability in feeding that conflict. And silence at the culpability of senior Congolese soldiers in the corruption of a state and the impoverishment of its people. It’s time that silence was broken.

**Peadar King is presenter and producer of What in the World? The series begins on RTÉ One on Tuesday at 11pm**