

# A subtle prejudice

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Contributed by: harrisp

by Paul Harris

For some while, I have been interested in and have written about the current events of a nation in central Africa. Many readers will know this country as Zaïre, although it was renamed Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) almost seven years ago. Further, many readers will be unaware that during five of those seven years, a bloody civil war that eventually involved seven neighbouring countries, killed more than four million people. This was the deadliest conflict since World War II and mainstream media all but ignored the story. The United Nations tried, some will say half-heartedly, to get it on the world agenda but failed.

Why? Well, no rock stars were coming forth to hold mega-concerts in support of the Congolese. And a civil war killing millions of babies is not as worthy of concern as famine and starvation killing millions of babies. But most important is the primary reason we rarely notice Africa: they're black.

As a society, we in Canada claim to be colour-blind and tolerant of people's ethnic and racial differences. But we kid ourselves ? there are very few Stephen Lewis's among us and it is a simple reality that if this civil war had occurred in a predominantly white country, it would have received enormous press and, perhaps, outside assistance to quell the violence. It's mostly over now, but no thanks to us Canadians and the rest of the West.

Indeed, there is some evidence that some Canadian corporations are complicit in fomenting this war, but that's a different story. Because this article is not about Africa: it's about fifty or so women in East Vancouver. It is a gruesome story and not what Canadians have come to believe about our benign and peaceful country. At the time I am writing this, thirty-one of those women are confirmed dead, many more are still counted as missing. It is presumed, however, that the deaths of many of those still listed as missing will be confirmed as police continue their investigations into a farm in Port Coquitlam, British Columbia. The investigation is slow and identification of victims is tedious because all confirmation is being obtained through DNA testing - that's about all that's left of most of these women.

The exact fate of the women is unknown, or at least unpublished, and perhaps it never will be made public. But it is clear that they were transported to this farm, either dead or alive, where their remains were disposed of and hidden. One of the owners of the farm has been charged with more than a dozen of the confirmed deaths but, at this stage, the only indisputable accusation is that DNA of some missing women has been located on this property. The fate of this farmer still rests with a jury, but it is these

young women that concern me.

Now, how did I get from the Congo to East Vancouver? Well, to me, the social parallel is obvious. Africans can be ignored because they're only black; these victims can be ignored because they were mainly prostitutes, drug users, and native Canadians. And that made it easy for police to be less than enthusiastic about launching an investigation when the families and friends of these women began to report them as missing.

There is evidence to suggest that some of the criticism leveled against police for their handling of these disappearances has merit. The mother of one of the young women whose DNA has been confirmed at the pig farm launched an assault against the Vancouver police for what she considered to be a callous disregard for her daughter and all the other young women. At the time she started her campaign to find answers, all she knew was that she had not heard from her daughter for some time. She had no inkling that there might be some serious tragedy unfolding in the east end of Vancouver, she only knew that she wanted to find her daughter.

The young woman in question was known to police and social workers and the mother tried to locate information through social work offices. It was only when she started to think there might be something awful occurring in East Vancouver that she approached police. It appears the police had received numerous missing persons complaints but had never taken the step of alerting the public of the possibility of a serial killer or kidnapper on the loose. They do not appear to have stepped up security in the area from which all the women disappeared, they issued no broad warnings to women, they did not assign a task force or special unit to look into where all these women were going. They did not even bother to issue a warning to other "street" women in the same area who might have been in peril as potential victims.

Instead, they did what most of us have done with the Congolese: they shrugged and went about other business. It's not like nice girls from nice neighborhoods were missing, just a few seedy folks from Vancouver's unpleasant east side. Perhaps no one would miss them.

Even now that this story is finally unfolding in the media and the courts, it is not difficult to get a sense that people are far more interested in the story of this horrible murderer (alleged) than in his victims. Most people will still see these women with the same sensibilities as the Vancouver police: too bad they were killed, but they were just a bunch of drugged up natives and hookers.

And much like the story in my opening paragraphs, this is one that smacks of intolerance: intolerance for colour, for life style, for ethnicity, for morality, for whatever reasons or personal tragedies may have led these women to the lifestyle so disdained by the police. We have often bragged that Canada is a very tolerant society but we have a great deal to learn about the acceptance of others who might be different from us. Whether it's racial, social, religious, or economic intolerance, Canadians have the same prejudices as we condemn in others.

Recently, there has been talk of a memorial of some sort for these women. It was right and proper to build such a memorial for the fourteen women assassinated at Montréal's Polytechnique a few years back, but don't expect one anytime soon for these Vancouver women. Because they weren't "nice" girls and that's a prejudice Canadians are far from being able to let go. But these women are no less our sisters and daughters than the students in Montréal and deserve a similar acknowledgement of how one sick and warped individual ended their lives. They certainly deserve to remain in our memories.

---- Paul Harris is self-employed as a consultant providing businesses with the tools and expertise to reintegrate their sick or injured employees into the workplace. Canadian businesses can reach him at [paul@working-solutions](mailto:paul@working-solutions). He has traveled extensively in what is usually known as "the Third World" and has an abiding interest in history, social justice, morality and, well, just about everything. Paul is also a freelance writer and can be reached at [paul@escritoire.ca](mailto:paul@escritoire.ca). He lives in Canada.

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