

# DRC: THE CHURCH AT THE BOTTOM OF A MINE

## WOLFRAM

Despite the extreme poverty of its population, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the main suppliers of rare minerals in the world. The Church is committed to ensuring that miners are treated more fairly.

They live far from the cities, and can only dream of what the ugly grey rocks they extract from the ground are really for. Nonetheless, the men of Nzibira go out in search of them every day in the hillsides of eastern Congo.

The miners work with primitive tools, small pickaxes and shovels with shaved blades, so that they can use them in the narrow galleries. Their helmet lamps make little light – batteries are expensive – and the tropical humidity is merciless when they are underground. Without metal detectors, they dig by intuition. “You end up knowing where to look, but it’s not an exact science”, one of the veteran miners tells Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) during a recent visit to the country. When a strike with the pickaxe reveals a nugget, a murmur ripples through the galleries. “We’ve found some! We found it”, one can hear, though it is not clear who found it exactly. It takes a lot of practice to learn to navigate a place like this.

**“We found a nugget!”**

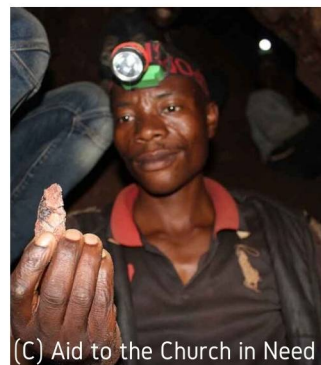
When the now famous “nugget” is brought into the light it doesn’t look very extraordinary. It is a brown, earthy stone, encrusted with some darker material. This is wolfram, a mineral rich in tungsten.

The mineral is entrusted to the women of the community, the “twangaisas”, which means “the grinders”. Equipped with rocks and hammers, they grind the mineral into a dust and sift it in the bottom of a basin, just like the gold diggers from ages past. Some of the twangaisas are very old, yet they work all day, backs bent, striking and grinding the mineral between rocks.

## EVERYONE WORKS IN THE MINE

Everyone in the community works for the mine, from the children to the elderly. Some dig, some separate, in the hope of scraping out a living.

Because even though this is an essential metal, for them it is a hard living. The buyers negotiate from a position of strength, overwhelming strength. They turn up when they please, in their large off-road vehicles, and are greeted like messiahs. Many miners literally die of hunger, and the buyers take advantage of their situation to pay low prices.



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## ACN HIGHLIGHTS THE PROBLEM

The DRC has a complex economic situation, due to a war which does not respect borders and is marked by political, economic, ethnic and religious interests; inhumane terrorism and a government incapable of bringing the conflict under control. ACN has highlighted the country’s problems several times over the years.

“Many of them don’t have a cent to spare”, explains Mr. Bahati, founder of the Comidea cooperative, which is supported by the local Church. “When the buyer comes, they sell what they have as quickly as possible, so that they and their children can eat.”

The miners are not aware of the value of their work, or of the fact that if they were to organise themselves, they might be able to stand up for their rights. Priests such as Fr Grégoire, who is in charge of the local parish, encourage them to join the cooperative in order to do just that.

### PLAN



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## ABANDONED BY THE GOVERNMENT

The plan is simple enough: to gather all the mineral and sell it to a buyer only when the group decides, and for decent prices. “Those who need money straight away can get an advance on their share when they leave their mineral with the cooperative”, Bahati tells ACN.

Getting organised like this could change the lives of the villagers in this remote region, where there is no such thing as hospitals, schools, or other public services. ACN is supporting the Diocese, which includes the village of Nzibira, through the construction of churches and housing, as well as training programmes in these areas that have been abandoned and forgotten.



ACN



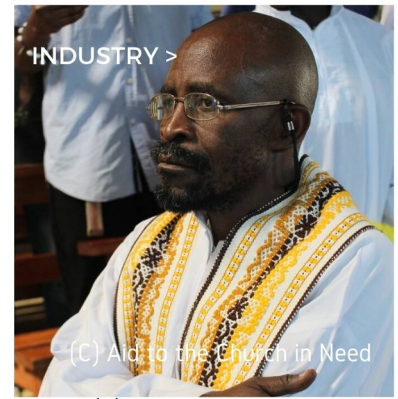
## DRC: A PRIEST IN PRISON

## WOLFRAM

ACN visited Fr Adrien at the central prison in Bukavu, in the far east of the country (South Kivu region) of the DRC. There a priest is struggling to protect inmates from hunger and despair and works to bring hope to these otherwise abandoned people.

Nothing in his clothing distinguishes the priest from the prisoners he has come to visit and who gather around to greet him. He walks across the corrugated iron-covered courtyard, with its worn cement floor crowded with inmates, whom he greets by their first names. 2,147 people live within these walls, which were designed to accommodate 500.

**“THERE IS NOT ENOUGH ROOM FOR EVERYONE, NOR IS THERE ENOUGH FOOD; IN FACT, WE ARE SHORT OF EVERYTHING”.**



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## PLAN

## ABANDONED BY THE GOVERNMENT



He holds up a 200 ml beaker and explains to ACN: “This is the daily ration of maize that the government gives to a prisoner”. To satisfy his hunger, the prisoner must pay extra to the merchants who have access to the prison. Fortunately, there are also Christian associations that distribute free food to supplement the menu, but they cannot be there every day, Father Adrien says regretfully.

The overcrowded cells have neither electric light nor windows. More than 300 inmates must sleep huddled together on the iron sheets of the bunk beds or on the bare floor. Day or night, the darkness is so complete that it takes some time to realise that there are people living here. The flash of the camera reveals distraught eyes, staring into space. This state of numbness and insensibility can have dramatic consequences.

To bring the prisoners out of their lethargy, Fr Adrien does his best to find things for them to do. He shows us an object he has hidden in his bag as if it were a valuable treasure: a trophy. The priest is preparing a football tournament for the inmates. Fr Adrien also fulfills his duties as a priest, bringing a breath of fresh air to the prisoners. Fr Adrien has just consecrated a new chapel in the part of the prison where young inmates aged under 18 are housed. He also had the pleasure of baptising nine prisoners during the Easter 2023 celebrations. Among the prisoners was a former soldier who had been involved in arms trafficking and banditry. A repeat offender, his request for baptism was the subject of questions and controversy. In the end, however, the man changed his behaviour and received the sacrament along with the other eight inmates.



In the infirmary, a young prisoner trembles when the doctor tells him that he will have to change his bandage. He is no more than 20, but has bedsores, a condition that normally only affects very old people who cannot move. He has been lying on the bed for days and this insidious condition has eaten deeply into his leg. The doctor insists that ACN should photograph his festering wounds: “I want the world to know what is happening here. We must fight for the provision of necessities like disinfectants and bandages! People here who have serious illnesses are doomed!” This “infirmary” is primarily used to separate tuberculosis patients from the rest of the prison population. A hospital bed and a chair are the only furniture available. The doctor shows us another patient, malnourished and with protruding ribs. For him, the remedy would not be very expensive, he just needs proper meals...

ACN supports the Diocese of Bukavu so priests like Fr Adrian can continue to work among the abandoned population. It also works with religious sisters such as the Daughters of the Resurrection, who carry out numerous social projects including training for disadvantaged groups, food aid for the poorest, and running an orphanage.