

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We would like to share with you a little bit about our lives here in Goma. Many of you have been waiting for a substantial update on this mission, which is the second outside of the Beni-Butembo area, the first being the capital city, Kinshasa. The mission is really still in its infancy.

1. About the city of Goma

How time flies! It's already been 40 days since Fr. Jacob Welikha Barasa and I, Fr. Roger Kasereka Syayipuma, set foot on Goma soil. Fr. François Nzanzu joined us a month later. Still to come are Frs. Thomas Ndovya and René Mihigo. The land in Goma has been devastated by the lava that has flowed down from Nyiragongo volcano (which the local bishop, Most Rev. Théophile Kaboy, calls " General Nyiragongo " that levels everything in its wake--- the "General" of an army, to be sure); the volcano businesses, erupts about every 25 years on average! The last eruption took place in 2002. Lots of luck to those who will be around in 2027! Before plunging into Lake Kivu, the lava turns everything into rock along its path: people (who are vulnerable no matter what type of housing they may have), houses, schools, churches (even the cathedral of Goma), businesses, etc. In Goma one doesn't turn to salt like Lot's wife, but to lava rock. This lava is unforgiving; it leaves indelible marks behind ---- hard rocks. One has to learn how to walk and to drive on it because it destroys shoes and tires alike. It's strange but this volcanic soil is fertile : you can see women planting beans among the rocks! These same rocks are mixed in with charcoal briquettes in order to extend their life for cooking. But that's not all! There are other secondary benefits that people have discovered for this lava rock: the lava " cleaned " the city of its decrepit, older buildings and made way for new, clean, and modern ones; it has also contributed to the expansion of the city from the downtown area to the "suburbs." This lava rock is used in all kinds of construction. God writes straight with crooked lines an d even tragedy and mishap can be the occasion for something new --- new initiatives, new dynamism.

The second factor that puts Goma at risk is the fact it is subject to so many rebels of different stripes that operate in the area and threaten it. The city is profoundly marked by fear of the " What's next ". It is not easy living day in and day out fearing a rebel attack! The mayor of the city recently decreed, for example, that no vehicles may circulate after 6 PM as a security measure. In general, everyone tries to get home by 7 PM. Someone commented wryly that these days mothers and children actually see their fathers come home before nightfall --- so even family life is seeing a benefit; family ties are being strengthened.

Goma is also a lakeside town, cooled by the waters of Lake Kivu, a body of water shared by the Congo Kinshasa and Rwanda. This lake covers deposits of methane. Such deposits make of the lake a source of energy but also pose a danger of death. So the city is squeezed between the Nyiragongo volcano to the north and Lake Kivu to the south.

Goma is a cosmopolitan city of at least 700,000 inhabitants. At the present time it is difficult to say exactly how many people live here because so many displaced people flee here for safety as they escape the repeated and deadly attacks in the neighboring villages and countryside. The major tribes of the province of North Kivu that populate the city are the Hunde, Nyanga, Rega, Tembo, Hutu, Tutsi, Nande, etc. There are other tribes from other provinces as well (les Bashi, les Bakongo, etc.). Two languages are used for communication: Kiswahili and French. Nevertheless, depending on the neighborhood, one hears people speaking their "maternal" tongues, not to say tribal.

The number of NGOs and other agencies is impressive. They keep growing like mushrooms. It would be interesting to see what is going on behind the scenes of the "miraculous multiplication" of these non-governmental organizations that are all recognized by the government: is it aid to the vulnerable? consciousness-raising and promotion of the rights of man? democracy? financing? egoism or altruism? Still, it would be helpful if certain of these organizations consolidated in order to avoid a proliferation of funds and human resources! God alone, for example, knows how many youth organization there are in the city of Goma! One for democracy, another for human rights, another for aid to displaced people, still others for the environment or for members of a particular tribe, another for this or for that, and the list goes on.





