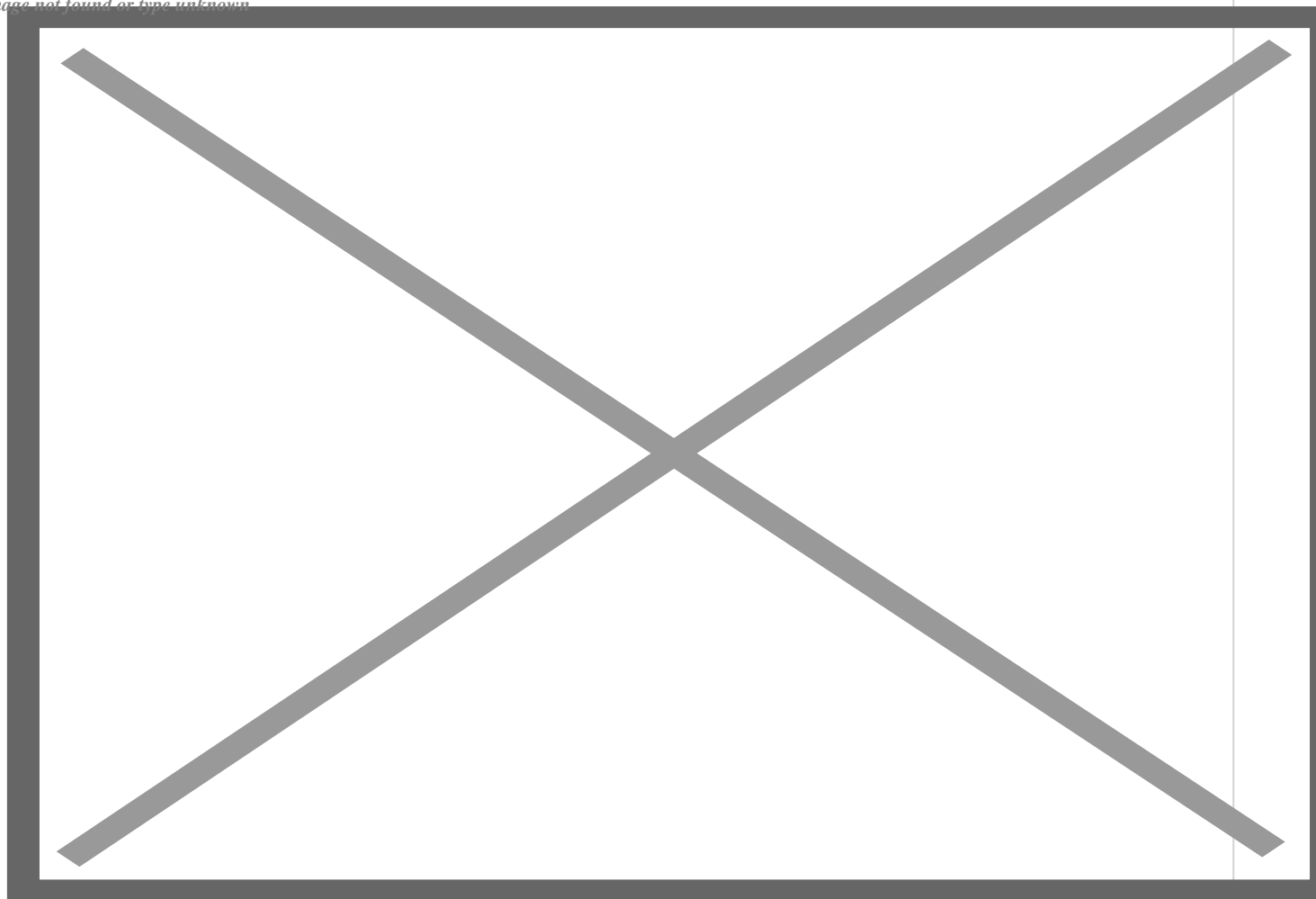


Pope slams foreign plundering of Africa as he arrives in Democratic Republic of Congo

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The 86-year-old Francis says a 'forgotten genocide' is under way in the DRC as he begins his trip to two African nations.

Pope Francis sits next to Democratic Republic of Congo's President Felix Tshisekedi as he

attends a welcoming ceremony at the Palais de la Nation on the first day of his apostolic journey, in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, January 31, 2023 [Simone Risoluti/Vatican Media/Handout via Reuters]

Kinshasa, February 1 (RHC)-- Pope Francis has demanded that foreign powers stop plundering Africa's natural resources for the "poison of their own greed" after he landed in the Democratic Republic of Congo as part of a trip to two African nations.

The 86-year-old Francis is the first pontiff to visit DR Congo since Pope John Paul II did so in 1985, when the country was still known as Zaire.

"Hands off the Democratic Republic of the Congo! Hands off Africa!" Francis said on Tuesday to applause in his opening speech to Congolese government authorities and the diplomatic corps in the garden of Kinshasa's national palace.

Calling Congo's vast mineral and natural wealth a "diamond of creation," Francis demanded that foreign interests stop carving up the country for their own interests and acknowledge their role in the economic "enslavement" of the Congolese people.

"Stop choking Africa. It is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered," said history's first Latin American pope, who has long railed at how wealthy countries have exploited the resources of poorer ones for their own profit.

Francis pointed the finger at the role colonial powers such as Belgium played in the exploitation of Congo until the country, which is 80 times the size of Belgium, gained its independence in 1960. He also said neighbouring countries are playing a similar role today.

The 86-year-old didn't identify Belgium or any neighbouring country by name, but he spared no word of condemnation, saying there was a "forgotten genocide" under way. "The poison of greed has smeared its diamonds with blood," Francis said.

"May the world acknowledge the catastrophic things that were done over the centuries to the detriment of the local peoples, and not forget this country and this continent."

The six-day trip, which also includes a stop in South Sudan, was originally scheduled for July 2022, but was postponed because of Francis's knee problems, which were still so serious on Tuesday that he could not stand to greet journalists in the plane heading to Kinshasa and was forced to use a wheelchair on the ground.

Francis was also supposed to have included a stop in Goma, in eastern Congo, but the surrounding North Kivu region has been plagued by intense fighting between government troops and the M23 rebel group, as well as attacks by fighters linked to the ISIL (ISIS) armed group. The fighting has displaced some 5.7 million people, a fifth of them last year alone, according to the World Food Programme.

Instead of travelling to Goma, Francis will meet with a delegation of people from the east who will travel to Kinshasa for a private encounter at the Vatican embassy. The plan calls for them to participate in a ceremony in which they jointly commit to forgiving their assailants.



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