

Denis Mukwege

Gynecologist and human rights advocate

Date of birth: March 1, 1955

Place of birth: Bukavu, Belgian Congo (now Democratic Republic of the Congo)

Also known as: Doctor Miracle

Education: University of Burundi; University of Angers

Significance: Denis Mukwege is a Congolese gynecologist and human rights advocate who treated thousands of women who were raped and mutilated in areas of conflict. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 in recognition of his advocacy and efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war.

Background

Denis Mukwege was born on March 1, 1955, in Bukavu, South Kivu, in what was then Belgian Congo. The third eldest of nine children, he grew up in Bukavu. His father was a traveling Pentecostal minister, and Mukwege often accompanied him on his visits to the sick. The visits made him aware of the need for better health care in the area and inspired him to become a doctor.

Dr. Denis Mukwege, 2018.



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Mukwege studied medicine at the University of Burundi in Bujumbura, Burundi, and received a bachelor's degree in general medicine. He then returned to his home country and briefly worked as a pediatrician at the Christian Hospital in Lemera. While there, he realized many pregnant women were not given adequate medical care, which caused difficulties during childbirth, and he returned to school so he could qualify as a gynecologist. He studied at the University of Angers in France and received a master's degree in obstetrics and gynecology.

Medical Career

After completing medical training in France, Mukwege returned to the Christian Hospital in Lemera in 1989. He established obstetrics and gynecology services and became the doctor in charge of the hospital. In 1996, a civil war broke out in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The hospital was destroyed, and many patients and hospital employees were murdered. Mukwege moved to Bukavu and established a tent hospital with a maternity ward. It, too, was destroyed, in 1998. With financial assistance from several organizations, he built Panzi Hospital in 1999 and became its director and chief surgeon.

Originally intended to provide gynecological and maternity care to the region's women, Panzi Hospital soon shifted its focus to women who had been sexually brutalized by rebels, soldiers, and

others during the civil war, after a patient who had been raped and shot through the vagina arrived at the hospital. Additional women with similar types of injuries soon followed. Many combatants in the conflict used rape and other sexual violence as a weapon of war. They typically gang-raped multiple women, mutilated them by shooting, knifing, or pouring chemicals on their genitals, and forced their husbands and others to watch. In response, villagers usually fled their homes, leaving their economic resources for the combatants, which was the desired goal.

Mukwege recognized the need to treat more than the physical injuries of his patients. Panzi Hospital offered psychological, legal, and social services. It provided a safe house where women could live while recovering. It also offered a program where women produced goods they could sell, giving them an income and means to support themselves and their children.

Word of the hospital's services spread, attracting women from throughout the area and neighboring countries. The hospital added personnel and beds to accommodate the growing number of patients. Within two decades, it had more than 350 doctors, nurses, and support staff and had treated more than 85,000 women. Mukwege became an expert on fistula repairs and surgical reconstruction of the genital area. He implemented a program that trained medical students and doctors to repair genital and fistula injuries, and trained midwives and nurses how to treat patients with repaired fistulas to prevent further damage during childbirth.

Human Rights Advocacy

Mukwege also became an advocate for the women treated at Panzi Hospital. He raised international awareness of the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and urged the Congolese government to address the root causes of the violence, such as competing claims for mineral rights. He also called for the prosecution of individuals who weaponized sexual violence during war. Mukwege addressed numerous government bodies, including the US White House and Senate, the Canadian and European parliaments, and leaders in the United Kingdom, France, and Belgium.

In a September 2012 speech to the United Nations Security Council, Mukwege decried the failure of both the Congolese government and international community to adequately respond to the sexual violence that had long marred the DRC. One month later, several men broke into his home and took his two daughters and their cousin hostage. He and several others were attacked when they returned to his home and Mukwege's security guard was killed. Mukwege escaped without injury and he and his family fled to Sweden and then to Brussels, Belgium. A group of Congolese women raised money for his airfare and persuaded him to return to the DRC in January 2013. He then lived at the hospital under the protection of United Nation peacekeepers.

Impact

In addition to having a direct impact on the lives of thousands of patients, Mukwege received numerous awards and recognitions for his work. These included the 2008 United Nations Human Rights Prize, 2009 African of the Year, 2009 Olof Palme Prize, 2013 Right Livelihood Award, 2013 French Legion of Honor, 2014 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, and 2016 Seoul Peace Prize. In 2018, he was a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace prize, sharing it with Nadia Murad, an Iraqi Yazidi activist who was taken hostage, tortured, and raped by Islamic State terrorists in 2014.

Personal Life

Mukwege married Madeleine Mapendo Kaboyi. They had two daughters and three sons.

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