

A Voice From The Congo

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As Susan Graseck pointed out in the last article, increased knowledge and understanding of the outside world are essential for twenty-first century students. Teachers can benefit from the fact that the United States is a haven for prominent and well-informed visitors from other countries—diplomats, government officials, entrepreneurs, prominent journalists, political exiles, and others. Teachers are sometimes not aware of all the opportunities they have to host visitors of distinction.

In October 2007, at Maple Dale School, we welcomed Azarias Ruberwa Manywa, former vice president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Ruberwa visited with a fifth and an eighth grade social studies class, to whom he outlined the difficult events in the recent history of the DRC and how he became a vice president.

There was a civil war in the DRC between 1998 and 2003. During this time, 3.5 million people died and a huge humanitarian crisis resulted, which some have said is the worst in the world. During this war, there were three main fighting parties and up to seven foreign armies in the DRC. Ruberwa was the secretary general of the *Rassemblement Congolaise pour la Democratie* (RCD) and the main RCD negotiator in the peace process. He was named one of four vice presidents in the transitional government that was set up. After the new government was eventually formed, he became the leader of the RCD political party. He is an informal advisor to the current president of the DRC.

Ruberwa pointed out that the hope for the future in the DRC centers around three key issues: controlling the violence in the East of the Congo; dealing with the humanitarian needs and issues of the Congo; and rebuilding the ability of the government to carry out its functions. The key question is: Will the government revert to being a

corrupt dictatorship or will it begin to show signs of true democratic governance?

Students were intrigued by the situation in the DRC, and asked Ruberwa about the conflict there. One student was very interested in the impact the humanitarian crisis had on the people of the country. Others asked how he got to his position within the transitional government, and about the role he played in the peace negotiations, and his current role as leader of his political party. Students were very impressed to have a former leader of a country and a current leader of a political party visit their classroom. Because of his visit, students got a sense of the strife that exists throughout the world, but realized that such strife can sometimes be resolved through peaceful initiatives. They became more interested in and more informed about the challenges facing the DRC.

Ruberwa was able to visit our school because he had been invited by the nearby University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) to talk about his role in finding a solution to the political crisis in the DRC. Rob Ricigliano, director of the Institute of World Affairs at the university, was involved in the negotiations for a peaceful solution and helped sponsor Ruberwa's visit to Milwaukee and our school. On another occasion, Rob arranged for the former

president of Ecuador to visit our class and make a presentation that also gave students an experience they will always remember.

Many universities have international centers and institutes dealing with different parts of the world that are similar to the UWM Institute of World Affairs and often host experts or important visitors. I strongly recommend that teachers establish contacts with these centers, which often have newsletters and are happy to put teachers on their mailing lists. They can be a great resource for connecting schools with foreign visitors and bringing the outside world into the classroom.

Having foreign visitors speak about their countries makes another part of the world more real to students than simply reading about the countries would do. It also provides a human dimension that is a valuable counter to stereotypes, because students meet and hear an individual with whom they can identify, who shares striking experiences with them. To make the most of such visits, classes should learn ahead of time about the subject the visitor will discuss, and engage in activities or assignments after the visit that make use of the information provided by the visitor. I recommend that if the speaker addresses problems or conflicts, teachers should also introduce students to the general culture of the speaker's country so that students see that part of the world in terms of the human beings who live there and not just as an area with problems. 🌐

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