

Parents of slain UN worker seek justice for their son, peace for the Congo

Michael J. Sharp had been investigating violence in the Congo when he was killed one year ago.

by [Marshall V. King](#) in the [April 11, 2018](#) issue



Michael Sharp, center right, visits Elizabeth Namavu, left, and children in Mubimbi Refugee Camp in Congo. Photo provided by Mennonite Central Committee.

When their son Michael J. Sharp disappeared in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in March 2017, John and Michele Sharp took on the role of bearing witness to his life and work.

A Mennonite Christian, he had worked with the Program for Peace and Reconciliation of the Church of Christ in Congo, an association of more than 60 Protestant denominations known by its French abbreviation ECC, which worked with militia

leaders in Eastern Congo and encouraged them to allow soldiers, including children, to be allowed to leave the forest and go home.

More recently, Sharp had taken a job with the United Nations as the leader of a six-person group of experts on the Congo. [He went missing while doing an investigation.](#) March 27, 2017, his body and that of Zaida Catalán, a Swedish-Chilean expert on sex crimes, were found in a shallow grave in the Central Kasai region. Government officials blamed the deaths on a militia group that the two had been on their way to meet. Many others say the government or people with ties to it were responsible.

When Nikki Haley, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, met with Sharp's parents in July 2017, she asked what they wanted. They told her they wanted an independent investigation of their son's death.

In October, Haley visited the Congo and gave President Joseph Kabila a list of names of people in a video of the killings. In February, she made international news by asking at the UN what Kabila had done with the list, which has not resulted in arrests.

"The current investigation is hampered by the lack of cooperation," John Sharp said.

Mention of the deaths of Sharp and Catalan appear in nearly every story about the war-torn country, which is an important source of copper, tungsten, tin, and cobalt. Copper and tin are used in many electronics. Cobalt is a key ingredient in lithium-ion batteries, and its price is skyrocketing worldwide. Tungsten is the mineral used to make phones vibrate.

The Michael J. Sharp Memorial Fund with Mennonite Central Committee, a Christian relief, development, and peace-building organization, has received nearly \$60,000 to use in the DRC. In North and South Kivu provinces, it supports workshops to help people who have experienced violence. A new project will support the ECC in election monitoring and conflict resolution.

Protestant churches are [joining the Catholic Church in opposition to the government.](#) Pastor François-David Ekofo, an ECC leader, criticized the government at a January 16 service commemorating the assassination of Kabila's father and former president, Laurent-Désiré Kabila. With government officials and members of the presidential family in the congregation, Ekofo said it was time to pass the baton and help the poor people of Congo thrive in the mineral-rich country.

“I have the impression that the state does not really exist,” Ekofo said. “We have to leave our children a country where the state is real, a responsible state, where everyone is equal in the eyes of the law.”

A mission organization wrote that there has been no news of Ekofo since February, and he is now believed to be in exile outside the DRC.

FOLLOWING UP (Updated February 20, 2019): An army colonel in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was arrested in relation to the death of a Christian peacemaker working for the United Nations, Michael J. Sharp, and a Swedish UN coworker, Zaida Catalán. The Congolese government blamed local militia members and arrested two dozen of them but later admitted that agents of the state may have been involved, Reuters reported. Attorneys defending the militia members at trial played an audio recording in which the colonel recommends a translator to Sharp and Catalán and then calls the same translator. In early February, defense lawyers accused a military tribunal of obstructing progress in the trial, a French-language Congolese news site reported. Additionally, political figures called to testify have not appeared in court.

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