

'Courageous but not reckless': The tragedy of an American U.N. worker slain in Congo

By **Max Bearak** March 29 at 5:59 PM

An exceptionally bright and driven son of the Midwest was killed this month in Congo — his remains, along with those of a colleague, were found in a shallow grave on Monday — and to those who knew him, it is the unfairness of his death that is most crushing.

It's not that anyone else might have deserved Michael Sharp's fate: kidnapped and killed by unknown assailants along with a Swedish counterpart and a local interpreter. It's that Sharp, 34, was “standard deviations above the norm” when it came to integrity and compassion.

“He just deeply cared about everyone and saw no difference between people of different nationalities,” said Rachel Sweet, a Congo-based researcher who has known him since 2013. She recalled that for the three years he volunteered for the Mennonite Central Committee in Congo, he received only a tiny monthly stipend — and even that he wanted to share. “He refused to eat anything other than beans and rice because that's what everyone around him was being served,” she said.

Congo, formally known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is a massive country roughly the size of the United States east of the Mississippi River. It is home to perhaps more distinct armed groups than anywhere else in the world. Decades of conflict have left millions dead and many more displaced. The state is largely absent through most of the country, but its military, poorly trained and even more poorly paid, has committed countless war crimes. Thousands of foreign aid workers have descended on Congo over the years to administer the billions of dollars the international community has invested, some would say unsuccessfully, in promoting peace.

“He was courageous but not reckless. What happened to him is not because he didn't follow protocol,” Sweet said. “He was the opposite of a war junkie.”

But conflict mediation was Sharp's specialty. A relatively new war is what brought him and his colleagues to the Kasai region at

the beginning of the year. Fighting has raged between a tribal militia, known as Kamuina Nsapu, and government forces since the former's leader was killed in August. Last week, the militia ambushed a convoy of police officers and beheaded 42 of them, sparing only the six who belonged to the same ethnic group as the militia, the Luba. Violence is on the rise; more than 400 people have died since August, and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes.

Sharp had impressed many with his cultivation of trust among eastern Congo's rebel leaders in his three years with the Mennonite Central Committee, an organization that does humanitarian and conflict-resolution work. He'd been so successful that he was eventually hired by the United Nations' Group of Experts, which is appointed by the Security Council, to investigate the violence in Kasai. He was named coordinator of the investigating panel. At 34, he was one of the youngest to ever hold that position.

On their first trip to Kasai, Sharp and his Swedish colleague, Zaida Catalan, set the stage to return in March to document the militia's alleged use of child soldiers, to investigate massacres of unarmed civilians by government forces, and to seek dialogue with stakeholders such as militia leaders, religious figures and civil society groups to promote peaceful solutions.

On their return trip, they traveled south from the regional hub of Kananga through the bush on motorcycles, accompanied by four Congolese, as traveling in U.N. vehicles might have made them a target. Neither warring side is particularly fond of the U.N. investigators, who are often the only reason the outside world becomes aware of the groups' crimes. Still, when Sharp's team went missing March 12, it was the first time that U.N. experts had been reported missing in Congo. The fate of the four Congolese, including an interpreter, who accompanied Sharp and Catalan remains unknown.

Sharp's father, John, speaking from his home in rural Kansas, said their Mennonite faith informed Michael's devotion to peacemaking. "We teach that violence solves nothing, as history proves," he said, adding that his son's death should not be an excuse to cut and run from Congo. "We hope that the U.N. will continue to work for peace in Congo and that the U.S. does not renege on its fees to the U.N. because the Group of Experts is one of the best shots at peace."

In a message conveyed to Michael's parents, former U.S. ambassador to Congo Jim Swan wrote, "After all the predatory foreigners who have passed through the Congo over the past few centuries, Michael was someone who genuinely cared, who wanted to understand and learn, and who sought to reach those most difficult to access — not only physically, but psychologically. It's really sad and — for what it's worth, unfair — that he was the one taken."

The United Nations has promised an inquiry and has urged the Congolese government to "conduct a full investigation into this incident."

Meanwhile, Michael Sharp's colleagues and friends are taking solace in the fact that someone so kind and so hopeful embraced a place often derided as hopeless.

"I spoke with one of Michael's Congolese colleagues yesterday," said Sweet, recounting a candlelight vigil held Tuesday in the city of Goma, where both Sharp and she were based. "And he told me, 'Michael was my boss. But he was also my brother.'"

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