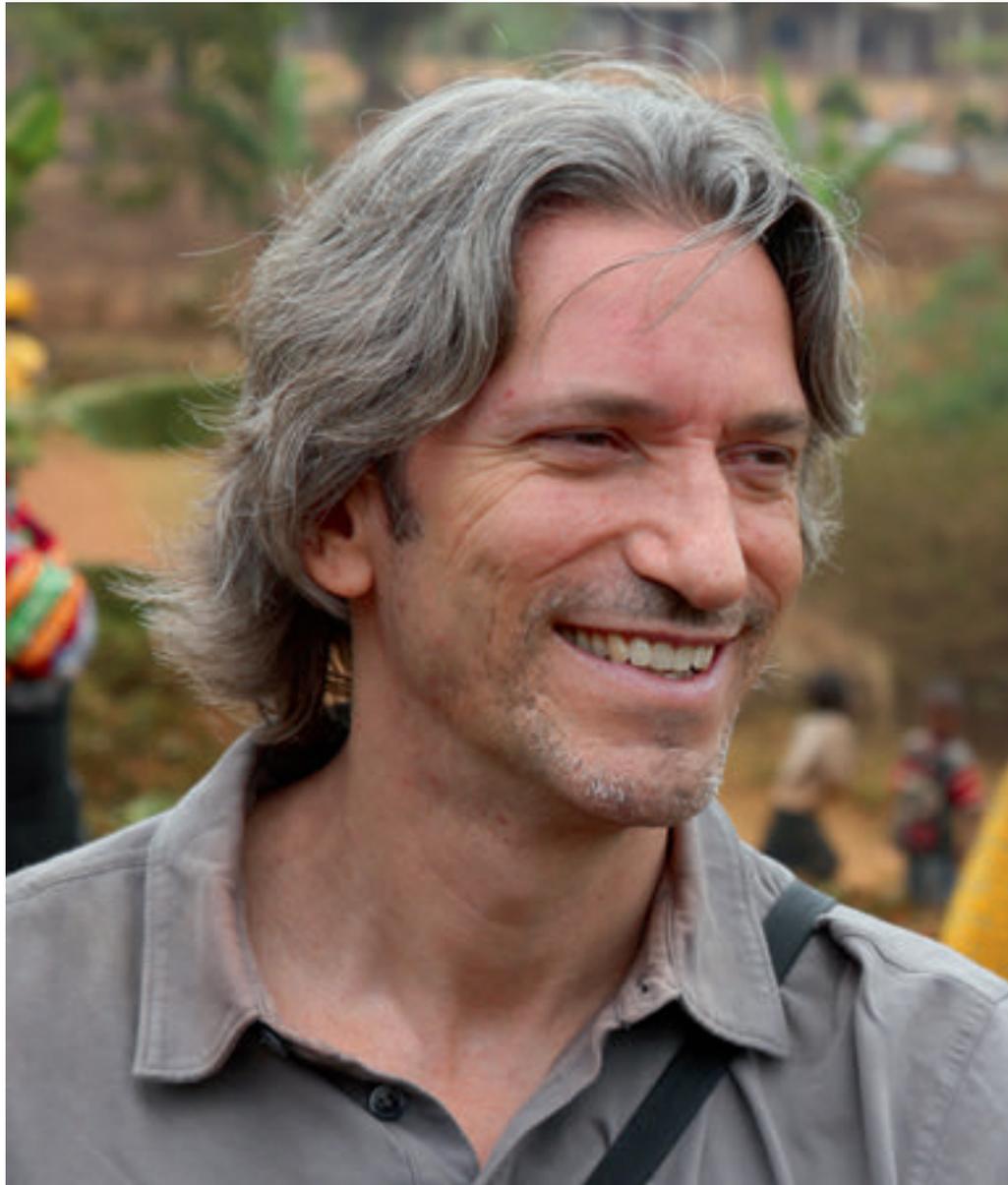


THE FIGHT FOR AFRICA

He has campaigned with George Clooney and produced a book with Ryan Gosling. **JOHN PRENDERGAST** tells us why the fight against exploitation in Africa has defined his life.



WHAT ARE THE ROOTS OF YOUR ACTIVISM?

I am a work-in-progress human rights and peace activist, constantly evolving to try to make the biggest impact I can with the gifts that I have been given. Ever since I was young, I have always identified with the underdog. From my own difficult childhood I developed a real discomfort with unfairness.

As I learned more about the world, and learned about the injustices and inequalities that are at the core of our shared global history, I reacted with a mixture of anger at the past and present along with hope for the future, if only enough of us would take a stand and raise our voices in support of threatened peoples and the environment. Fighting for human rights has been at the centre of who I am for much of my life.

GEORGE CLOONEY IS ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE SENTRY – HOW DID YOU BECOME FRIENDS AND FELLOW CAMPAIGNERS?

We met at a rally for the people of Darfur and realised we had very similar backgrounds,

interests, and objectives. When he decided to ramp up his activism on Africa, we found ways to work more closely together, particularly by travelling to African war zones.

We faced many dangerous situations and were inspired by remarkable people everywhere we went. Those experiences have created a trust and bond that reinforces our commitment to do all we can to make a difference. We're two Irish guys from the midwestern US doing more than we ever thought would be possible. And I think we both believe we can do more together than we can separately.

YOU HAVE WORKED WITH CELEBRITIES INCLUDING DON CHEADLE, RYAN GOSLING, AND MATT DAMON. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH HIGH PROFILE PEOPLE?

As Don Cheadle would say, they are able to take a mirror and redirect all the light and attention on them as celebrities onto forgotten issues. Celebrities are like master recruiters to causes all over the world. Many people have learned about issues simply

because they follow the celebrities and learn from them. The celebrities also can help “make it loud,” as George Clooney would say. They make it really hard for politicians to turn away or say they didn't know.

TELL US ABOUT THE SENTRY

For three decades I worked on humanitarian aid, development policy, peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and human rights monitoring, all in Africa. But through all this work, I concluded that all of the good efforts that organisations and governments in Africa and around the world were making on these issues were being undermined by systemic corruption.

I have come to believe that the biggest obstacle to peace and human rights in Africa's major wars is the phenomenon of state capture, where a small group of political and military officials and their international commercial collaborators hijack the state institutions and repurpose them for their own enrichment. All the good efforts at development and peace are put at risk because of the incentive structure in these countries, which favours



Clockwise from main: John Prendergast photographed in Congo, where he wrote a book about the remarkable people he has met through his charity work; Prendergast at a refugee camp in Uganda; Prendergast with George Clooney and Don Cheadle; Prendergast's most recent book

violence over coexistence, and looting over economic development.

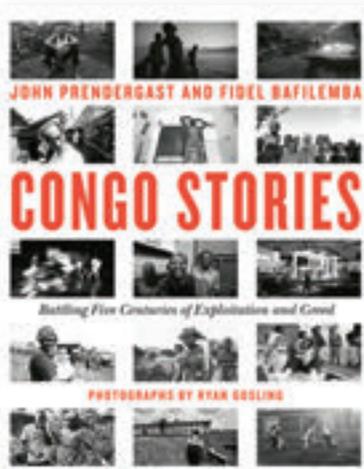
We decided to go after that looting machine that was robbing these countries blind and warping the incentives away from peace and human rights. The best way to do that, we thought, would be to follow the money and turn over the evidence to banks and governments around the world that can do something about the billions of dollars that are illicitly pouring out of Africa every year through the formal international financial system.

WHAT IS THE MAGNITSKY ACT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER BEYOND THE UNITED STATES?

It's a policy instrument that allows the US to impose sanctions on the basis of corruption and human rights abuses. The law is inspiring other countries to pass similar legislation, so more and more countries can utilize this policy tool. My dream is that some day there will be the same kind of accountability for human rights violations and grand corruption as there is for terrorism and narcotics trafficking.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR MOST RECENT BOOK

When I started doing research for Congo Stories: Battling Five Centuries of Exploitation and Greed, I was stunned at how deeply connected Europe and the US



have been to Congo for hundreds of years. Many have heard one or two things about the Congo's past through "King Leopold's Ghost" or maybe Mobutu and his reign, but the cumulative story was mind-boggling. Over a quarter of the people enslaved on America's plantations were from Congo.

Our auto industry has twice been dependent on Congo for its expansion: first for the rubber for the tires, and now for the cobalt in electric car batteries. Congo delivered the copper for weapons systems in World War I and the uranium for the atomic bombs in World War 2. The country was a major pawn in the Cold War, and it has supplied the essential ingredients for our cell phones and laptops.

The list goes on. Europe, America and now China have gone in and simply taken whatever they wanted – the people, the resources, the wildlife – and left the country in ruins. I was inspired by the efforts of the Congolese people to fight back against this tidal wave of unfairness, so the book profiles many of these "Upstanders," these heroes battling for a better future for their country.