



## 30 ✻ An open Bible at rebel headquarters

By the time Pierre Mulele and his Jeunesse rebels swept through Bandundu Province, church authority was being passed from missionary to Congolese hands, leaving a new young team of Congolese officers in charge. Samuel Kakesa, the first Congolese legal representative of Mennonite Church of Congo, lived in Mukedi, where he had been born in 1936. His parents, Rebecca Gavunji and Jacob Gasala,<sup>1</sup> were part of the Christian community.

As the legal link between his church and the Congo government, Kakesa carried great responsibility. Among other things, because the government was still subsidizing school programs and teachers' salaries, large sums of money moved regularly through his hands for disbursement in Bandundu Province. To keep in daily touch with the other seven mission posts of Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission, Kakesa had a shortwave radio in his home.

One day, soon after the violent rebel attacks of January 1964, in which the rebels took control of the territory, a delegation of rebels knocked on his door. "We understand that you have a shortwave radio in your home."

"That is correct," Kakesa replied.

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photo—Samuel Kakesa with his wife, Françoise Kafutshi, and their child  
1 See "Rebecca, Jacob, and a son named Samuel" (chapter 8).

“Well, our commander, Pierre Mulele, needs one at our bush headquarters at Malemba, and he is sure you would be happy to donate it to the cause of the Jeunesse.”

Though handing over the radio would leave him without contact with the outside world, Kakesa was powerless to block them. He stood by as they entered his home, gathered up the transmitter and battery, and climbed a couple of palm trees to retrieve the antenna.

A few weeks later the rebels were back, saying Commander Mulele wanted to meet him. With no choice but to obey, Samuel bade his wife Françoise<sup>2</sup> and children farewell and began the several-day trek to their bush headquarters.

Arriving late one afternoon, he was offered food and shown a place to sleep. Next morning he was summoned to meet Mulele. The commander offered him a chair and scrutinized him. “So you are Samuel Kakesa?”

“I am.”

“You are the legal representative of a large church?”

“I am.”

“Large sums of money pass through your hands for village teachers of your region?”

“That’s correct.”

Tapping a packet of letters on his desk, Mulele said that he’d been receiving complaints from various teachers accusing Samuel of failing to deliver their salaries on time. The commander was investigating the matter.

Kakesa tried to explain that since the rebels had overrun their area, all contact with the church headquarters at Tshikapa in the next province had been cut off. While he was sure that the salaries were being held for the teachers, there was no way to transfer the funds to him in rebel-held Bandundu Province.

Noncommittal, Mulele informed him that for the time being he was a prisoner in their camp and that Mulele would talk to him again about the matter.

The rebel camp was built around a large quadrangle of cleared bush land. Along one side was the commander’s office and workspace. Two sides were shelters for resident rebels. Along another side was the rebel “jail,” small cubicles fashioned out of sticks and thatch with dirt floors and a single rudimentary bench serving as both bed

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<sup>2</sup> See “Trust in the Lord and tell the truth” (chapter 65).

and place to sit. Through the cracks Kakesa watched the bustling activities at the rebel headquarters. Teams were constantly arriving with looted goods and with people they'd brought for questioning or worse. Kakesa soon discovered that the rebels imposed harsh punishment on all accused of opposing the Jeunesse movement. Now and again he witnessed, through the cracks, someone being put to death.

A week or so after his arrival, a surprise visitor appeared in the camp, someone he knew from Mukedi. The visitor got permission to pass Samuel a change of clothing sent by his father. In the brief time they had together, the messenger passed news from home and quietly told him that in his little packet of clothing, his father had hidden Kakesa's Gipende New Testament.

Days were passing. Kakesa was becoming increasingly restless, all the while pondering the packet of letters of false accusations lying on Mulele's desk. Then one day he heard the sound of familiar voices of church colleagues in other places! Was he hallucinating? He quickly understood that across the quadrangle some of the rebels were tinkering with the shortwave radio they had confiscated from his home weeks earlier, and they had stumbled on the frequency that the Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission stations used for their regular noon communication. He was indeed hearing, in the middle of the rebel camp, familiar voices of his co-workers from other areas.

Rattling his cell door, he called a guard and asked to see Mulele right away. Granted his request, he stood before the rebel commander and said, "If I can prove to you that all of the teacher pay I've supposedly misused is in Tshikapa, will you believe me?"

"You'll prove that to me how?"

"Tomorrow at noon, go with me over to that shed where you put the shortwave radio taken from my home, and I'll prove that I'm telling the truth." Mulele agreed.

Next day toward noon, the commander sent for him. "Now remember," he said, "if you say anything that would betray us or our cause, you will die on the spot."

Breathing a word of silent prayer that today, of all days, reception would be clear and that a Tshikapa missionary would be at the radio, Kakesa settled into a chair, adjusted dials, cradled the familiar microphone in his hand as he had done so often in his own home, and began to use the call letters for Tshikapa.

Almost immediately came a loud, excited missionary voice: “Kakesa, is that you? Is that really you? I’ve been trying to contact you for weeks. Where have you been? Where are you now? We have urgent business with you. There is much accumulated mail for your area and we also have several months of salaries for the Bandundu teachers that we need to get to you as soon as possible. Set a day and time when we can meet you at the Loange River, so we can bring all of this to you.”

Responding cautiously, Kakesa said: “I am well, but I’m not able to meet you now. I’m surrounded by soldiers. The matter of the mail and the money will have to wait.”

With that, he clicked off the set and looked up at Commander Mulele. “Now do you believe me?”

Without hesitation Mulele replied: “Yes, I now believe you. You are no longer a prisoner, but I cannot allow you to leave our camp. You are too valuable a person. You have much to offer our Jeunesse cause.”

Next morning Samuel was invited to the commander’s office and shown a table with a typewriter and a bundle of handwritten notes. Kakesa became Mulele’s typist and settled into a routine. He was good at this, so his thoughts often wandered as his fingers accomplished the assignments of the day. But one day he found himself typing out detailed instructions on how to dig a trench across a road and then camouflage it. There were also instructions on the most efficient way to set fire to a building of permanent materials and how to coerce a reluctant village chief to provide whatever was being demanded of him.

“What am I doing?” he asked himself. “I’m contributing to the destruction of my own homeland and the enslavement of my own people. I’m being used by this evil movement.”

Escape was impossible. Open confrontation with Mulele in that setting would only invite death. Nonetheless he determined to find some way to signal that he had not renounced his faith or his God. That evening he went to his shelter, took his New Testament out of hiding, and made his way along a winding path leading away from the camp. He sat on a fallen log and read and prayed. This became his evening routine.

One day the inevitable happened. Some passing rebels found him and hurried off to report to Mulele. Though Kakesa knew he’d

been found, he decided not to change his practice. He would place himself in God's hands in this godless place and entrust his life to God.

Only a few evenings later Kakesa was on his log, reading his New Testament and praying, when he heard approaching footsteps. He turned to find Commander Mulele himself looking down at him. For a long moment their eyes locked, then Mulele turned on his heel and returned to his camp. Neither had said a word.

Kakesa knew full well that if Mulele chose to consider him a traitor to the rebel cause, he could be put to death before dark. But dusk fell and there was no summons. He made his way back to his hut.

What had stayed the hand of the commander as he looked at Kakesa with his open New Testament in hand? Was it memory of his earlier years, when Mulele had briefly studied for the Catholic priesthood? Was it a momentary acknowledgment of a power higher than him or his movement?

Asked that question later, Kakesa had a simple answer; "It was the hand of God that restrained him. I stood between life and death during those moments. God still had more work for me to do."

Kakesa eventually was able to leave the rebel camp and resume his role of leadership in his church, despite the Jeunesse rebellion. In the process he became a major force and eventually contributed to the defeat of the Bandundu rebellion.

Thus began a new chapter of Kakesa's engagement in the service of his church and his community. Samuel Kakesa threw himself into organizing the administration of the entire community's operations. He regularly took trips on the tiny planes of the Mission Aviation Fellowship to make legal arrangements for the establishment of new schools. Although he was often called a pastor because of his work, which reflected his good Christian qualities, he was a layperson. He succeeded in reconciling the duties confided to him by the church and the demands of the government, especially in the area of education.

Samuel Kakesa was responsible for establishing the church administrative headquarters at Tshikapa Centre. Those who knew him remembered the concerns he had to protect the property of the church. His wife emphasized that, in various discussions of the future of the church, her husband said, "We ought not to demolish our

mother house (the church) by our acts nor wait to be buried in its ruins. Patiently, stubbornly, it must be rebuilt.”

At the end of his mandate, he resigned humbly the position of the church’s legal representative and became an ordinary member of his parish. Each time the church had need of him, he always rose to the challenge. One of his children recalled that Kakesa often lost sleep while seeking solutions to the church’s problems, even though he no longer had a formal position in his community. After having suffered from diabetes for a long time, Kakesa died in June 2000 in Kikwit. The church recognized in him the culture of peace, the sense of pardon, and especially the concern for the unity of the church.

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