



War in the Congo

By Thomas Turner, University of Tunis III

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire), one of the largest countries in Africa and potentially one of the richest, has been torn into fragments. By early 2000, some ten different political/military factions were vying for control of all or parts of the country. The central government of Laurent Kabila controls only about half the country, from Equateur region in the northwest to mineral-rich Katanga in the southeast. Rebels control the northern portion of Equateur region and most of the eastern Congo, including the northern edge of Katanga.

The map of government- and insurgent-held regions is reminiscent of the post-independence civil war in 1964-65 when an earlier rebellion almost succeeded. Then the central government prevailed, thanks to military support from the United States,

Belgium, and European mercenaries, who brought military leader Mobutu Sese Seko to power. Today, however, the foreign military forces are African. By March 2000, fourteen African countries had become "major players" in the DRC, supplying access, funds, guns, and troops, according to the French academic Gérard Prunier.

The civil war began in August 1998 when Kabila, who had ousted Mobutu the year before, attempted to consolidate his regime by expelling the Rwandan military officers who had brought him to

power. Various anti-Kabila Congolese joined the Congolese Democratic Movement (RDC), which began fighting to overthrow Kabila, with help from Rwanda and Uganda. (Burundi also has troops in the Congo but claims only to be fighting Burundian insurgents based on Congolese soil.)

As the rebellion spread, it splintered, with the result that there are now two RDC factions, one based at Goma and headed by Emile Ilunga, the other based at Kisangani and headed by Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba. When a majority of members of the RDC council voted to depose Wamba, he formed a rival faction, with Ugandan backing; the Ilunga faction is backed by Rwanda. A third rebel force, the Congolese Liberation Movement (MLC) of Jean-Pierre Bemba controls the

northern portion of Equateur region, with military support from Uganda.

Kabila is recognized internationally as chief of state. However, his regime would not survive without military engagement from Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Angola.

The continuing war, persecution, division of the country, collapse of the formal economy and government services, and abuse of power in all four zones contribute to the misery of the population. With the economic collapse, Kabila's government and the various rebel movements are each financed by the sale of easily transported nonrenewable wealth, such as gold, diamonds, and ivory.

Conditions are worst in the occupation zones along the Congo's eastern frontiers with Rwanda and Uganda. Many civilians have been killed in South and North Kivu, where the Rwandans and their Congolese allies are harassed by local fighters known as "Mayi Mayi." In Kibali-Ituri, the zone nominally controlled by Wamba's rebel faction, missionaries estimate that 5,000 to 7,000 people—both Hema cattle raisers and Lendu cultivators—have been killed in ethnic fighting resembling the Tutsi-Hutu conflicts in Rwanda and Burundi. Several attempts to negotiate a resolution to the strife have failed. Only Bemba's MLC in northern Equateur appears to enjoy significant support from the local people.

Neither Rwanda nor Uganda has been able to secure itself from attack, even though this was the alleged reason for launching the second war. Meanwhile, the war effort has contributed to problems in the countries allied with Kabila, which may weaken their resolve to continue. The civil war in Angola has escalated and has recently spilled over into Namibia, another Kabila ally, with Angolan government forces attacking their UNITA adversaries operating in Namibia.

In Zimbabwe, the loss of life and heavy financial outlays resulting from the Congo war are among factors contributing to the decline in popularity of President Robert Mugabe's regime, though poor economic conditions and abuse of power by Mugabe's ZANU-PF presumably are more basic sources of discontent. Whatever the importance of the various factors, Mugabe suffered a major setback in February 2000, when voters rejected a constitutional referendum that would have reinforced presidential power and facilitated the confiscation of agricultural land from the European minority, ostensibly for transfer to the African majority.

Key Points

- The Congo war is stalemated, and the country is divided into four regional regimes, each dependent upon foreign troops for its survival.
- The war, persecution, abuse of power, and the collapse of the formal economy and of government services all contribute to the misery of the population of each region.
- The war effort is contributing to problems in the allied countries, notably Zimbabwe.

Problems With Current U.S. Policy

The U.S. bears significant responsibility for the conflict in the Congo and therefore has an obligation to participate in its resolution. But other outsiders—both African and non-African—have also contributed to this tragic morass. There is blame enough to go around and thus a collective responsibility to put things right.

Belgium, the former colonial power, failed to prepare its Congolese subjects to assume power. In neighboring Rwanda and Burundi, Belgian rule favored Tutsi domination of the Hutu majorities, setting the stage for successive waves of ethnic killings that have spilled over into the Congo.

The U.S. played a major role in converting the newly independent Congo into a cold war battleground. In 1961, the Eisenhower administration authorized the murder of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, who had been voted into office just months earlier in the territory's first-ever democratic election. Washington, which then installed Mobutu in power and kept him there for more than 30 years, bears heavy responsibility for the disastrous economic conditions, massive corruption, and suppression of human rights in Zaire. The U.S. prolonged Mobutu's rule by providing more than \$300 million in weapons and \$100 million in military training.

With the end of the cold war, the U.S., France, and Belgium formed a "troika" designed to pressure Mobutu to move toward democracy. This effort might have produced more positive results had not France defected to support Mobutu and the Hutu military dictator in Rwanda, Juvénal Habyarimana, in defense of French language and culture, supposedly threatened by "Anglophone" Uganda and its Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) protégés.

All of the Western powers contributed to the Rwandan genocide of 1994 by ignoring warning signs and reducing the United Nations presence at a time when it should have been reinforced. France compounded the problem by intervening, ostensibly to protect Hutus from the vengeance of the Tutsi-dominated RPF, but also to permit the authors of the genocide to escape. The creation of refugee camps in the Congo near Rwanda was a virtual invitation to the 1997 attacks on the camps. The Clinton administration stalled international intervention, which might have saved refugee lives but which also would have thwarted the effort by Rwanda and Uganda to replace Mobutu with Kabila.

Despite the end of the cold war, Washington decision-makers have continued to impose simplistic dichotomies on a complex, ambiguous reality. In Africa, Clinton posited a single solution to the problems of "rogue states"—notably Islamist Sudan and "dinosaurs" such as Mobutu—namely the "new leaders" of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, and Rwanda. Presumably these pragmatists would cooperate with Washington in establishing the new order in Africa.

Two other stereotypes reinforced the idea of new leaders: the Tutsi as "serious" in contrast to the Hutu and Congolese, and the Tutsi as genocide victims. On the

basis of these stereotypes, the U.S. began secret military cooperation with Rwanda and Uganda. In all, the U.S. has supplied weapons and training to eight of the governments directly involved in the war that has ravaged the DRC since Kabila's 1997 coup, according to a recent World Policy Institute study.

The 1998 rescue of Kabila by Angola and Zimbabwe led to a stalemate. American efforts shifted to the promotion of a cease-fire, in cooperation with South Africa and Zambia. Such an agreement was signed in Lusaka, Zambia, in July 1999, but the African signers have shown little will or capacity to implement the cease-fire.

In January 2000, when the U.S. was chair of the UN Security Council, seven African presidents met in New York for a special session in an attempt to make the Lusaka cease-fire stick. They did little beyond reasserting the goals of the agreement. Kabila, however, who addressed the Security Council and conferred privately with American officials, reportedly left New York reassured that his government's views had been understood. For him and for Washington, this was a small victory.

In February, the Security Council unanimously approved an American-backed 5,500-strong monitoring mission to observe the Congo cease-fire, but the deployment of the force is scheduled to take four to six months. That time frame assumes that the troops are ready to go, that the fighting doesn't worsen, and that the warring states guarantee the mission's security. This bevy of assumptions raises the prospect of further delays. It is also unlikely that a peace can be policed by the belligerents, as the Lusaka Agreement requires, without strong input by neutral forces.

In addition, because of transport limitations, the UN plans to rely almost entirely on airlifts to get the troop monitors on the ground. That will cost an estimated \$500 million in the first year, one-third of the annual UN peacekeeping budget. The United States has said it won't contribute ground troops but may provide logistics support, which in past peacekeeping operations has included aircraft and communications equipment.

The UN plans to deploy the force in four key cities: Kindu and Kisangani in rebel-held territory and Mbuji-Mayi and Mbandaka in government-held areas. Adoption of the UN plan represents another minor diplomatic victory for the Clinton administration, but it is far from clear that the conditions necessary to deploy the UN observer force will be met.

Key Problems

- Given its involvement in the Belgian Congo and Zaire, including its 30-year support for Mobutu, Washington is partly responsible for the conflict in the Congo and thus has an obligation to participate in its resolution.
 - American backing for Rwandan and Ugandan intervention in the Congo reflects uncritical acceptance of three stereotypical notions: the leaders of Uganda and Rwanda as "new leaders," Rwanda's Tutsi leadership as "serious," and the Tutsi as deserving of support because they are genocide victims.
 - The U.S. has supplied weapons and training to eight of the governments involved in the Congo conflict.
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Toward a New Foreign Policy

The Clinton administration's renewed commitment to implementing the 1999 Lusaka Agreement, sending UN peacekeeping troops, and establishing a cease-fire in the DRC is welcome. The Lusaka Agreement and the Security Council resolution to send a UN force can represent steps on the road toward

peace and reconstruction if implemented; Washington should work to make sure that happens, expeditiously and with sufficient numbers of troops and financial resources.

While embracing the Lusaka Agreement, the U.S. should make it clear that the obligations imposed on the Kabila government are not unique. The Congo has become infected by conflicts in neighboring African states and currently serves as a battleground in the struggle between Uganda and Zimbabwe for hegemony within Africa. An effective resolution of the DRC conflict

has to address these other conflicts. If national dialogue and reconciliation are critical in the DRC, they are equally necessary in Rwanda (where the RPF regime represents only former exiles, a minority within the Tutsi minority) as well as in Burundi, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Angola.

In the DRC conflict, what could each party settle for? Kabila justifiably wants Ugandan and Rwandan forces out of Congolese territory, and many Congolese who are not Kabila supporters agree with this position. The Lusaka Agreement links this desired outcome to a national dialogue. Kabila has announced his intention to convene a "constituent and legislative assembly," but unarmed opposition groups in the DRC have indicated that this would fall short of what is necessary for a genuine national dialogue. In addition, Kabila has announced an amnesty for members of the armed opposition (RDC, MLC), but these organizations have rejected the offer as "insulting," since it implies that they are guilty of some crime for which they need to be amnestied. Through continued overtures, some formula will have to be found by which the armed and unarmed opposition can participate in a comprehensive national dialogue.

Rwanda has sought to establish a sphere of interest over large areas of the eastern Congo (in North and South Kivu regions), insisting that this area was historically part of Rwandan territory. These claims involve a confusion between culture zones and political control. The

U.S. needs to make clear to Rwanda that any claim that would change political boundaries is not valid and must be rejected. Rwanda and Uganda both want secure frontiers. This presumably is a greater priority than promoting the interests of their clients (the MLC and the two RDCs) or of the Rwanda-speakers of the eastern Congo.

These Rwanda-speakers want to be able to live in the eastern Congo, where they have been for generations or, in some cases, several centuries. Many Congolese argue that these people are not Congolese and that the Congo's nationality policy is an internal matter. This is an obsolete point of view in an era when genocide and other crimes against humanity have been recognized as international concerns, and when the claims of the former South African government that apartheid was an internal matter have been discredited. As with apartheid, discriminatory nationality laws and policies should be considered a threat to international peace.

The United States needs to defend the political rights of the Rwanda-speaking minorities, as it has attempted to defend the victims of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. This will be difficult in practice, and these minorities (along with the Hema of Ituri) are among the likely losers as the situation in the eastern Congo evolves. However, since the current crisis involves attempts by these minorities to defend their rights, a concerted international effort should be made to avoid crafting a state-to-state solution at the expense of the interests of minorities.

Secure frontiers will require the disarming of the non-state military forces, particularly the Rwandan Hutus. The Rwandan government presumably will insist that they be disarmed. Since the UN mandate will not include disarming such forces, Kabila will have to use his leverage to accomplish this task. The U.S. must ensure that this happens, in return for promoting a national dialogue in Rwanda.

Tightening the ban on illegal diamond trading, a position already endorsed by the Clinton administration, would restrict the ability of the various Congolese rebel factions, as well as UNITA in Angola, to make trouble. Finally, the U.S. should stop its flow of weapons and military training to those involved in the Congo conflict. And Washington could further help create the conditions needed for peace and stability by unconditionally canceling the debt accrued by Zaire under Mobutu, pressuring the international financial institutions to do the same, and greatly increasing its level of development assistance to Africa.

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Key Recommendations

- Diplomatic efforts must continue to ensure that a UN monitoring force is expeditiously deployed and has sufficient troops, financing, international backing.
- Washington needs not only to support national dialogue in the DRC but also dialogue in the neighboring states involved in the conflict.
- The U.S. must restrict the flow of weapons and military training to central African countries, provide unconditional debt forgiveness, and increase its development assistance.

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