



## War in the Congo

By Thomas Turner, University of Tunis III

The bloody war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the largest nation in Central Africa, is in one sense a civil war and in another sense an invasion. As in 1997, Congolese seeking to overthrow the leader in Kinshasa (Mobutu Sese Seko, then, and now Laurent Kabila) are backed by Rwanda and Uganda.

The second war is dangerous not only to the survival of the Congolese state but also to peace throughout the region because of the unprecedented scale of outside intervention. Combatants supporting Kabila's Congo government include the armed forces of Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Chad. On the opposing side is an alliance of Rwanda, Uganda, and Congolese opponents of Kabila. Burundi apparently participates as an ally of Rwanda and Uganda.

There have been reports of Sudanese aid to Kabila, in the form of bombing raids on Kisangani and other northern towns. Libya reportedly has aided Kabila and in particular has supported the Chadian troops.

The movement that overthrew Mobutu had its roots in local problems of land tenure and access to political power in the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu (which border on Rwanda and Burundi). On the national level, these problems took the form of a dispute over the nationality of speakers of the Rwandan language (*kinyarwanda*) living in the Congo. Trade and warfare across borders added a third layer of problems, which

were compounded by the new and competing interests of those interested in exploiting the country's considerable mineral wealth.

Some Central African rulers (e.g. Mobutu until 1997) and some insurgents (Kabila in the 1970s and 1980s, Savimbi in Angola) are warlords whose private armies are financed by the smuggling of diamonds and other minerals. Currently, Ugandans export Congolese diamonds while Zimbabwe barter military support of

Kabila for a stake in the copper and cobalt industry of Katanga (in the southeast, bordering Zambia and Angola).

Long before the fall of Mobutu, his regime had been undermined by a powerful internal movement for democratic reform that emerged in 1990. Because of his resistance to reform, Mobutu faced declining support after 1990 from his main external backers, the U.S., France, and Belgium.

Disappointing many early backers, Kabila ignored the internal political opposition. He established a dictatorship, relying heavily on a small group of fellow Katangans. Arbitrary arrests and incitement to ethnic violence against Tutsis were common in the first months of the war, although they have recently lessened in response to international criticism. Kabila now promises a rapid return to political parties and elections.

The Congo Democracy Movement (CDM, as the rebels call themselves) does not represent a plausible alternative to Kabila. Violence against civilians is common in rebel-held zones. Progressive intellectuals such as the historian and CDM leader Ernest Wamba dia Wamba have little in common either with the soldiers—Rwandan, Ugandan, or Congolese, who represent the real force of the movement—or with the Mobutist politicians, beyond a dislike of Kabila. In the event of a rebel victory, it is hard to see how Wamba could avoid being pushed aside by military men or by rival civilians with closer ties to the soldiers.

To Kabila there is no civil war, but only an invasion by Tutsis. Kabila views non-Tutsi Congolese such as Wamba as traitors. Kabila's people maintain that they will not negotiate until Rwanda and Uganda withdraw their forces. Kabila, apparently outgunned, has a compensating advantage in support motivated by nationalism.

The anti-Kabila insurgency has spread but lost its cohesion. A second rebel group, led by Jean-Pierre Bemba (son of a longtime Mobutu associate), has emerged in the northwestern region of Equateur (Mobutu's province of origin) and has apparently gained Ugandan support. In late January 1999, an enlarged rebel council was formed, supposedly incorporating the military and civilian wings of the movement in the East, as well as Bemba's group.

### Key Points

- Congo is being torn apart by a stalemated war, and the stability of the entire Central African region is endangered.
- This war flows from the failure of President Laurent Kabila—whose rise to power in 1997 depended on support from Rwanda and Uganda—to consolidate power and to satisfy the expectations of his backers, both Congolese and foreign.
- Background factors influencing the outbreak of the war and the course it is taking include resources (land and minerals) on the one hand and the logic of “the enemy of the enemy is my friend” on the other.

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The United States claims to seek a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but its policy, past and present, is part of the problem. The U.S. supported Mobutu's dictatorship for more than 30 years before backing his overthrow by Kabila. However, Washington's support for Kabila was subordinated to its relationship with Rwanda and Uganda. In 1998, the U.S. apparently accepted the assurances of its allies that Kabila could be overthrown quickly and easily. In fact, the insurgents were at the gates of Kinshasa before being turned back by Kabila's forces and their Angolan, Zimbabwean, and Namibian allies.

American policy in Congo is in a shambles. Drawing Libya into the conflict and legitimizing the participation of Hutu forces of the former Rwandan regime cannot be intended results. American policy contributed to the present impasse, in which casualties are high, especially among civilians, and neither side is able to win. Possible outcomes include an east-west partition of Congo or even its collapse into a welter of warlord states.

The United States is handicapped by its prior involvement in Congo politics, beginning with independence in 1960. It is associated, factually and in Congolese minds, with the murder of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and with the installation and maintenance in power of the kleptocrat Mobutu Sese Seko. This problem is reinforced by U.S. backing for the regimes of Yoweri Museveni in Uganda and Paul Kagame in Rwanda. Whatever the real extent of American involvement in the invasions/insurrections of 1996-97 and 1998 in Congo, many Central Africans believe that the U.S. either initiated or encouraged these events and continues to back the rebels. Thus, when Assistant Secretary of State Susan Rice declares Rwanda's acknowledgment that it has troops in Congo to be an important step toward peace, this declaration is greeted with derision. Likewise, her attempt to persuade Angola and Zimbabwe to withdraw their troops is seen as absurdly one-sided.

One of the constants of U.S. policy during the Mobutu regime (along with cold war anticommunism) was the maintenance of the territorial integrity of the huge, centrally located Congolese state. For that reason, the U.S. was less inclined than Belgium, Britain, or France

to support the Katanga secession. However, partition of Congo into two or more successor states seems a likely outcome of the currently stalemated war. Although Rwanda and Uganda might be pleased with such an outcome, the two successor regimes would be weak. Kabila's regime excludes too many important political forces based in Kinshasa and western Congo to be stable, while the insurgents are unpopular with the majority of the population of the eastern region, who correctly perceive them as violent and Tutsi-dominated.

Another problem has been Washington's inconsistent promotion of democracy in Africa, which has been an avowed objective of American foreign policy, at least since 1990. The U.S. entered into an informal alliance with France and Belgium (the so-called troika) to pressure the Congolese dictator Mobutu to open his political system. This policy was successful for a time; a combination of internal and external pressures led Mobutu to allow the convening of a national conference in which various parties and citizen groups were represented, and to accept a prime minister designated by the conference. But Washington and its partners were inconsistent in their support for democratization and for Etienne Tshisekedi, the prime minister designated by the conference. The troika collapsed in 1993 when French President Mitterand broke the diplomatic boycott and met with Mobutu at the Francophone summit in Mauritius.

More consistent support for the process of democratization in Congo could have hastened the transition from dictatorship and obviated the invasion of 1996-97 that brought Kabila to power. Even today, while Washington preaches democracy and peace, there is widespread suspicion that its main objective is to create stable conditions for U.S.-led economic investment, trade, and development.

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## Key Problems

- Consistent U.S. support for a democratic transition might have obviated the invasion of 1996-97 that brought Kabila to power.
  - The U.S. is now perceived as backing Rwanda and Uganda against Congo.
  - American action and inaction have contributed to a situation that Washington cannot have intended, including a prolonged war, the involvement of numerous forces on the side of Kabila, and a possible collapse of the Congolese state.
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The U.S. has an interest in avoiding the spread of interlocking wars and in encouraging the emergence of stable, relatively democratic regimes in Central Africa. Policies to date contradict those interests.

The starting point for a new policy is the avoidance of simplistic categories. Governments headed by what Washington trumpets as the “new leaders”—Rwanda, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea— do not differ significantly from other regimes in the region. Governments willing to cooperate with an American policy do so for their own reasons. A case in point is the African Crisis Response Initiative, a U.S. military training program that since 1996 has provided training and communications facilities and organized joint U.S.-African military exercises in seven countries including Uganda.

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## Key Recommendations

- Ending the Congo war means taking into account the interdependence of Congo and its neighbors.
- The U.S. should use its leverage with Uganda and Rwanda to bring about a cease-fire.
- Congo and its neighbors will require substantial aid, which should preferably be delivered through multilateral channels.

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Instead of attempting to identify “good guys,” Washington would fare better by recognizing that each state in the region needs peace in order to develop. Each needs to reorient its budget from costly military expense to the restoration of infrastructure and the provision of essential social services. Each needs secure borders. Each must do more to promote nonviolent conflict resolution with opposition groups and neighboring states.

Congo is the key state in Central Africa. Attempting to make that key state into the client of a minor actor such as Rwanda, or even of Rwanda and Uganda acting in tandem, is doomed to failure. However, designation of key states should be done less publicly than the U.S. did in identifying itself with Uganda, Rwanda, and South Africa. The “enemy of my enemy” logic means that leaders of states that are not the focus of attention resent those that are. The allies of Kabila’s Congo—certainly Zimbabwe, perhaps also Namibia and Angola—were in that sense determined by the American designation of their rivals as “new Africans.” Libya, France, and even China may be aiding Kabila on the basis of their rivalries with the United States.

Restoration of order within Congo and peaceable relations with its neighbors would enable the expansion of the zone of peace and security to neighboring states and then to those adjoining Congo’s neighbors. To the greatest extent possible, each state should be treated evenhandedly; Uganda is not so well-governed that Museveni should be exempted from pressures to democratize.

The time is ripe for a cease-fire and negotiations. The war appears stalemated but is becoming very costly to all concerned. Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Chad—Kabila allies that do not share common borders with Congo— may be receptive to a formula that permits them to save face while withdrawing. Angola, which backs Kabila, and Rwanda, which backs the rebels, are less likely to pull out, even when the costs become difficult to bear, because they have so much to lose.

Kabila must be encouraged and pressured to keep his promises to move toward democracy. However, he should be given assurances that if he does move in a democratic direction he will be rewarded by increased security of Congolese borders. This message will be more credible if coupled with a similar message to Rwanda and Burundi, whose own needs for internal peace and democratization are equally great.

The U.S. needs to use its aid as leverage to get Uganda and Rwanda to bring their Congolese rebel allies/dependents to accept a cease-fire. Kabila’s Congolese “rebel” opponents must be told that the U.S. is working both to obtain the withdrawal of the foreign forces backing them and to ensure that the Kabila government meets their legitimate concerns. Leaders of the “third force”—Tshisekedi and other leaders of parties that opposed Mobutu and now oppose Kabila but are not participating in the war—need to understand that the U.S. sympathizes with their objectives and will work to ensure free and fair elections in which their popular support will earn them votes. At the same time, however, Washington must strive to end the war.

Efforts to end the Congo war should not absorb U.S. attention to the exclusion of the problem of identifying and punishing those responsible for genocide and other crimes in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. Lasting peace must be built on justice.

Long-term problems, such as the unequal distribution of land in Central Africa, cannot be addressed until peace has been restored to the region and confidence-building measures are undertaken between Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda.

President Clinton’s policy as reflected in the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, which calls for increased U.S. trade and investment with Africa, is questionable. Even if it is in the long-term interests of both the U.S. and the states of Central Africa, this policy is irrelevant in the short term. Peace will have to be established and infrastructure rebuilt before it is time for “trade, not aid.” Considerable aid will be needed, starting with international peacekeepers along Congo’s borders with Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi.

If there is a general principle demonstrated by the present foreign policy disaster in Central Africa, beyond the desirability of avoiding simplistic formulas such as “new Africans,” it surely is that unilateral non-African involvement in African affairs is self-defeating. The United States and France each has demonstrated that point in recent years, at the cost of many Central African lives. The U.S. should participate in peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and the promotion of democracy mainly through multilateral structures, preferably the United Nations in collaboration with the Organization of African Unity. France should be encouraged to do likewise.

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# Sources for More Information

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**All North America Conference on Congo (ANACCO)**  
Email: etmaloba@RUBY.INDSTATE.EDU  
Website: <http://www.mtsu.edu/~nk2a>

**Association of Concerned Africa Scholars**  
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326 Lincoln Hall  
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**Harvard Human Rights Program**  
Voice: (617) 496-2825  
Fax: 617-495-1110  
Email: prosenbl@law.harvard.edu  
Website: <http://www.law.harvard.edu/Programs/HRP>

**Human Rights Watch/Africa**  
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**Info-Congo/Kinshasa**  
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**UN OCHA Integrated Regional Information Network for Central and Eastern Africa (IRIN-CEA)**  
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Email: irin@ocha.unon.org

## World Wide Web

**Africa News Online**  
<http://www.africanews.org>

**Congo Democracy Movement**  
<http://www.prairienet.org/panafrica/cdm/>

**Democratic Republic of Congo**  
<http://drcongo.org/frames/index/html>  
<http://www.crocker.com/~acacia/congo.html>

**Forces of Freedom in Democratic Republic of Congo**  
<http://www.congo.co.za/>

**Marek Inc.**  
<http://www.marekinc.com/NCN.html>

**One World News—Congo**  
<http://oneworld.org/news/africa/congo.html>

**ReliefWeb**  
<http://www.reliefweb.int>

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