

Anti-Kabila uprising in eastern Congo

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An uprising by rebellious troops which began August 3 in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo has spread to other parts of the huge central African country and threatens to involve neighboring countries as well.

The revolt is the product of a split within the US-backed group which took power 15 months ago after a brief civil war against the former longtime dictator of the country, Mobutu Sese Seko. Laurent Kabila, who heads the new regime, has fallen out with the military cadres supplied by the Rwandan government who spearheaded his rise to power.

Rwandan Tutsi officers, dispatched by their US-trained commander, Rwandan Vice President Paul Kagame, had mobilized local Congolese Tutsis, called Banyamulenge, as the main fighting force against Mobutu. But in recent months Kabila has sought to oust most of the ethnic Tutsi officials in his government, including James Kabari, his top military commander. On July 27 he ordered all Rwandan Tutsi military personnel to return to Rwanda immediately.

The uprising began a few days later. Already the cities of Goma and Bukavu in Kivu province have passed under rebel control, and there have been reports of heavy fighting in Uvira and in Kisangani, the strategic road and river transport center which is the country's third largest city. United Nations officials suspended relief operations in the region, where tens of thousands have been displaced by the civil war in Rwanda and last year's revolt against Mobutu.

On August 4 the uprising spread to the far west, near the Congo's outlet to the Atlantic Ocean and its border with the oil-rich Angolan enclave of Cabinda. Rwandan officers in the town of Kitona, a center for the retraining of thousands of former Mobutu troops, staged an uprising. The fighting spread Wednesday to the towns of Muanda and Banana near Cabinda, where the American oil company Chevron operates one of the

most lucrative oil concessions in the world.

In the capital city, Kinshasa, Kabila's forces remained in control after clashes at two military bases outside the city. More than 1,000 Rwandan and ethnic Tutsi soldiers were said to have fled into the neighboring jungle, and Kabila issued shoot-to-kill orders for any Rwandan soldiers found in the city.

The government staged an anti-Rwandan demonstration August 5, which was followed by mob attacks on Tutsi-owned shops. Kabila lifted the dawn-to-dusk curfew which he had imposed three days earlier, facilitating the looting.

One cause of the conflict between Kabila and his Rwandan backers appears to be the regime's failure to suppress Hutu militias which have staged raids from eastern Congo into Rwanda. It is not clear whether the Rwandan leaders seek the outright overthrow of the regime or to establish a sphere of influence in eastern Congo and push back their Hutu opponents.

Two high-ranking ethnic Tutsi officials, Foreign Minister Bizima Karaha and Presidential Affairs Minister Deogratias Bugera, fled the country after the revolt. Karaha reappeared in Goma, together with a longtime anti-Mobutu leader and former UNESCO official, Arthur Zaidy Ngoma, and they declared themselves the civilian political leadership of the rebellion. Karaha denied the uprising was ethnic or tribal in character, declaring, 'This is a country-wide revolution to topple Kabila.'

While purging Banyamulenge from his government and army and encouraging pogroms against this ethnic minority, Kabila has filled his government with his own personal and tribal following, drawn from his home province of Shaba (Katanga), the location of most of the Congo's mineral wealth.

His interior minister, Gaetan Kakudji, and his justice minister, Mwenze Kongolo, are both his cousins, while his son Joseph is deputy chief of army staff. The head

of the national police force, the chief of the armed forces, the governor of the central bank, his ambassador-at-large and all new members of the presidential guard are from Katanga.

There have also been widespread reports of personal corruption, including the siphoning off of what little foreign aid is directed to Congo, and claims that large cash deposits have been made on behalf of Kabila in banks in Europe and in other African capitals.

The conflict in the Congo could easily spill into the nine countries which are its neighbors--in addition to Rwanda, these include Burundi, Uganda, Sudan, Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania. In many cases tribal and linguistic groups overlap the borders, which have been inherited unchanged from the period of European colonialism.

A spokesman for Kabila's government threatened to 'extend the war into Rwanda' if that country did not halt all backing for the rebellion. He denounced Rwanda as 'a criminal state.' Concerned over this prospect, Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe is convening a summit conference Friday in Harare, with officials of Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Zambia and Tanzania scheduled to attend.

The US State Department dispatched its special envoy to central Africa, former Congressman Howard Wolpe, to Kinshasa, and urged all US citizens to leave the country. The Clinton administration publicly urged other countries to stay out of the fighting in the Congo. But there were indications that the US government is itself backing the rebellion through its close ties with the Rwandan regime.

The US European Command headquarters in Germany has confirmed, in response to press inquiries, that American soldiers are now on the border between Rwanda and Congo as part of the 'Rwanda Interagency Assessment Team' that has been in the country for nearly two weeks and will remain for several more.

State Department spokesman James Rubin declined to make any pledge of support for the Kabila government. 'I'm not prepared to comment on whether we would like to see a change in the Government there,' he told a press briefing, 'that's not something we normally do.'

US dissatisfaction with Kabila is sparked not only by the corruption and general incompetence of the regime,

but by its failure to carry out promised agreements with the big US and Canadian mining companies which bankrolled his rise to power. The *Wall Street Journal* noted August 5 that Kabila 'has alienated potential foreign investors, especially the crucial mining sector, by making deals and then breaking them.'

Underlying the crisis is the impact of the world financial crisis on a Congolese economy that was left in shambles by three decades of plundering by Mobutu and the longer term legacy of colonial exploitation and oppression. Plunging prices of commodities such as copper and cobalt, once the country's main exports, have slashed the Congo's foreign exchange earnings. A report in mid-July said that all economic indicators, including mineral production, were down, and there has been virtually no new foreign investment since Kabila came to power.

Foreign aid has not been enough to alleviate mass starvation, let alone spark any economic development. The last meeting of the country's foreign aid donors produced contributions totaling only \$32 million, about 75 cents for each of the Congo's 46 million people.

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