

Escalating war in the Congo threatens to destabilise sub-Saharan Africa

Chris Talbot
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The war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (previously Zaire) has taken on a new dimension, as other African states have lent their military support to the embattled regime of President Laurent Kabila. What began as an uprising against Kabila is turning into a regional war threatening to destabilise the whole of sub-Saharan Africa.

Faced with a rebellion backed by Uganda and Rwanda in the east and west, Kabila was forced to abandon the capital Kinshasa and withdraw to his power-base in the province of Katanga. But Zimbabwe and Angola came to his aid. Angolan troops poured across the border from their enclave in Cabinda on August 22, at the same time as Nelson Mandela was meeting with other African leaders in an attempt to get a negotiated settlement that would remove Kabila.

Four days later, Angolan troops were still crossing the border in a massive build-up of forces under the command of the Zimbabwean Air Marshall, Perence Shiri. Their fighters and helicopters have bombed Kisangani, the Congo's third largest city, and the town of Kasangulu near Kinshasa. The number of civilian casualties is as yet unknown.

With Angolan and Zimbabwean backing, Kabila returned to Kinshasa predicting victory over the rebels and urging a genocidal campaign against members of the Tutsi tribe. In response Uganda and Rwanda have begun preparing a joint airlift.

Uganda already had troops in the Congo under an agreement with Kabila, but they have now advanced deep into Congolese territory on the pretext of preventing a massacre of Tutsis. Uganda's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs said, 'Our view, which we have made absolutely clear--where it comes to genocide, the matter ceases to be an internal matter.' Referring to the massacres in Rwanda he said, 'We are not prepared to have another genocide like in 1994.'

Meanwhile, Tutsi rebels in eastern Congo, who are backed by Uganda and Rwanda, were reported to have massacred refugees whom they suspected of supporting a pro-Kabila militia.

The failure of Nelson Mandela's attempt to enforce a negotiated settlement has shown that the 14-member Southern African Development Community (SADC) cannot police the region. American and other western-backed governments in Africa nominally support the SADC. Its pretensions for peace and stability are undermined, however, by the other aspect of American policy in Africa--the establishment of new leaders supposedly more in tune with the needs of the free market and the dictates of the International Monetary Fund.

These 'new leaders'--including those in Uganda, Ethiopia and Eritrea--were supposed to bring about an 'African renaissance', replacing the old corrupt regimes like that of Mobutu Sese Seko, the former ruler of Zaire.

When Kabila was installed as president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo last year, ousting Mobutu, it was with the United States' backing. American military personnel in Rwanda trained Kabila's army and most of his officers were drawn from the Rwandan army. Within the space of 15 months, Kabila succeeded in alienating potential foreign investors by breaking agreements with the major mining companies and continuing the corruption and incompetence of the Mobutu regime. Earlier this month, US State department spokesman James Rubin refused to give any support for the Kabila government.

France has been most outspoken in expressing support for the anti-Kabila rebels. Foreign minister Josselin attacked Kabila, saying that he was never meant to be a statesman. Arthur Z'Ahidi Ngoma, the pro-Rwandan leader of the rebels, was reported in the French satirical magazine *Canard Enchaîné* as having met with President Chirac while the rebellion was being prepared. Ngoma is

quoted as saying, 'France is a country which has understood the meaning of the rebels' action.'

Rwandan opposition to Kabila is over his support for Hutu militia that have been attacking Rwanda from their bases in the Congo. After the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the present Tutsi-dominated regime regard their support for the rebels as a question of 'ethnic survival'. Both Rwandan president Bizimungu and Ugandan president Museveni attended the SADC peace talks, but made clear they would continue their military opposition to Kabila.

Uganda is involved because it has troops already based in the Congo -- one of the conditions agreed to by Kabila when he came to power. Uganda's military bases are in the Kivu region, from which, with US backing, it sends out forces in support of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army involved in a civil war against the Sudanese regime in the north.

For their own reasons, Zimbabwe and Angola are unwilling to see the collapse of Kabila's regime. In 1994, the decades-old conflict between the CIA-backed Unita rebels and the MPLA government came to an end in Angola. Kabila agreed to cut off Unita's supply lines when he came to power last year. The uneasy peace was already crumbling before the Congo conflict broke out. Jonas Savimbi, leader of Unita, is attempting to rally dissatisfied oppositionists from all over the region including the Congo. Mobutu, the ousted president of the Congo, was a long time ally of Savimbi. As fighting intensified, Unita declared that it also had interests to defend in the Congo as well as the Angolan government, threatening an extension of the incipient Angolan civil war to the Congo.

Zimbabwe's support for Kabila is in part determined by the \$93m that the Kabila regime owes it for weapons and equipment. But money is not the only reason. President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has taken the opportunity to cast himself as a regional strongman and assert his leadership of the southern African states against that of President Mandela. Mugabe portrays Mandela as acting on behalf of America and has adopted anti-America demagogy to divert attention from the social and political crisis in Zimbabwe. Unemployment has trebled since Mugabe came to power 18 years ago and real wages have fallen by a third since 1990. As a result, strikes have become frequent and opposition has grown. In January six hungry rioters were shot dead by armed troops.

Besides Uganda, Rwanda, Angola and Zimbabwe, several other countries including Namibia, Zambia,

Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville and the Central African Republic have interests in the Congo, and are already involved in the war or could become embroiled in the conflict.

While the main base of the rebellion against Kabila is in the eastern part of Congo bordering Uganda and Rwanda, troops loyal to former president Mobutu and led by Tutsi officers rebelled in the western Congo, capturing the Atlantic port of Matadi and the Inga dam. They were joined by troops airlifted in from the east. They now find themselves encircled by Zimbabwean and Angolan forces with all lines of retreat blocked.

The more beleaguered their position the greater the threat to the strategically important Inga hydroelectric plant. Foreign investors are increasingly concerned that the trapped rebels will blow up the power station and blackout much of central Africa. John Clemmow of Investec Securities was reported by the *Financial Times* as saying that if this happened, 'There would be a human catastrophe of the highest order'.

The nature of this catastrophe, as far as western investors are concerned, is not so much the disaster that is already engulfing the civilian population of the region, but the threat to the profitability of the mineral-rich Shaba region in the south. Power from Inga is essential to plans to revitalise the copper and cobalt mines of Shaba. As commodity prices continue to fall on the world market, only the availability of cheap power could make the projected investment viable.

As well as the drive to extract mineral wealth, the United States and Western capitalist countries have continued to extract billions of dollars from Africa in debt repayments, plunging the continent into deeper and deeper poverty. It has produced regimes and military cliques who promote ethnic conflict and civil war as their modus operandi, which now threatens to engulf millions in Africa's biggest war.

See Also:

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