

Congo War Drags On—Uganda and Chad pull out

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After nine months of a war that has engulfed much of central Africa and directly involved at least eight surrounding countries, two of the main participants fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire) have pulled out. Uganda, which was backing the rebels, and Chad, which came to the support of President Laurent-Desire Kabila, have withdrawn after a deal reached under the auspices of Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi in Sirte in April.

The war has resulted in a major humanitarian disaster, with thousands killed and up to 500,000 internally displaced people. Hundreds of refugees every day are fleeing the conflict area in the east of the DRC and crossing the border into Zambia. A further 50,000 have crossed Lake Tanganyika into Tanzania. Despite this being an extremely fertile agricultural region as well as having huge mineral deposits—the largest copper mine in the world in Shaba (Katanga) and a diamond mine which used to yield \$1 billion a year—there has been a complete collapse of the DRC economy. In the capital Kinshasa there have been riots over price rises in which troops shot at demonstrators. President Kabila was booed and stoned as his cortege drove through the streets.

The war is set to continue, but has reached a stalemate. Rebel forces still backed by troops from Rwanda and Burundi have taken control of about a third of the country in the east, but have failed to drive out the pro-Kabila forces from the south and west. After Chad pulled out, and many Angolan troops were withdrawn earlier in the year to continue fighting the civil war in their own country, troops from Namibia and Zimbabwe continue to back the Kabila regime. Zimbabwean troops pulled back from fighting in the east after taking some casualties earlier in the year, but many of their 9,000 troops have now dug in around the key diamond producing town of Mbuji-Mayi in East Kasai, which the rebels have failed to take.

There have been dozens of previous attempts at peace deals by the United Nations, the Organisation for African Unity, and individual African states such as Zambia and South Africa. The talks in Sirte between Kabila, Gaddafi, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and the presidents of Chad and Eritrea, Idriss Derby and Isayas Aferwerki, reflect a growing concern by Western powers whose interests are directly involved in this war.

Chad troops entered the war last September to "protect Libyan business interests" in the DRC, but were seen as having French support. Gaddafi has been working closely with European Union countries, especially since UN sanctions were lifted after the Lockerbie bombing suspects were handed over last month. In a BBC report January 7 the Zimbabwean government stated that its military intervention in the DRC was being funded by France and Libya, with China as the main supplier of arms.

The United States' interests in Uganda are substantial. Publicly the US gave \$20 million in military aid to Uganda and other countries who are backing the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) in the south of Sudan. Privately, they are believed to be giving much more. The SPLA, which was in a state of collapse in 1995, has been built up with modern weapons to fight US imperialism's number one enemy in the region, the

Sudanese government. Uganda entered the Congo war to prevent a small rebel outfit, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), from continuing their civil war against the Museveni regime from bases within the DRC. Sudan was giving financial backing to Kabila to maintain these ADF bases as part of its war with the SPLA.

The rapidly increasing cost of their involvement and the collapse of the tourist trade following the killing of Europeans by Hutu militia coming out of DRC bases, has led to Museveni's withdrawal. In March the International Monetary Fund delayed an \$18 million loan, citing increased defence spending as the reason. Although no details have been published, it is likely that an agreement was reached that Kabila would prevent any more attacks from Ugandan rebels based in the DRC.

A rift between Uganda and Rwanda has now emerged. Rwanda has declared the Sirte agreement, in which it did not participate, "null and void". Meanwhile, the Ugandan and Rwandan backed wings of the rebel movement fighting Kabila both oppose the deal. Jean-Pierre Bemba, leader of the pro-Ugandan group, the Congo Liberation Movement, which operates mainly in the north-east of DRC, said that the agreement did nothing to stop the fighting. The larger Rwandan-backed Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), which operates in the east and south-east of the country, also rejected the deal. The major concern of Rwanda and the rebels is Kabila's recruitment of tens of thousands of Hutu militia. Since they were driven out of Rwanda after they carried out the genocide of 1994, the Hutu militia have regrouped. They now threaten the security of Rwanda and the thousands of Rwandans who live in the eastern Kivu region of the DRC where the two rebel groups are based.

A major factor in Western governments' seeking to reach an agreement in the DRC is the sharp deterioration of the economy. As the *Financial Times* explained March 19, "Congo's key industries—copper and cobalt mining and diamond extraction—are in vertiginous decline. Once-excited foreign investors are steering clear." This collapse has resulted from Kabila's desperate attempt to stabilise the economy. In January this year he banned trade in dollars, which had grown during Mobutu's rule to make up 60 percent of Zairean currency as the various issues of Congo francs became worthless. His aim was to fix the DRC currency at its official exchange rate and block the black market exchange in dollars, while at the same time getting hold of millions of dollars with which to finance the war. The result has been a complete collapse of the economy, as nobody will trade in Congo francs.

The war and its devastating effects can only be understood as the outcome of the contradictory policies of the Western governments towards Africa over the last decade and, before that, a century of imperialist domination. Mobutu Sese Seko ruled Zaire from 1965 with a notoriously despotic regime often referred to as a "kleptocracy". It was a regime of systemic corruption, in which Mobutu himself looted billions of dollars into his Swiss bank accounts. By means of patronage, Mobutu presided over an elite consumed by regional and tribalist conflicts whilst the economy was run down and the vast majority plunged into deeper and

deeper poverty. Between 1973 and 1995 per capita income fell by 3.5 percent a year and Zaire, potentially one of the most fertile countries in Africa, became a net importer of food. The average Congolese in 1995 was 53 percent poorer than 30 years earlier. Mobutu's rule was supported throughout the Cold War by the United States and European governments because of his opposition to Soviet influence. Zaire became a base for CIA operations, like the support for Unita in neighboring Angola.

By the 1990s there was mounting pressure, especially from the US, to remove Mobutu. The IMF demanded the \$14 billion debt Zaire had built up be repaid and that at least a pretence of democracy be introduced. Mobutu's response was to run down the economy even more. Income from mining fell sharply as a result of the drop in world prices, state employees and soldiers were no longer paid, and hyperinflation became the norm. It reached a world record of 24,000 percent by 1994.

In May 1997 when Kabila took power, ousting Mobutu, it was with US and Western support. Kabila was put at the head of a coalition of forces, the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo/Zaire (ADFL), which was trained by the Ugandans and the new Rwandan government. The coalition included Mobutu oppositionists from the Shaba, Kasai and Eastern Zaire regions, but its military backbone was the Rwandans. Between October 1996 and May 1997, the ADFL swept across Zaire, driving out the demoralised and unpaid Zairean army.

Initially Kabila received backing from the US administration which sought to make him a "new leader" like Museveni in Uganda and Aferwerki in Eritrea. The task of these former guerrilla leaders was to collaborate with Western governments and impose IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programmes. Kabila's past record as a guerrilla fighter against Mobutu in the 1960s—a supporter of the radical nationalist Lumumba, murdered by the CIA—was not a problem, given that Museveni and many other African leaders had abandoned their Marxist rhetoric and embraced free market doctrines after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Mining transnationals were soon busy making deals with Kabila to exploit the DRC's huge mineral wealth.

Yet within the space of a year Kabila was being demonised by Western politicians and UN human rights leaders as another Mobutu. There is no doubt that Kabila was killing or locking up political opponents, but so were many of the other "new leaders". If he could have submitted to IMF terms and UN demands to investigate the atrocities committed against the Hutu refugees, Kabila would have maintained a close relationship with his US backers. That option was not open to him because his regime was made up of a shaky coalition that would have toppled him if he had attempted to do so. He needed to maintain the support of regional interests by the patronage and black marketeering built up under Mobutu. Above all, he needed the backing of the Rwandan military, who wanted to eradicate the threat from the Hutu militia from within the DRC.

When the so-called Hutu Power regime, the Former Government of Rwanda (FGOR), was driven out into what was then Zaire, it took up to 800,000 Hutu refugees with it. France, which had been the major backer of the Hutu government that carried out the 1994 genocide, sent troops to support it. When a UN resolution called for the FGOR to be disarmed, French troops handed the weapons over to Mobutu's army who promptly gave them back to the FGOR. While this was going on, the French flew crack Hutu troops and commanders to the Central Africa Republic for training. The FGOR looted the whole of Rwanda in its retreat and set up its military administration in what were ostensibly refugee camps funded by humanitarian agencies. The Hutu regime took the food aid for themselves and used the camps as bases to attack Rwanda. The UN refused to dislodge the FGOR from the camps, which were eventually broken up by the Rwandan army and later by the ADFL.

Most of the Hutu refugees eventually moved back to Rwanda. But as the FGOR moved their camps further into Zaire, media stories were put out that thousands were dying of starvation and that atrocities were being

committed by Rwandan and ADFL forces against unarmed Hutus. No doubt atrocities were committed, but the intention of the UN reports and moral platitudes from Western politicians was to divert attention from imperialist responsibility for the Rwandan genocide and to cultivate the impression that it was a purely African problem of ethnic conflict. In 1994 the UN and Western governments had stood by in the full knowledge that the Rwandan Hutu government, which based itself on the ethnic division between Hutu and Tutsi institutionalised by the Belgian colonial regime, was carrying out a genocidal massacre.

Well aware that this had been the UN's role, Kabila blocked their investigation of ADFL atrocities. He then found that financial support for his new regime was being blocked on the grounds of "human rights violations". A three-year development plan worth \$4.5 billion from the World Bank was stopped. The IMF demanded that Kabila's government recognise the \$14 billion debt built up under Mobutu, and negotiate an agreement to pay off at least a part of it. It was hardly surprising that Kabila refused to co-operate, given the fact that in the Cold War period Mobutu had been allowed to build up this debt and milk off huge amounts from the Zairean economy.

Under this squeeze from world finance, and with growing pressure from the mass of the population who had expected at least some improvement from the grinding poverty of Mobutu's rule, divisions opened up between Kabila and his Rwandan backers. As in Rwanda, the ethnic divisions that had been cultivated by the Belgian colonial authorities played a crucial role. The border between Rwanda, Uganda and the Congo was arbitrarily imposed. Large numbers of people from the semi-feudal kingdom of Rwanda ended up living in the Congo. In 1981 Mobutu imposed a law removing all citizenship rights from the Congo Rwandans, unless they could prove they had settled there before Belgian colonisation in the nineteenth century. The majority became officially stateless and ethnic attacks were whipped up against them. This enabled Kabila, after he fell out with the Rwandan officers who had put him in power, to expel the officers and to organise anti-Tutsi racism against the remaining Rwandan soldiers.

At the same time Kabila allowed the Sudan-backed ADF to operate against Uganda in return for financial support. Provoked by these moves, Uganda and Rwanda organised the rebel forces, predominantly Rwandans from within the DRC, together with their own armies, to defeat Kabila. Given the demoralised state of Kabila's army, they expected to sweep all before them, and did take over most of the DRC, until they were repelled by Angolan and Zimbabwean forces. The conflict with Rwanda particularly intensified when Kabila began recruiting Hutu militia who have since become his most reliable troops.

Whilst there is no doubt that regional ambitions, by Museveni in Uganda and Mugabe in Zimbabwe, have played their part in fomenting the Congo war, this brief examination shows the culpability of the imperialist powers. The attempt to demonise Kabila for his abuse of human rights, incompetence and corruption serves to divert attention away from Western policy intrigues in central Africa that have given rise to the war.



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