

US intervenes to shape settlement in Congo

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Richard Holbrooke, United States ambassador to the United Nations, summoned African leaders to a special session of the UN Security Council on 24 January to discuss the continuing war in the Congo. Participants included the Presidents of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, Rwanda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola and Mozambique.

Declaring January the "month of Africa," the meeting was an opportunity for America's UN ambassador, who has the presidency of the UN Security Council for the next six months, to launch a new US initiative on the continent.

Holbrooke and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright are determined to revitalise the Lusaka peace agreement, which was struck in August last year but subsequently broke down in renewed fighting. Under the cease-fire agreement, the neighbouring countries that have sent troops into the Congo were to withdraw. Discussions were then to begin on the DRC's political future, including the integration of the rebel troops into a new national army.

At US insistence, the UN is now likely to extend the number of observers in the Congo from 76 to several hundred. A number of troops will also be committed to defend the observers. But the US will not sanction the 5,500 strong peacekeeping force proposed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan until there is a commitment to the cease-fire and "Congolese national dialogue" by the warring parties.

This more assertive stance by the US has upset the African leaders, who wanted UN troops sent immediately. Zambian President Frederick Chiluba, who brokered the Lusaka peace agreement, said that the Security Council was looking for "a perfect score on some performance chart".

Speaking at the UN meeting, Albright made it clear to the African leaders that the "sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Democratic Republic of the Congo" must be restored "and respected" if they want US assistance. She referred to the conflict as Africa's first "world war," given the enormous size of the DRC and the number of other countries involved.

The stress on sovereignty appears to be in line with the exclusion of the rebel forces from the meeting, conceding to DRC President Laurent Kabila's request. At Lusaka, Kabila

was pressurised into accepting the rebels as a party to the agreement and there were indications that a de facto division of the Congo would be accepted.

Albright's strong line on this question suggests a return to traditional imperialist considerations in the Congo. Created at the Berlin Conference of 1885 under the absolute and brutal rule of King Leopold of Belgium, the Congo's role was to stand between the imperialist powers as they divided up the rest of the continent among themselves. Its importance grew in the post World War II period as a Western bulwark against Soviet influence in Africa.

The Congo remains a source of contention between Western governments. France's delegate to the UN meeting, Charles Josseling, Minister for Francophone Africa, opposed the decision not to send a larger peacekeeping force. Whilst agreeing that the Lusaka delegates should overcome their differences, he called for "credible action" and a "large-scale" operation from the UN as well as an international conference on the Great Lakes region. He expected France to play a role in this operation.

Louis Michel, Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium, backed this up, saying, "The international community should not remain on the sidelines." Michel stressed that European involvement is "a prime factor" in the recovery of the Congo. Press reports reveal that Kabila had a private meeting with the French delegation after the UN meeting.

Michel and Josseling were speaking on behalf of traditional European interests in the Congo. The lucrative diamond mines in the Congo are part-owned by the Belgian company Sibeka.

One of the principal considerations in the present US initiative is to restore the huge mineral wealth of the Congo to Western corporations. During the war, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe have benefited from looting gold and diamonds from Congo mines, whilst Zimbabwean soldiers and businessmen have begun regular hauls of copper and cobalt out of Katanga province.

After the UN meeting the African leaders were fêted by US businessmen. Maurice Templesman, chairman of the Washington-based Corporate Council on Africa, who hosted a dinner at the New York Metropolitan Club. Attending the

dinner were presidents Kabila, Museveni (Uganda), Mugabe (Zimbabwe), dos Santos (Angola), Chiluba (Zambia) and Chissano (Mozambique). Templesman himself has several mining interests in Africa. Executives from the US Export-Import Bank, Amoco, Chevron and other companies were also present.

Anxious to encourage inward investment, an official DRC press release states: "The DRC offers tremendous potential to investors and our government is fully committed to creating a favourable environment for them."

The Congo war broke out in the summer of 1998. The long-standing dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled the Congo (then called Zaire) brutally from 1965 with US backing, was overthrown in May 1997. With the end of the Cold War the US and Western governments were no longer prepared to tolerate Mobutu's corrupt regime.

Laurent Kabila came to power at the head of a military force organised by the Ugandan and Rwandan armies, initially with US support. Within a year, however, he had alienated the foreign investors who had hoped to exploit the Congo's rich resources, and had fallen out with his Rwandan and Ugandan backers.

Rwanda and Uganda attempted to overthrow Kabila by organising rebel forces in the Congo Liberation Movement (MLC) and the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD)—the latter has now split into two factions. As Kabila's regime was on the point of collapse, Zimbabwe and Angola intervened, providing troops to force back the rebels. The war has continued since then, with the rebels and the government effectively dividing the country between them.

This latest US initiative on the Congo appears to be part of a new modus operandi in Africa, which is supported by Britain. The two countries agreed to finance a 6,000-strong UN peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone at the end of last year, with possibly another 5,000 troops to follow.

Since the US debacle in Somalia, the Clinton administration has opposed sending American troops into Africa and become wary of UN operations in Africa as a whole. They refused to sanction any UN intervention in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, for which they have paid the price with a loss of diplomatic influence in Africa. More recent UN operations, such as the attempted peace deal in Angola and the ECOMOG intervention in Liberia and Sierra Leone led by Nigeria, have been disastrous.

Clinton attempted to repair the damage with his 1998 tour, when he called for "new African leaders" to emerge. He singled out Zenawi in Ethiopia and Afwerki in Eritrea as examples of this new political phenomenon and worthy of particular praise. Within months they were at war with each other. Clinton's policy similarly came to disaster in the Congo, where Museveni and Kabila are on opposing sides.

It is possible that the US has now drawn a lesson from Britain's long colonial experience in Africa and is turning to a policy of using small, well-equipped African client forces to further their interests. Nominally under UN control, their operations can be carefully controlled by Western officers, as in the latest Sierra Leone intervention.

A vital role in Western intervention in Africa is being played by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). These have become the main conduit for government-financed aid to Africa, and have increased exponentially in size and numbers over the last few years. They have also become the major source of information from war zones like the Congo and are in a position to manipulate the media to get publicity for their own ends or to further the interests of various Western powers.

A recent example is provided by a massacre in the northeast of the Congo. The DRC government and the Ugandan-backed rebels whipped up fighting between the Hema and Lendu ethnic groups, leading to the mass slaughter of women and children with machetes.

In the course of a war that has killed tens of thousands of people and driven millions into dire poverty, this massacre has come into prominence after a little known charity, the Christian Blind Mission, circulated a video to news stations to coincide with the UN meeting on January 24. The charity's spokesman said, "The international community saw the signs in Rwanda but didn't take action quickly enough, and we have spent millions of pounds since discussing what went wrong. This is an appeal to the world to intervene quickly."

The video is being used to mobilise public opinion behind a Western intervention in Africa. A similar media offensive preceded the UN mission to Sierra Leone, using harrowing footage of child amputees.

Calls for Western intervention as a means of resolving such conflicts are bankrupt. Tensions between the Hema and Lendu are the product of the prolonged colonial history of this area. Belgian colonial administrators created and fomented the division between the pastoralist Hema and Lendu farmers in the same way they divided Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. Mobutu won Western support for his regime when he continued with the same policy.



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