

The Congo: President Kabila assassinated

Chris Talbot
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President Laurent Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was shot dead Tuesday afternoon, according to reports from Belgium, Britain and the United States. However, some confusion has been caused because at the time of writing the DRC government claims that although shot, Kabila is still alive, and has named his son as caretaker leader.

Press reports indicate that Kabila was shot by one of his bodyguards in front of army generals, after a row in which he had sacked them. Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel confirmed the involvement of army chiefs and claimed that the killing was not a coup attempt, but “an argument that descended into violence”. There were reports of heavy fighting around the presidential palace for half an hour, after which calm descended in the capital Kinshasa. It appears that presidential chief of staff Colonel Eddy Kapend has taken temporary control of the country. He appealed on television for discipline in the army.

Other Western press reports have followed Michel in playing down the possibility of a coup. However it seems that the row with army chiefs was over the course of the war in the Congo and that the military top brass removed Kabila because he was standing in the way of a negotiated settlement.

DRC government forces, backed by Angola and Zimbabwe, have recently suffered set backs in the south-eastern province of Katanga at the hands of Rwandan troops and Rwandan backed rebels. Similarly in the northern Equateur region, DRC forces have lost out in clashes with Jean-Pierre Bemba's Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC) forces, which are backed by Uganda.

The *Washington Post* quote a “Kinshasa-based analyst,” who reported that elements in the army were feeling out support from foreign governments for a move against Kabila: “there has been some disillusionment among some elements of the army, and

they have been making independent approaches among other people to support them.”

Original press reports were of Kabila being shot, but expressed uncertainty about whether he had been killed. Ugandan involvement in the assassination may be indicated by the fact that only Ugandan reports were positive that Kabila was dead. A senior intelligence source in Kampala telephoned Reuters saying “I am 101 percent sure he is dead.”

Pointing to the role of Uganda, a country which receives military backing from the United States, the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* stated that: “It is more than probable that this coup has been carried out with the consent of the United States”. *Le Soir* claimed that “semi-official sources” in the US have been saying for several days that nothing further could be done about a peace deal in the Congo while Kabila was still in power. They described a scenario in which, after the “disappearance of the president”, the team around ex-President Masire of Botswana, who had negotiated the failed Congo peace deal at Lusaka in the summer of 1999, would “install an interim administration” that would proceed with their original mission of organising an “inter-Congolese” dialogue. This idea, put forward at Lusaka, is for all the countries to pull out from the DRC, whilst a new political framework is established between the Kinshasa regime and the Ugandan and Rwandan-backed rebels.

Le Soir further suggested that elements of the old Mobutu regime could be brought back into power: “But the interim administration could also open the way for the rebel Jean-Pierre Bemba to return backed by the old Mobutists, who count numerous friends among the ranks of the Republicans and who have already been contacted by the future American Vice-President Dick Cheney.”

Kabila overthrew the US-backed regime of Mobutu Sese Seku in May 1997. It was notorious for its

brutality and corruption. For three decades, the economy was run into a state of collapse. Mobutu was a personal friend of the Bush family.

A further indication of possible US involvement is the fact that the assassination occurred on the eve of a French-Africa summit to be held at Yaounde, Cameroon. The summit, entitled “Globalisation and Africa”, is to be attended by some 30 African heads of state. It is intended to boost French policies in Africa and offset US influence on the continent. France's overseas development Minister Charles Josselin attempted to distance his government from any connection with corruption scandals in Africa, including those involving former French President Mitterand's son, by stressing the fact that France is the largest development aid donor to sub-Saharan Africa.

Kabila was clearly hoping to strengthen his position by gaining support at this meeting. After the military reverses, he had made what the French newspaper *Libération* described as “two small victories”. One was passage of the United Nations Security Council resolution in December, strongly backed by France, demanding that Rwanda and Uganda withdraw. The second was an agreement negotiated personally by Kabila last week at Libreville, Gabon between President Buyoya of Burundi and the Hutu militia, the FDD, who had been conducting a civil war with the Burundi regime from bases inside the Congo. The intention was to get Burundi, whose forces have been backing Rwanda, out of the Congo war. Hutu militia, numbering as many as 40,000, and including the Interhamwe, the rump of the Rwandan regime that carried out the 1994 genocide, have made up a major part of Kabila's forces.

In the 1960s, Kabila had led a guerrilla struggle against the Mobutu regime. One of his claims to fame was a meeting with Che Guevara, although Guevara apparently considered him a liability—who spent more time in bars and brothels than in politics. Kabila's group controlled a tiny region in the South Kivu region of the Congo, where it was sustained by gold mining and ivory trading, and where the group is said to have brutalised the local population. In the 1980s Kabila moved to Dar es Salaam, selling gold mined in the Congo. Here in 1996, he was contacted by fellow Pan-Africanist Julius Nyerere, the former President of Tanzania. Kabila was taken up by his former Pan-

African associates President Museveni of Uganda and the then Vice-President of Rwanda Paul Kagame. Like them, Kabila had abandoned any pretence of Marxism and was a committed supporter of the profit system.

Uganda and Rwanda were fighting against the Interhamwe in eastern Congo, then called Zaire. But because of the collapse of Mobutu's army they soon swept across the country and installed Kabila in power in 1997. With his anti-imperialist rhetoric, Kabila was initially very popular amongst the Congo population. The US clearly hoped he would become one of the “new African leaders”, like Museveni and Kagame, who were being lauded by President Clinton. They believed that Kabila, the Pan-Africanist turned free-marketeer, would bring stability to this huge country, and provide access to its considerable mineral wealth.

After little more than a year in power, however, Kabila broke from his Ugandan and Rwandan backers. The two countries supported rebel forces in an attempt to oust Kabila, but with backing from Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia, he hung on to power and the civil war began. Now that Angola and Zimbabwe are under pressure from the West to pull out, and the economy of the DRC has all but collapsed, it is unlikely that Kabila's removal will bring stability to a region dominated by numerous rival factions, and where the tribalist conflicts created by colonialism are rife. Moreover, the rival imperialist powers—France, Belgium, and Britain, as well as the United States—all have an abiding interest in the region.



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