

# France leads clamour for Congo intervention

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A French military reconnaissance team has been sent to Bunia, regional capital of the northeastern Ituri province of the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is intended to prepare the way for 1,000 French troops that would lead a United Nations force to halt the violent conflict in the region.

Not to be outdone, British Prime Minister Tony Blair has said he was looking at the possibility of sending a British force. This is despite the fact that Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, the former Chief of Staff who retired last month after the British intervention in Iraq, said that the UK was so overstretched that it could not undertake another military operation for 18 months.

A recent report prepared by an NGO, the International Rescue Committee, estimates that 3.3 million people have died in the five eastern provinces of the Congo as a result of the war, concluding that it was "the most deadly war ever documented in Africa, indeed the highest war death toll documented anywhere in the world during the last half century."

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, as well as several NGOs and human rights groups, have been calling for an intervention in Bunia. Latest news reports of over 300 bodies, many of them mutilated, being discovered by the small UN peacekeeping force in the region follow earlier reports of bloody fighting in which two UN peacekeepers were killed.

The conflict is between rival militia from the two local tribal groups—the Lendu, traditionally pastoralists, and the Hema, mainly farmers—fighting for control of the wealthy resources in the region. Near Bunia is the Kilo Moto goldfield, the biggest in the world. There is a lucrative trade in timber and other goods across the border into Uganda, and the Canadian firm Heritage Oil Corporation is said to be exploring for oil in the Lake Albert basin.

However, this is not an isolated dispute that has only recently flared up. The fighting has continued for

several years as part of the war that began in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 1998. The ethnic militia around Bunia, said to number over 25,000, are only part of a complex network of armed groups throughout an area that is the size of Western Europe. In the mineral-rich eastern part of the Congo there are rebel armies backed by Uganda and Rwanda, various ethnic groups backed either by Uganda, Rwanda or the DRC government in Kinshasa. In addition there are troops from Rwanda and Uganda, although the latest fighting is said to have resulted from Uganda withdrawing its official army under pressure from the Western powers. There are also DRC-backed Hutu militias that originally formed the Rwandan army, but were driven into the Congo jungle after carrying out the genocide of 1994.

Whilst this complex situation originated in a conflict for the control of the Congo between Uganda and Rwanda on the one side and the DRC government backed by Angola and Zimbabwe on the other, it has resulted in a stalemate in which militias and armies finance themselves by looting mineral resources and terrorising local populations.

According to a UN report prepared last year to investigate the "illegal exploitation of the natural resources" of the Congo, the conflict between the Hema and Lendu—whilst it dates back to divisions fostered by Belgian colonialists similar to that between the Tutsis and Hutus in neighbouring Rwanda—escalated when Hema businessmen, backed by the Ugandan army network that organises the exploitation of the area, built up their own militia.

As the Lendu organised their own militia to fight back, the Ugandan army trained and armed the Hema militia but also sold arms to the Lendu. Uganda could then justify its army presence in the region as peacekeepers. Latest reports indicate that the Hema militia are now backed by Rwanda as Ugandan troops

have withdrawn under Western pressure. The Lendu are said to receive support from the DRC government.

Over the last three years a faltering US-backed peace initiative has made little progress in this vast territory. Whilst armed conflict has subsided in most of the DRC, the negotiations to set up a transitional government in Kinshasa—supposed to include ministers from Ugandan and Rwandan rebel factions as well as the group around President Joseph Kabil—have stalled. Angola gives the main backing to Kabil. With US encouragement its troops guarantee the security of Kinshasa, and are said to have agreed with Uganda to facilitate the present negotiations.

Britain has led diplomacy with Uganda and Rwanda, attempting to smooth over the conflict between them—this began in 2000 over the control of diamonds in Kisangani—and pressurising them to withdraw troops in exchange for more aid.

Washington has worked behind the scenes in pushing the deal, mainly through South African mediators, but has so far resisted sending significant peacekeeping forces into the Congo. The present UN Organisation Mission in the DRC (Monuc) is underfunded, with less than 4,000 troops in the vast area, and has no mandate to intervene in fighting. In the Ituri area it has only 700 troops and can scarcely protect what is left of Bunia's population against the ethnic militias.

The proposed intervention by France and possibly Britain into the Ituri region is clearly aimed at utilising the present humanitarian disaster to justify a more “muscular” intervention. Both President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Tony Blair have made clear their neocolonialist ambitions in Africa. No doubt Blair expects the US to allow Britain to take on a bigger role in the continent in exchange for support in Iraq. Whether the French will get the go-ahead from the US and other Western powers is still the subject of diplomatic wrangling that has lasted for several days and is presumably linked to the capitulation of the French government in agreeing to the US-British resolution on Iraq placed before the United Nations Security Council.

According to a Reuters report the US was not prepared to intervene itself, but was encouraging countries to participate in an intervention force, possibly including South Africa as well as France and Britain.

UN spokesman Fred Eckhard called for a force with “necessary strength and political balance to be acceptable to all parties in the conflict,” the latter point presumably referring to the widespread hostility to France in the region. Rwanda in particular has protested France's involvement, given the support it gave to the genocidal Hutu regime and its alleged present links with Joseph Kabil.

No credence can be given to any genuine humanitarian concern from Paris or London. The present death toll in Bunia, with the horrendous mutilations and murder of children, involves relatively small numbers and ill-equipped militias. The real interest of the West is in securing the mineral wealth of the Ituri region that could easily be exploited from neighbouring Uganda. Over the last five years the West stood by as the region's armies exhausted themselves in a war that has caused unprecedented suffering. Other opportunities for Western mining corporations will no doubt follow.



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