European Union sends troops to Congo

First independent EU military mission

Andreas Reiss
27 June 2003

The Europe Union (EU) has launched military operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). On June 10, the first French soldiers arrived in the contested region around Bunia. Altogether, 1,400 soldiers are to be stationed in the central African theatre of war.

Officially, the justification given for this first independent European military operation is to establish peace in a region that has been wracked for years by fighting and civil war. However, even a cursory inspection reveals that such statements are at best foolhardy, given that since 1998 an open war has raged in the Congolese border area with its roots going back to colonial times.

Much points to the fact that the European powers have launched themselves into a military adventure that will develop its own dynamic and whose dangers and consequences are completely unpredictable. It is already certain that it will not be long before the soldiers become entangled in heavy fighting. But the decision-makers in Paris, Berlin and Brussels are blind to all the risks, in their rush to demonstrate the military independence of Europe.

The situation in crisis-ridden central Africa is catastrophic. As a direct or indirect consequence of armed struggles, famine or disease, at least 3.5 million have died so far—other estimates put the figure at more than 4 million victims. Conditions in the region were compared with the Thirty Years' War in Europe; former US secretary of state Madeline Albright described the conflict as the "the First African World War." The events that have taken place in the DRC (formerly Zaire) over the last years, the devastation of an area the size of western Europe and the untold misery of the local population are indeed unparalleled since the end of the Second World War.

Particularly gruesome is the widespread recruiting of children for military purposes. Often they are forced to join the militias—some when only six years old—but many of them also enlist voluntarily. Orphaned and forced to be self-reliant by years of war, this seems to offer the only chance of survival. In the militias, they are given alcohol or drugs so that they feel neither fear, hunger nor pain.

For several years, 65 UN soldiers (most of them from Uruguay) have been stationed in Congo—without a mandate, however, to engage in military actions. They are there to supervise the so-called peace process, as well as to protect UN observers, refugee camps and civilians. Considering the expansion, duration and sharpness of the conflict, it is no surprise that this has proved to be impossible. Recently, when over 300 victims of a massacre in Bunia were discovered, some partly mutilated, and two UN soldiers were killed, demands increased to send a strike force with a "more robust mandate." France soon headed those making such calls, and with 900 soldiers provides the largest share of the contingent now being sent to Congo.

The origins and participants in the war

The conflict that has been raging in central Africa for years is not limited to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Since it began, both neighbouring, and in some cases, more distant African states have taken part in the conflict. The Congolese government in Kinshasa receives the support of groups from Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Chad; the rebels they confront are supported and reinforced by troops from Burundi, Uganda and, above all, Rwanda. Behind the scenes, South Africa, one of the West's most important African partners, plays a substantial role via its close connections to Uganda.

The present conflicts between the rebels and the Congolese government are part of a wider conflagration that has been smouldering for years, if not for decades, in central Africa. Its origins go back to colonial times. The drawing up of arbitrary borders, the manipulation of ethnic conflicts and the deliberate creation of a ruling local elite serving the interests of the colonial powers established the foundations for continuous military conflicts in the region—which colonial powers endeavoured to utilise in their own interests.

The African independence movements that emerged after the Second World War posed the former occupying powers the challenge of utilising African governments that could function as guarantors of their imperialist interests. Under the conditions of the Cold War, one mechanism to safeguard their interests in the post-colonial age was the installation and support of corrupt dictatorships. These guaranteed access to the immense sources of raw materials and their unhindered commercial exploitation by the same Western enterprises.

In return, the members of these local bureaucracies received a piece of the cake and were able to accumulate enormous wealth (former Congolese dictator Mobutu Sese Seko was said to have hoarded a fortune in foreign banks worth billions at the time he lost power). The end of the Cold War undermined the basis of this system. Instead of the entrenched and thus stable dictatorships, the West now called for regimes that are more flexible. The enormous corruption of the old ruling elite had become an obstacle.

Already during the Cold War, the Western powers had acted according to the principle of "divide and rule," frequently utilising existing conflicts between various tribal groups. The fact that bloody conflicts would develop was both foreseeable and regarded as acceptable. The events in Rwanda in 1994 can be traced back to such considerations. In only four months, a racist campaign by the Hutu-dominated Rwandan government resulted in mass murder, in which over 800,000 Tutsis and opposition Hutus fell victim.

In the years before the genocide, French president François Mitterrand and his son Jean Christophe had played a particularly appalling role, supporting the Rwandan government. After the massacre, Rwanda was dominated by Tutsi gangs, which resulted in hundreds of thousands fleeing over the border to Congo—civilians as well as former militia fighters, who were afraid of retaliation. This resulted in enormous problems. Political problems and the difficulties of providing food and

© World Socialist Web Site

supplies forced those immigrating into conflict with the resident population.

In 1997, the dictator Mobutu, who had ruled Congo for decades with French and US support, fell to the rebel armies under the leadership of Laurent Kabila. These rebels received their most important military and financial support from the US. In return, even before Kabila seized power, concessions and prospecting licences were granted to American companies. The change of power in Kinshasa was damaging for French interests in the Congo, which now seemed to fall under the exclusive influence of the Americans.

Following his seizure of power, Kabila continued the plunder of the region's rich raw materials and was open for the interests of the large Western corporations. It was not long before groups of rebels arose with the goal of bringing down the new government. Neighbouring states provided them with help, thereby trying to ensure their own share of the wealth of eastern Congo. Kabila found allies in the very Hutu militias that had fled to east Congo after their defeat in Rwanda for fear of retaliation by the victorious Tutsi armies. After Laurent Kabila fell victim to an assassination in 2001, rule passed to his son Joseph Kabila, who has continued the policies of his father.

Today, a large number of militias under the leadership of various warlords continue to cause unrest. They appeal frequently to the feelings of ethnic affiliation of their subordinates, seeking in this way to legitimise their struggle for influence and wealth. There is no simple system by which each group of rebels can be linked to the government of any particular neighbouring country. Many of the rebel leaders are probably only concerned with their own self-interest. The fact that the conflict has thus gained a certain momentum can hardly come as a surprise, bearing in mind that the highly armed local warlords are supported by various sides.

Gold, oil and raw materials

The city of Bunia lies in the province of Ituri, where the Hema and Lendu tribal groupings are fighting one other. The Lendu receive assistance from the government in Kinshasa, while the Hema are supplied with weapons by Rwanda and, until recently, Uganda.

"Members of these two ethnic groups have been fighting for years," writes Stefan Ehlert in the *Berliner Zeitung*, and reports that these clashes unleashed a war in the surrounding province of Ituri that long ago reached genocide proportions. Uganda and Rwanda encourage this conflict by supplying weapons. They have an interest in the destabilisation of the region, so that they can earn more from the plunder of the raw materials in Ituri. Ehlert sums up the development: "It is a matter of gold, wood and soon also oil that can be found on the Ugandan border."

There is no doubt that central Africa is extraordinarily rich in raw materials. Besides gold and diamonds, the area is rich in copper, uranium, palladium and cobalt, as well as coltan ore. This contains the metal tantalum, which is used in the production of mobile phones. The armed conflicts revolve around the access and the commercial exploitation of these raw materials. Essentially, the rebel groups finance themselves with the profits they make from the exploitation of the ore deposits. The fact that this is their most important source of income undermines the resolution of conflicts through a purely political solution.

The states involved attempt to secure their influence over these sources of raw materials. For example, like the American enterprises, Zimbabwe, in return for the years of support it has given the Congolese government, receives prospecting licences and shares in the companies involved.

However, the conflict cannot be explained simply by the economic rivalries of the various African states. Behind these—directly or indirectly—stand the interests of powerful Western combines. The coltan, for example, is moved from Congo via other states to Western companies that are involved in the mining of this ore through local intermediaries. In 2001, a UN report named the German, Canadian and US companies involved.

Equipped with a licence from the Kabila government, the Canadian Heritage Oil Company has been successfully drilling in northeast Congo for oil—in the very region that is being violently contested at present. In the meantime, it is assumed that several billions barrels of oil could be found. In the age of the worldwide struggle for oil, this lends a new importance to central Africa.

The states involved in the conflict do not by any means pursue an independent policy. They maintain, in part covertly, more or less close relations with Western states, and in the final analysis depend on them for development aid. This provides substantial influence for the donor countries. The United States* has threatened several times to "shut off the tap" should the policy of this or that country not meet with its approval. Its hypocritical demands for democratisation conceal the drive to liberalise trade markets, which would provide foreign corporations with unhindered access to the wealth of Africa.

France and Europe

To ascribe France's involvement in Congo to altruism and humanitarian motives would be an act of deliberate blindness. Especially in central Africa, where for years the most corrupt regimes could only survive with French support; where the witch hunt against the Tutsis in Rwanda was accepted; where France's bloody pursuit of its own interests over the last decades means it can act as little more than a force for order—all at once we are led to believe that philanthropic considerations now stand in the foreground.

An important aspect of French interest in establishing a military presence in Africa lies, without doubt, in regaining access to old and new sources of raw material. The fall of Mobutu in 1997 meant French dominance in the region suffered a severe setback, and French president Jacques Chirac now sees the chance to reconquer terrain that came under American influence after the fall of the Congolese dictator.

Competition with the United States also provides the most important political motive of the intervention. Following the differences and clash of interests that arose between the US and the European powers in the course of the Iraq war, calls for a European military power independent of America have become more vehement. The current "Operation Artemis" means that for the first time the European Union (EU) is acting outside Europe independently of NATO.

In an interview with the weekly journal *Die Zeit*, the EU's chief diplomat Javier Solana declared, "UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan asked us to support the UN troops there. We said yes, because we can now do that. For the first time, we can show how far we have advanced militarily today. And we demonstrate that 'Where there is a will, there is also a way.' Naturally, NATO could also do this. However, neither the Americans nor NATO had any interest. So we will do it, without any recourse to NATO. And we will do it together, because we are then militarily more effective and set a political sign."

Solana may protest that France does not have colonial interests in the region ("... it is the Belgians and not the French who have left their trace here..."), but the decades of support for the Mobutu regime and the close connections with the racist butchery in Rwanda mean this is just hypocrisy.

© World Socialist Web Site

The position of Germany

The Congo intervention was one of the main topics of conversation when President Chirac visited Berlin in mid-June. Media reports quoted Chirac saying, it was a “case study for European security politics” and a kind of counter-model to America’s unilateralist approach. Spiegel-online quoted the French president saying, “This is European solidarity in the context of an operation, which is the way the UN wants it,” and commented it was a “cunningly disguised side-swipe at America.”

Chirac called the planned German contribution “modest,” but expressed understanding for this, since Germany was working at full capacity already in Afghanistan.

Germany will now participate in the Congo mission by providing transportation and military hospital airplanes as well as some staff officers, who are to be stationed not in the DRC but in Uganda. The German contingent comprises 350 soldiers in all. But that can soon change. Even before the *Bundestag* (parliament) had agreed to support the mission, Defence Minister Struck spoke of expanding German participation. He claimed this could be necessary and might be wanted by the UN. At ministerial level, it is obvious that more grandiose plans are already being considered.

All the parliamentary groupings in the *Bundestag* have already agreed in principle to German participation. In particular, Green Party politicians have argued forcefully for German participation in the mission, including Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and defence expert Winfried Nachtweih. Kerstin Mueller, a minister of state in the Foreign Office, has been particularly active in advance of the mission, travelling to the region “for investigative purposes.” Among others on her trip, she met with the heads of state of Uganda and Rwanda, as well as with DRC president Kabila.

On her return to Berlin, she argued untiringly for the European Union to participate in the Congo mission. Mueller said that the number of troops being sent was sufficient for the present, but should be reinforced from September and the operational area expanded.

Above all, one thing is clear: The current EU mission is not a humanitarian action to guarantee peace and protect the population. The European powers presently carrying out this operation clearly have their own interests in the region. In well-tried fashion, the sufferings of the civilian population are being used to justify this international mission.

Furthermore, they want to send a political signal across the Atlantic and establish once and for all that the United States is not the only world power with the ability and the authority to launch international military operations. Europe’s adventurism in Congo can only further serve to aggravate the conflict between the great powers.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site