

German cabinet agrees on military operation in the Congo

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During the nineteenth century, when Africa was divided among the colonial powers, Germany came too late onto the scene and had to make do with smaller pieces of the African cake such as Togo and Namibia, which it then lost during the First World War. Now, a new race for Africa has begun, and Germany does not want to be left on the sidelines again.

Hence, the decision earlier this month by the German cabinet to send 780 soldiers to the civil war-shattered Democratic Republic of Congo. The authorisation of the German Bundestag (parliament) is seen as a given.

The operation will be the largest by the German military in the African continent since the capitulation of Hitler's Afrika Korps in May 1943. The operation is part of a 2,000-man European Union (EU) mission that Germany will head.

Officially, the intervention is to safeguard the elections planned for July 30 and is limited to four months. Critics, however, are united in the view that it is a military adventure with an open departure date. How the operation develops cannot yet be foreseen. The EU force could rapidly find itself in a war situation.

The current ruler, Joseph Kabila, possesses a 10,000-to-15,000-strong presidential guard, which could be mobilised if he loses the election. Its members come from his home province, resource-rich Katanga.

In the country's east, the elections could easily prove to be a catalyst for a devastating flare-up in the latent civil war. Local warlords, organised groups like the Rwanda-affiliated RCD-Goma (*Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie*) and the FLNR (the successor organisation to the Interahamwe militia that led the genocide campaign in 1994), as well as the stooge of Rwandan President Kagame, General Laurent Nkunda, have absolutely no interest in handing over power after the elections to a central administration in the capital Kinshasa.

The leading candidates who defend a central government are hardly advocates of democracy, either. They include the former chief of the central bank, Pierre Pay-Pay, as well as former prime minister Etienne Tshisekedi. The latter has called for an election boycott and will not play a roll in the poll. Both men, like Kabila, have strong military contingents—Pay-Pay in the form of an alliance between various military leaders and politicians based in the capital, and Tshisekedi through the support of the military in Kasai province, which he controls.

Under these circumstances, the EU soldiers could quickly become entangled in a violent confrontation, which could lead to the sending of far larger numbers of troops.

This fear is widely felt in Berlin. "Many Union [Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union] parliamentarians fear an overload for the Bundeswehr [army] and incalculable costs if the mission is not punctually ended," reported the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Free Democratic Party (FDP) politician Wolfgang Gerhardt criticised it as the most poorly prepared mission that he had ever witnessed. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) defence expert Johannes Kahrs spoke of a "flaky mission."

"On s'engage et puis on voit"—"Act first, think later," was a famous

motto of Napoleon prior to risky battles. The German government is obviously following the same motto, as they cast all caution to the wind and prepare for a mission in the heart of Africa. What is the reason for its leap into utterly uncertain and insecure terrain? Why does the Grand Coalition [Christian Democratic Union-Social Democratic Party] regime consider this military presence so important?

The official justification—to ensure a "peaceful, democratic development" in the Congo—is a plain lie. The very concept that 2,000 European soldiers can stabilise and democratise the shattered, worn-torn country within four months is absurd.

The Congo has been embroiled in a bloody civil war for the last 10 years—a war that has cost an estimated 3.8 million lives. As well as the native warlords and government soldiers, troops from Uganda, Rwanda, Angola, Burundi and Sudan have been involved, as well as other states like Chad, Namibia and South Africa, and—directly or indirectly—forces from France, the US and other Western industrial powers.

Before the war, the country was devastated by three decades of rule by the dictator Sese Seke Mobutu. Mobutu came to power after independence leader Patrice Lumumba was murdered in 1961 with Western compliance.

The never-ending suffering of the nation's population, the complete economic destruction of one of the African continent's richest countries, as well as the indescribable brutalisation of an entire generation of children and adults who have grown up in a vast war zone are only the most obvious consequences. One of the most gruesome forms of the conflict is the widespread use throughout the country of minors as so-called "child soldiers."

Even if the upcoming elections run smoothly, they will not solve the fundamental problems afflicting the country. The election result will, at most, rearrange the cards between the competing ethnic cliques and the imperialist powers that stand behind them.

It is for this exact reason that the German government is absolutely committed to taking part. For Germany, it is about establishing a foothold in the Congo and in the African continent as a whole, whose enormous natural wealth is once again set to be carved up among the major powers.

The background to the civil war in the Congo lies in the raw materials in the region. The country's provinces contain large quantities of gold, diamond, copper, cobalt, oil, and, of importance to the production of digital technologies, the mineral coltan. The exploitation of these immense resources is the reward for those powers able to maintain the dominant hand in the region's multitude of conflicts.

The enormous economic importance of the region for industry can be garnered from the involvement of the large transnational corporations in the conflict. It is their lust for profits that lies behind the increased engagement of the European Union in Central Africa.

According to the German diplomat Albrecht Conze, who is the deputy political director of the UN peace mission in the Congo (MONUC), the poverty-stricken Congo could rank among the five richest countries in Africa if there was a stable political order. Conze wrote in the April

edition of the journal *International Politics*: “Its proven natural resources make it, along with South Africa, the leader in the continent. Its hydro-electric capacity could make it a potential energy supplier to half of Africa.... Its quantities of timber in its mostly intact tropical forests are the biggest in the world.”

A bitter struggle has raged for years over these resources. France for a long time took advantage of the fact that French is spoken in the former Belgian colony to cultivate a relationship with the dictator Mobutu. When Mobutu was overthrown by Laurent Kabila in 1997, the US saw its chance. It supported Kabila and later his son Joseph, when he took over the reins after the murder of his father in 2001.

This support has paid dividends. In August of last year, the US company Phelps Dodge was granted the licence to start extracting the largest untouched deposits of copper in the world. For the right to mine reserves estimated at around \$90 billion, Phelps Dodge paid just \$15 million, to the disgust of Conze.

In his article, Conze also details how the raw materials of the country are being plundered. From the Isturi district, which contains the second-largest deposits of gold in Africa, gold is being carried out via Uganda. Coltan and cassiterite (a highly expensive form of tin) are finding their way out of the Kivu province via Rwanda, and cobalt from the Katanga province is leaving via Zambia. The neighbouring countries support various regional opposition militias, and are in turn supported by the industrial powers.

Diamonds are being extracted by hundreds of thousands of workers slaving under sub-human conditions, and are transported via a distribution network controlled by a Lebanese family. Kabila has granted the largest contract to an Israeli businessman who works closely with the Russian company Alrosa, which controls one fourth of the world’s diamond production.

While Conze accuses Russia and China of prosecuting a “new colonialism” and keeps silent on the role of the US, he argues that South Africa and the EU are playing a “constructive role.” Without “the regular intervention of South Africa and the EU the transition process since 2003 would have been derailed many times,” he writes.

This is pure propaganda. France above all has for a long time been exerting its own interests in the region, using methods just as reprehensible as the other major powers. For example, it has been shown that the genocide in Rwanda, which claimed an estimated 900,000 Tutsis, was planned, prepared and carried out with the tacit approval of the country’s former colonial power.

It was also France that played a key role in forcing a military presence in the Congo. It is supplying a contingent as large as Germany’s. German Chancellor Angela Merkel had promised French President Jacques Chirac German participation in such a mission months ago.

However, the interest of the German government in the African continent is not an innovation of the new Grand Coalition government. The former government under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) laid much of the groundwork in expanding the diplomatic and military engagement of Germany in different areas in Central Africa.

In neighbouring Rwanda, German aid has constituted the largest component of the national budget since the genocide. The current Rwandan government, under the pretence of hunting down those who massacred people during the genocide, has been regularly engaged in operations on Congo soil. In reality, it is engaged in the plundering of the Congo’s natural resources. The fact that German aid plays a significant part in financing these raids is either ignored or justified on the basis of “rebuilding” the infrastructure of the country.

Germany and France fear that the US, and above all China, will push them to the side in the Congo and in Africa as a whole. Walther Stütze, the former state secretary in the German defence ministry, explicitly stated

this on Deutschlandradio Kultur and in the *Berliner Tagesspiegel*.

“The competition for the exploitation of African raw materials has been fiercely underway for a long time, including in the Congo,” he wrote. “The Americans and Chinese have planned their strategies much more than the Europeans.... It was only late that the European Union placed the question on the table about whether it will leave Africa to others, like the US and China, who have fought hard to exert their policies. Europe, according to the French way of thinking, can no longer just be a destination for African refugees, but must prosecute its African interests in Africa. It is not ‘democracy’ that is the order of the day, but political stability.”

Stütze is against the current Congo mission, but he rejects it only because it has not been properly prepared and thought through. “Jacques Chirac should be familiar with the dimensions of this operation; Berlin, on the other hand, still presents itself as democratic missionaries. French power and German humanity on the path to Africa—with what aim?” he asks.

A further indication of the apprehension of the German government toward the encroachment of China in Africa was revealed in an article published by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on May 11, under the heading “China Rolls Out the African Continent.”

“China is not just fiddling around in Africa, it is slogging it out,” the article declared. “In Sudan, China has now become the largest consumer of oil. In Angola, which is the second-largest oil producer in Africa after Nigeria, the Chinese have long raised fears among its established competitors from Europe and the US. In the Congo, the Chinese are demanding under outlandish circumstances massive amounts of copper and cobalt, in Zimbabwe platinum, and South African mining companies can hardly ship enough black coal, platinum and iron ore to meet Chinese orders.”

The volume of trade between China and the African continent increased in the 1990s by 700 percent. In the last three years, it has doubled each year, and has climbed from \$9 billion in 2002 to nearly \$35 billion in 2005. After the United States and France, China is now Africa’s third-biggest trading partner, eclipsing the United Kingdom.

For China, it is not just about securing raw materials, but also about the establishment of markets for its goods. According to the article, “Chinese products are cheap and are therefore appropriate to the purchasing power of Africans.”

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* had to concede that African trade with China is also bringing advantages. “China waived debts of \$10 billion for the African countries. It sends medicine to the continent and each year invites thousands of African students and workers to study in China or for further education seminars. At the same time the roads, bridges, hospitals and schools which the Chinese build are affordable and of acceptable quality.”

Against this background, it becomes clear why Germany is rushing headlong toward Africa with all its might. Even though it is always accompanied by arguments proclaiming “a peaceful and democratic development” (as Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung put it) and “stability,” these cannot be taken at face value. What is meant is the ability to exert influence on regimes that will act in the interests of German business. This is the aim being pursued by the Bundeswehr operation in the Congo.



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