

Renewed war in Congo as conflict over minerals spirals

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An estimated quarter of a million people have been driven from their homes amid renewed fighting in Congo's north eastern Kivu provinces as rivalries between the major powers and their local proxies have escalated in this mineral-rich area.

Earlier this year peace talks at the regional capital of Goma produced an agreement that has been repeatedly breached ever since it was signed. This latest outbreak of fighting represents a serious escalation of the situation. It began when General Laurent Nkunda, leader of the National Congress for the People's Defence (CNDP), launched an offensive against government troops advancing to the outskirts of Goma. Despite having the support of MONUC, the largest United Nations military force ever deployed, government troops were routed.

As they retreated, soldiers looted towns and villages, murdered civilians and raped women. The population fled in advance of the government forces. Many of those fleeing had already been displaced and were living in desperate poverty in camps. Aid agencies were forced to pull out of the area and humanitarian supplies halted.

The response of the United States and European governments was swift. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, British Foreign Minister David Miliband and US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, Jendayi Frazer, went to the region. Kouchner called for the UN force to be strengthened. "We need different soldiers, and different rules of engagement," he told EU ministers on his return. "We need more offensive capability."

The UN's rules of engagement were "very restrictive" and "insufficient," he complained.

Miliband refused to rule out sending British troops to

Congo. "We have not ruled anything out," he told the BBC, "It is possible. We're talking about the work of the 17,000 UN peacekeepers there at the moment and the role of the European Union in supporting that politically, diplomatically, and no-one's ruling out a military role."

Referring to the genocidal massacres in neighbouring Rwanda, Miliband said, "The world's political leaders are determined to make sure there's no repeat of the murderous activities of the 1990s."

Prime Minister Gordon, visiting the Gulf States for talks on the global financial crisis, also stressed that the international community must "not allow Congo to become another Rwanda."

While Kouchner and Miliband were in Congo, Jendayi Frazer headed for Kigali, the capital of Rwanda where she had talks with President Paul Kagame. The nature of those talks is not clear because a planned press conference was cancelled. This alone suggests that the mood of the meeting was tense.

Frazer made it clear that she held Kagame responsible for Nkunda's actions. In the past the Rwandan regime has backed Nkunda's militia against the Hutu militia that took refuge in Congo after carrying out the Rwandan genocide.

Kagame came to power in Rwanda with US backing. He played a key role in bringing together an alliance of neighbouring states to oust the dictator of what was then Zaire and now the Democratic Republic of Congo, President Mobutu, who had outlived his usefulness to the US with the end of the Cold War. But relations became strained as he has sought to extend Rwandan interests in north eastern Congo at the expense of the US-backed regime of Joseph Kabila.

Fraser's visit was an attempt to knock Kagame into line, but it has so far proved unsuccessful. The response

of Nkunda was to threaten to continue his advance on Goma and ultimately to the capital, Kinshasa. His boldness reflects the loss of US prestige in Africa following the debacle Washington has suffered in Iraq. If Nkunda were to continue his advance, neighbouring countries would be drawn into the conflict. No other African regime could allow Rwanda to gain control of Congo's vast resources.

The previous intervention by Congo's neighbours resulted in a war that lasted from 1998 to 2003 and was dubbed Africa's world war because it caused the deaths of some four million people. Fighting continued in the north eastern provinces even after a peace deal was signed at Sun City. A further peace deal was signed at Goma in January, under which the governments of Rwanda and Congo agreed to withdraw their support for the rival militias. Neither has done so and the fighting has continued sporadically until this latest escalation.

In recent years the situation in Congo has been further complicated by the emergence of China. Its growing economy needs huge supplies of raw materials and China has established itself in Congo by providing \$8 billion for infrastructure projects. This deal has given China access to huge supplies of cobalt and copper, which are vital for modern manufacturing industry.

The Chinese import-export bank has pledged money for road and rail construction in Congo. There are reports that 5,000 containers of equipment have been despatched to renovate mines in Katanga province. A new Chinese-built railway is proposed to link Katanga to the coast and major hydro-electric projects are in their initial stages.

Kabila's government has taken the opportunity of a major review of mining contracts to terminate contracts with US, European and Australian companies in favour of Chinese firms. Few companies are prepared to discuss their position in Congo, but those under threat include First Quantum Minerals, Freeport McRorán, BHP Billiton and Anvil Mining. Vast mineral reserves may be handed over to Chinese firms in the government review.

In part Nkunda's present offensive is an attempt to exploit the anxiety of these companies and their governments. He is presenting himself as a more trustworthy figure than Kabila, who will protect the interests of Western companies against Chinese

encroachments.

Calls for foreign intervention must be seen in this light. Both Kouchner and Miliband presented their case in terms of a humanitarian intervention that would aim to help the displaced civilian population. Their real concern is to protect Europe's economic interests. The same is true of the US.

At present it seems that Europe will not send troops because Kouchner has been unable to get agreement. But European troops have been sent to Congo before. French and German troops were despatched to oversee the elections that confirmed Kabila as president. The exercise may yet be repeated.

If the mission took place under the auspices of the UN, it would still not serve the interests of the Congolese people. UN soldiers have been repeatedly accused of corruption, selling weapons to militias, raping women and children, and backing up the armed forces of the Congo in their attacks on civilians.

Any armed "humanitarian" mission to Congo would be a thin disguise for a naked imperialist intervention that was intent on pillaging the resources of this mineral rich country. Rather than being entrusted with a humanitarian mission, Western governments should be indicted for their historic role in causing the present mayhem. It was they who sparked civil war and overthrew the first independent government of Patrice Lumumba. It was they who installed the bloody dictator Mobutu as a bulwark against Soviet influence in Africa and it was they who precipitated Congo into a war involving its nine neighbours.



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