

Violence surges in central Congo's Kasai province

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Violence against civilians living in Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) central Kasai province has surged in recent months, raising fears of all-out civil war. Some twenty villages have been destroyed, nearly 4,000 civilians killed, and more than 1 million displaced in Kasai since last August, when fighting erupted following the killing of the popular tribal leader Kamuina Nsapu by government forces.

Recent fighting between government troops and militiamen affiliated with the National Coalition of the People for the Sovereignty of Congo (CNPSC) in South Kivu province has displaced an additional 80,000 civilians, the United Nations reported Tuesday.

Yesterday, UN investigators reported discovery of an additional 38 mass graves in Kasai.

Analysts are warning that the fighting threatens to explode into a general war comparable to the First and Second Congo Wars, also known as the African World War or Great African War. Orchestrated by the United States' government and its regional allies, war raged across Congo between 1996 and 2003, drew in the armies of six African countries, and resulted in the deaths of as many as five million civilians.

At present, nearly four million Congolese are internal refugees, the highest number of any country in Africa. Over seven million are in dire need of humanitarian aid.

It has become increasingly clear that the US and European powers are determined to seize upon the slaughter as the pretext for escalating their pressure campaign against the DRC government.

Last week, a group of ten leading US congressmen demanded that the Trump administration pursue a special inquiry into the deaths of United Nations personnel in Kasai. On Tuesday, US Deputy Ambassador Michele Sison announced that the American government will impose sanctions against

any Congo officials involved in attempts to "delay and obstruct" the holding of new elections before the end of the year.

In an official letter leaked to the *Financial Times* this week, International Monetary Fund (IMF) director Christine Lagarde implied that any further transfers of IMF emergency funds to the DRC will be contingent upon President Joseph Kabila's acceptance of a Western-dictated political deal, including a timetable for his own removal from power.

Western media are laying blame for the violence at the feet of the Congolese Army and Bana Mura, a militia with strong ties to the Kabila-led government, alleging that government forces are responsible for a series of recent atrocities. In Geneva last month, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein called for an investigation into what he called the "landscape of horror" in the Congo, and accused both the Bana Mura and the Congolese Army of mass killings and torture.

In a June 30 comment published by the *Washington Post*, "The crisis in Congo is spiraling out of control," Ida Sawyer, Africa head at Human Rights Watch, called for "sustained, targeted and well-coordinated pressure on Kabila and his government at the national, regional and international levels."

"Congo is facing a political and economic crisis, and it's only growing worse. President Joseph Kabila was due to step down in December 2016, at the end of his constitutionally mandated two-term limit. But he has managed to hold on to power by delaying elections and overseeing a brutal crackdown against those calling for the constitution to be respected," Sawyer wrote.

The DRC leadership is "unlikely to allow a real election any time soon," according to a political analyst cited by Deutsche Welle.

Congo's political crisis escalated on Sunday, when the Kabila government announced that it would remain in office through December 2017. Felix Tshisekedi, leader of Congo's main opposition party, the Kasai-based Union for Democracy and Social Progress, denounced the move and vowed a "full response." Kabila government troops captured and imprisoned leading members of the UDPS in June.

The concerted pressure campaign against Kabila is motivated by strategic considerations associated with the drive of American imperialism to dominate the African continent at the expense of its rivals, above all China. Kabila is viewed by Washington as an unreliable agent of American imperialism's financial and commercial interests in the DRC.

Kabila has greatly increased his and his family's fortune since taking the reins of power in 2001, securing control by the ruling clique over substantial holdings throughout the Congolese economy. Opposition leaders, including Tshisekedi and Moise Katumbi, are considered to be more malleable by imperialist strategists, and have increasingly been promoted in Western media.

Perhaps nowhere in Africa are the stakes higher than in the DRC, whose vast natural resource reserves include the lion's share of world cobalt supplies, a key component in cellphone batteries. The massive African nation, whose territory is equivalent to that of all of Western Europe, is emerging as a central target of the new scramble for colonial control over Africa's markets, resources and labor forces, now being waged by American and European imperialism.

The Kabila government's increasingly pro-Chinese policies are cutting across the interests of his erstwhile partners in Washington and Western Europe. Kabila has agreed to mining deals with Chinese firms in recent years, setting the stage for China to become the top developer of rare mineral extraction infrastructure in the country.

On Tuesday, DRC officials announced talks with Russia's state-controlled bank VTB toward potential investment deals and "strategic projects" worth in excess of \$1 billion. Congolese foreign minister Leonard She Okitundu presented Russia's top diplomat, Sergei Lavrov, with a package of rare earth metals as a token of goodwill during a state visit to Moscow earlier this year.

"Congo has tried to cultivate closer diplomatic ties to Russia amid growing strains in its relationship with the European Union and United States over its failure to organize elections on time and alleged human rights abuses," Reuters reported last week.

The explosive political tensions within the DRC are being amplified by the massive pressures being brought to bear on its economy by the deepening of the world capitalist crisis. Congo is experiencing intense "economic difficulties" as a result of "the collapse of prices of raw materials on the world market," Prime Minister Bruno Tshibalala reported Wednesday.

Congo's central bank currently possesses currency reserves sufficient to pay for imports for a period of only three weeks, and the DRC economy is projected to shrink by nearly two percent in 2017.



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