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05 August, 2003

## "Congo's International Civil War"

When Congo gained independence from Belgium in 1960 it did little to improve the lives of those living in what is now called Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A brief civil war, followed by a transitional government, gave way in 1965 to Joseph Mobuto's U.S.-backed leadership. Mobuto ruled for the next 32 years in a display of massive corruption. His departure in 1997 led to another U.S.-backed leader, Laurent Kabila, who quickly fell out of favor with the U.S. and found himself in the midst of a civil war in 1998. It raged for almost five years and now has the dubious distinction of being one of the deadliest conflicts since World War II.

One of the root causes of this war lies beyond DRC's borders, in Rwanda. In 1994, Rwanda experienced an episode of genocide that poured over the border into DRC as refugees attempted to reach safe haven but were ruthlessly followed by the perpetrators of the mass murders. One of the supporters of Rwanda's massacre of its Tutsi citizens was Laurent Kabila. He sheltered the architects of the genocide and incorporated them into his own fighting forces and continued to engage in raids into Rwanda in an effort to dislodge Rwanda's Tutsi-led government. Rwanda refused to address its internal racial problems, and this led to a mass movement of people into DRC. During DRC's civil war, Rwanda's government followed these refugees into DRC, determined that they would not enjoy any of DRC's wealth, and found an ally in Kabila.

While the causes of this civil war are complex, the other primary catalyst was the U.S. withdrawal of support for Mobuto and his eventual departure. Because DRC is rich in minerals, it was of great interest to many, and in the absence of the U.S.-supported strongman Mobuto, rival groups arose -- largely along ethnic lines -- determined to garner their share of the wealth. In all, more than thirty identified rebel groups fought each other and the federal government in a dizzying shift of allegiances.

The war raged for almost five years and only reached what

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**Latin America**

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appears to be a solid truce in April 2003, largely because of the persistence of President Joseph Kabila, adopted son of Laurent who was assassinated in 2001. The current transitional government, which formally took office July 17, 2003 and is formed out of the official DRC government and several of the major rebel forces, has pledged to guide the country while rebuilding proceeds, with the goal of conducting statewide free elections in 2005.

Even while the civil war ebbed and flowed, Rwanda and Uganda simultaneously helped to ignite ethnic rivalries. In the northeastern province of Ituri where, since 1999, more than 50,000 people have died, Rwanda and Uganda pillaged the resources of the region and fought a proxy war against each other. Meanwhile, the United Nations had about ten personnel in the region, all observers, to oversee a population of about 4.2 million people. Eventually, a modest and likely insufficient French peacekeeping force entered the region and has temporarily restored order.

The motivation for Rwanda and Uganda to involve themselves in DRC is readily apparent. Rwanda is an impoverished country and Uganda is not significantly richer. On the other hand, DRC is a state with vast resources and large areas of territory ripe for development. Both Rwanda and Uganda used the occasion of the civil war to enter DRC and make off with the country's resources and wealth. This helped to enrich their treasuries and, in large measure, helped pay for further military endeavors. With the ending of the civil war, that source of revenue has dried up for these two countries; both have made clear they would send their forces into DRC again "if their own peace and security required it." A depleted treasury might be sufficient reason to require a new incursion.

Europe has had interests in the DRC civil war as well, largely for economic reasons. Several gigantic European enterprises have large holdings in DRC, and most of DRC's external trade, save one critical product, is with European states. In addition, there are historical ties. For some eighty years, DRC was a colony of Belgium, and France has always taken an interest because there is a chain of countries across central Africa who have either been French colonies or who still have French as their primary language. It is this latter fact, at least in part, that has prompted France to provide peacekeeping troops in Ituri province.

A much more obscure player in this region, although certainly the most significant, is the United States. The U.S. has been involved in Congo since the time prior to independence from Belgium. The president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, is also heavily influenced by Washington. Rwanda's chief rival, Uganda, is also U.S.-friendly but because of their animus toward Rwanda they seized the opportunity to fight against them, with the added benefit of doing it on DRC's soil.

The U.S. also has financial interests in DRC due to the country's huge columbite-tantalite resources, more commonly known as coltan. This product is also of interest to Japan and several European states whose commodities rely heavily on coltan. When this mineral is refined it becomes metallic tantalum, a heat-resistant powder that can hold a high electrical charge, and is used in virtually every computer chip, cell phone, pager, nuclear reactor, and a variety of other products that rely on electrical

power. That alone makes DRC an attractive market for outside powers, but it also has huge supplies of gold, diamonds, copper, and tin.

For now, it appears that peace has finally overtaken DRC, though there are plenty of potential stumbling blocks in the future. DRC is being held together in two tenuous grips: one is the hope that several rival groups who fought a bloody and vicious war against each other can now sit down and work toward common goals; the other is the peacekeeping efforts underway in some of the more volatile areas, notably Ituri province. It is agreed by all observers that the peacekeeping forces in DRC are woefully small and, due to a short-term mandate, most believe that violence will erupt again when the troops leave in 2004.

Regardless of the goodwill of the members of the new transitional government, they face overwhelming odds. They are of varying ethnic backgrounds, and this issue always plays a critical role; they have widely divergent goals for the future of the country; the country remains financially strapped and it has now largely tapped into the bulk of funding it has available through the International Monetary Fund; the ill-will of its neighbors has not diminished.

It seems likeliest that the peace will hold, with some breakdowns, at least until the general elections slated for 2005. Many African countries have a habit of elections that are considered, at least in the West, to be far short of "fair." If such an election would occur, it is very likely that one side or another will decide to take matters into its own hands.

Even the possibility of peace until 2005 depends on containment of the ethnic violence in the Ituri and the Kivu provinces. And much of that depends on the good behavior of DRC's neighbors. For now, at least, the main area protagonists -- Rwanda and Uganda -- are in the U.S. camp and can be expected to refrain from further upsetting the balance of power in the region. But for Rwanda, a resolution of its internal racial problems is necessary and would help to ward off the possibility of further eruptions in DRC.

Those who have called for large-scale peacekeeping operations in central Africa are being far-sighted. Peace will not take hold until the root economic problems are addressed. Furthermore, due to DRC having such a large supply of mineral wealth, economic problems will most likely continue due to exploitation by rich Western states and corruption by local and regional figures.

*Report Drafted By:*  
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