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## Featured

### **This day will never come**

By Paul Richard Harris, Editor

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The first free elections to be held in the Democratic Republic of Congo occurred in 1959. That was also the last free election to be held in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The second election will take place, we presume, July 30, 2006. With an average life expectancy of less than 49 years, it is a safe bet that few people will eventually go to their graves being able to say they voted in both elections. It is probably also a safe bet that most Congolese are still reluctant to believe that this day will ever come.

This article is being composed July 28, before the expected elections, but I am presuming they will actually take place. The process has been plagued with fits and starts and has already been delayed because of squabbling over, well, just about anything one could imagine. Rebel groups who have been fighting in the eastern provinces have threatened to disrupt the vote, violence has made many Congolese believe that attempting to vote will be tantamount to signing their own death certificates. As it is, the largest opposition party failed to get itself registered for the vote so there is already talk that the vote will be rigged, that it can't possibly be fair.

But there is some hope that even if the vote is not fair, it might be fair enough.

As recently as today, the three main rebel groups fighting in the Ituri region and North and South Kivu provinces have declared they will lay down their arms, at least briefly, to allow the vote to take place. This is a remarkable turn of events following a lengthy buildup to this election which saw forces from many nations being installed as peace keepers. The election needs much more than mere observers.

This vote is immensely important, not just to DRC but to all of Africa, perhaps even to the world. Many countries around the world who can only dream of an opportunity to freely and fairly participate in choosing their governments, may take encouragement from the faint heartbeat of democracy beating in the Heart of Darkness.

### **The sheer magnitude of the effort**

The process is huge. DRC is Africa's largest country and is the current incarnation of a nation that has been known to history by various names. Most of us will have known it as Belgian Congo or Za•re but it is still known in some circles as Congo-Kinshasa to distinguish it from its contiguous neighbour, Republic of Congo. Much of its western border is comprised of the Congo River which it shares with Republic of Congo in an undefined way; no specific agreements have been reached on the division of the river, its islands, or its resources.

This central African nation of approximately 60 million straddles the Equator and is surrounded by Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda and

Burundi, Tanzania, Zambia, and Angola. There are over 200 ethnic groups in DRC, but about 45% of its population consists of three groups who are Bantu, and a fourth that is Hamitic. It also holds the second largest rainforest in the world, after the Amazon.

Each ballot in the four electoral districts of Kinshasa, the capital, will contain the names and pictures of some 800 candidates and is said to be the largest ballot ever created. These 800 candidates are vying for one of 17 parliamentary seats. In total, there are more than 9,000 candidates for the 500 seats and 33 candidates for president. Voter registration has been ongoing for months and more than 25 million voters will soon have the fate of DRC in their hands.

Distributing ballots and equipment for the election is a logistical nightmare. The United Nations is conducting Africa's biggest air operation, with more than 100 aircraft and helicopters carrying thousands of ballots, voting boxes, and electoral agents over jungle, forest, and lakes in a territory as expansive as western Europe.

The geography of the country is forbidding, roads are virtually non-existent in many areas, much of it is untamed jungle, and the simple act of getting to the polls may require long and perilous journeys. But recent interviews conducted on the ground suggest people are going to make the trip – in large numbers.

There is a good reason that author Joseph Conrad's 1902 novel called this area the 'Heart of Darkness'. This is this area referenced by the phrase 'darkest Africa' and trying to shine a light in here is a Herculean task.

### **How we got here**

The biggest problem in this land, going back further than Conrad to the days of Belgium's King Leopold II, has always been phenomenal wealth. DRC is a nation endowed with vast potential -- gold, diamonds, rubber, copper, cobalt, oil, timber, and coltan along with a wide variety of agricultural produce. But that potential has never been realized for the benefit of DRC or its people. Its economy has declined significantly since the mid-1980's due a variety of unsuccessful government measures, the residue of colonial rule, and the financial imperialism of new masters.

It has been estimated that DRC may comprise the most mineral-rich chunk of land on the globe but its recent history has been one of internal conflict. Much of the recent turmoil arose as the nation absorbed large numbers of refugees from the fighting in Rwanda and Burundi in 1994. And then welcomed the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide slaughter with shelter and amnesty.

But the conflicts in the whole of central Africa really date back as far as the fifteenth century and are today, as they always have been, conflicts of imperialism.

Many of the countries in this area achieved independence from colonial masters in the middle of the twentieth century and quickly degenerated into fighting within and without their borders, much of it spurred by the 'financial colonialists' who stepped into the gap left by the old masters. The history of these nations since the fifteenth century has been one of European colonialism, resistance, independence, followed by neocolonialism, and prolonged resistance yet again. The primary beneficiary of the new order in this region in the 1950s

and 1960s was the United States, who allegedly maneuvered the assassination of Congo's only freely elected president, Patrice Lumumba, in 1960. The country's history has been troubled ever since, including a civil war that began in 1998 and, after almost five years, eventually killed between 3.3 and 4.7 million people (apparently a difficult number to qualify in these remote conditions).

### **Congo? What Congo?**

The world's press paid no attention to the DRC civil war, nor did most of the world. Like the horrendous genocide that occurred in neighbouring Rwanda in 1994, the nations who could have helped, didn't; the UN troops who could have restored peace, didn't; the other African nations who might have intervened, didn't.

Even now that there is the possibility a new democracy is being built, without the dubious benefit of the United States invading and forcibly installing what they euphemistically call democracy, this upcoming election is drawing little interest outside the Equatorial region of Africa. The sole exception may be South Africa who has been instrumental in getting all the former warring parties to the table and getting this election to be a reality.

When a group of lightly armed people commandeered a series of airplanes in the United States on September 11, 2001 and wreaked havoc and airborne massacre, countries from around the world sent or offered assistance to the wealthiest nation on earth. DRC has been a disaster for almost 50 years ... and no one has noticed, except for the robber barons who have plundered its wealth. The only help that ever arrived was the hundreds of millions the US sent to help a former dictator line his pocket.

When an earthquake a couple of years ago caused devastation in northern Africa, there were quick complaints from Africans that little outside help was forthcoming; the nation of Rwanda suffered a devastating period of genocide in 1994 despite multiple warnings to the United Nations by its field people of the impending disaster; DRC's 5-year civil war killed between 3.3 and 4.7 million people and rarely entered our consciousness; fighting in the Côte d'Ivoire has been ongoing and bloody since the introduction of a racially bigoted public policy dubbed locally as "black Nazism"; ethnic unrest in several central African nations across the equatorial region is rife; renewed crop failure and drought situations currently have some 40 million people in peril of devastating famine; 12% of the world's population lives in Africa and bears 80% of its AIDS victims; draconian rule in Zimbabwe by reputedly one of the most vicious of the world's leaders threatens stability and the lives of the white population; an ongoing and thriving business in slavery is gripping Sudan.

The list of African nightmares is seemingly endless. For fifty or so years, billions of dollars in aid have been poured into Africa but it has long been recognized that, for a variety of reasons, most of the money has done little permanent good. Some has been siphoned off by unscrupulous rulers or middlemen, some was used to buy guns instead of bread, some was simply used to put small band-aids on gaping wounds. Most of what actually reached its intended recipients was spent on immediate needs rather than building against these recurring nightmares and much has been used to fight feebly against the onslaught of international monetary programs which have financially enslaved Africa.

But there is nothing unusual about this: the world has always turned its back on Africa.

They're mostly black, you know, so they don't matter much.

### **The positive side of nepotism**

Africans themselves have seemed powerless to stop the endless cycle of bad government that many of its nations suffer at the hands of military or corporate thugs and natural disasters seem to recur with hideous frequency. Although the largest problem appears to be the indifference of the rest of the world, and the apparently deliberate actions by some to keep Africa on its knees, this story may yet have a happy ending.

A man named Laurent-Désiré Kabila took power in 1997 after 32 years of brutality at the hands of Joseph Mobuto, a US-backed savage. Kabila was an old unrepentant communist who had once worked with legendary Cuban revolutionary Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. They had broken when Che decided Kabila didn't have the right stuff, and when Kabila came to office in 1997, it seemed the years had not taught him very much. Nor had he learned anything from Mobuto's brutality and failures.

He lasted until his assassination in 2001.

Enter Kabila the Younger. It was presumed by most that Joseph Kabila, Laurent's son and only 29-years-old at the time, would be a pushover and prove to be utterly incompetent. Yet it was he, alone among all the leaders this nation has ever had, who was able to end the civil war, to negotiate international agreements designed to get foreign interlopers out of DRC, to create and successfully implement a new national constitution, to form a government which includes many former militia and rebel groups who had spent their lives killing each other, and who is now leading this country to its first free elections in 47 years.

Kabila is the favoured candidate for president and it seems unlikely that he will not prevail. Although this election is only a first faltering step to getting this country up from its knees, it is encouraging and one of the first and brightest lights to shine in the heart of darkness.

There is definitely reason for cautious optimism.

And could this be the example needed by other nations in the area -- Nigeria, Togo, Sao Tome, Cote d'Ivoire?

### **Let them fix it themselves**

Africans themselves can be blamed for part of the problems they suffer. It has been said that people get the governments they deserve so it is probably fair to say that if Africans cared as much as we all might hope, they would rise up and throw off some of the appalling leadership they have known.

But that presupposes that they are not starving, that they can access weapons, that they can organize; in countries that have known nothing but oppression for hundreds of years, that is a tall order. Still, it would be helpful if their leaders could grasp the concept of serving the needs of their people rather than feathering their own nests.

In the words of Joseph Conrad:

*Once a white man in an unbuttoned uniform, camping on the path with an armed escort ... was looking after the upkeep ... Can't say I saw any ... upkeep, unless the body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead ... may be considered a permanent improvement.*

*...Well, if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to traveling on the road ... I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon.*

On July 30, there'll be a lot of 'niggers' on the road. They'll be marching off to polling places and for most of them, it will be the first time in their lives they have been able to vote, to have some say in their future.

Rather than ignoring Africa again, this is the time for rest of the world to lend a hand. On Africa's terms.

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