

November 14, 2006

Congo Pins Protest on Homeless

Scores of Children Held Following Post-Election Violence

By Michelle Faul

KINSHASA, Congo — Scores of homeless children and others living on the streets of Congo's capital have been rounded up and accused of starting a protest that led to violence, officials said Monday. The move came as this increasingly tense nation awaited results of a presidential election.

Advocates for street children said those arrested were scapegoats, but Interior Minister Denis Kalume was quoted on state radio as saying the 337 homeless people, including 87 children and 15 mothers, had provoked violence "by disturbing the peace." Kalume said they were being taken outside the capital for "social training."

Violence erupted Saturday between supporters of President Joseph Kabila and Vice President Jean-Pierre Bemba, the contenders in a presidential runoff late last month. The governor of the Congolese capital said gun and mortar fire killed three civilians and a soldier in front of Bemba's home—the scene of the weekend fighting.

By Monday, Congolese soldiers had taken up positions in a nearby cemetery, some sleeping on bullet-scarred gravestones that used to serve as beds for street children. None of the children, usually a ubiquitous reminder of Congo's devastation, were in sight Monday morning.

"Those who weren't arrested are hiding from the police," said Mado Langalanga, who lived in the cemetery for nine years until she got a job educating street people about the dangers of HIV and AIDS.

Kinshasa, a sprawling city of about 5 million people on the banks of the Congo River, has an estimated 50,000 homeless people, according to the private Association for the Development of Young Street People.

The latest eruption of violence came as the Independent Electoral Commission posted results from 99.37 percent of the vote-counting centers, which had Kabila with 59 percent and Bemba with 41 percent.

Peacekeepers in Congo, the biggest U.N. force in the world with some 17,500 troops, have brought reinforcements into the capital, stepped up patrols and reinforced positions in a show of force since the weekend confrontation. Riot police guarded strategic buildings.

The elections could set Congo on the road to democracy and peace after decades of dictatorship and war, but the violence underlines the transition's fragility in this poor but mineral-rich nation of 50 million.

Supporters of Bemba, a former rebel leader, have alleged vote fraud.

In a televised address Monday night, Bemba said: "There's no double-dealing in democracy. All that we want is that the truth of the ballot come out of these elections, which we have worked to make free, democratic and transparent."

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