

November 15, 2006

Congo Faces Danger of New Civil War as Opposition Rejects Election Result

By Chris McGreal in Kinshasa

The Democratic Republic of Congo is facing the threat of another civil war after the well-armed opposition yesterday rejected President Joseph Kabila's victory in the first free presidential election since independence, and the country's powerful Roman Catholic archbishop denounced the result as a western conspiracy to grab the country's mineral wealth.

Nearly complete results released yesterday gave Mr. Kabila close to 60% of the vote in last month's run-off election against his only opponent, the former rebel warlord and businessman Jean-Pierre Bemba. Voting reflected a deep divide along regional and ethnic lines that in the capital, Kinshasa, included an overwhelming rejection of the president.

Tensions in the city are high after fighting by supporters of the two candidates using mortars and Kalashnikov rifles left four dead on Saturday. Clashes killed 23 in the city in August after the first round of elections.

The ballot was intended to legitimise Mr. Kabila's hold on power six years after he inherited the presidency following the assassination of his father, Laurent Kabila, and to end a decade of foreign invasion and civil war thought to have cost four million lives.

But yesterday Mr. Bemba's Union for the Nation coalition of about 50 opposition parties said in a statement that it had won more than half the votes and accused Mr. Kabila of manipulating the result.

"The Union for the Nation will not accept an electoral hold-up that aims to steal the victory from the Congolese people," it said.

The statement went on to say that the coalition no longer feels bound by agreements to accept the electoral commission's official results and to prevent violence. "We reserve the right to renege on all agreements made with (Mr. Kabila's) Alliance for a Presidential Majority," it said.

Last night scores of United Nations peacekeepers surrounded Mr. Bemba's house in the heart of Kinshasa.

European and American diplomats have spent days trying to persuade Mr. Bemba to accept defeat and take a senior post in government from which he can build on his political power base towards a future challenge for the presidency.

Diplomats say Mr. Kabila has already offered Mr. Bemba the post of prime minister but

he turned it down. Some of Mr. Bemba's allies are urging him to turn to armed resistance because they believe his overwhelming popular support in Kinshasa means he could seize control of the city and large parts of the east and north of the country.

Mr. Bemba's backers have distributed large numbers of weapons among supporters in Kinshasa while Mr. Kabila has moved loyal troops and tanks into the city. But it is not clear that the president can rely on the backing of all ordinary soldiers, who include former rebel fighters.

The EU has deployed 1,400 peacekeeping troops in the capital to discourage violence. They are serving alongside forces from the UN's largest peacekeeping operation, which has 17,500 soldiers spread across Congo.

But the European presence only confirms for many in Kinshasa that foreign governments are backing Mr. Kabila just as they propped up Mobutu Sese Seko as dictator when the country was called Zaire, in order for western business interests to mine diamonds and other valuable minerals. That view was reinforced on Monday when the archbishop of Kinshasa, Cardinal Frédéric Etsou, told Radio France International that "results that are coming out are not the results that are being published".

"I ask the international community to abstain from all attempts to impose on the people of Congo the man whom they have not chosen as their president ... just to satisfy gluttonous and predatory appetites like those of a foreign dictator," he said.

France, Belgium and the US are Mr. Kabila's leading foreign supporters. He also has the backing of some African countries, notably Angola, which has offered to send troops to put down any uprising.

Mr. Bemba has filed complaints with the electoral commission alleging that large numbers of his supporters were prevented from voting, that there was multiple voting by some of Mr. Kabila's supporters, and that there are disparities between the actual count from some constituencies and the announced results.

Mr. Bemba also says the destruction of his helicopter by government forces and the closing down of his television station curtailed his ability to campaign, while the state media was little more than a propaganda service for Mr. Kabila.

Foreign observers say there were irregularities but not on a scale that comes close to overturning Mr. Kabila's victory.

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