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Congo rebels sworn in as vice-presidents, war toll mounts: Canada's Gen. Baril helped break impasse over army

SOURCE: Agence France-Presse, with files from Reuters

KINSHASA - Congo's main rebel leaders were sworn in as vice-presidents yesterday, inaugurating a power-sharing government intended to end a five-year war that has torn the giant African country apart.

At a ceremony attended by thousands in the capital, Kinshasa, hopes were high that President Joseph Kabila and his four new deputies will succeed in leading the country to a lasting peace and its first elections since independence in 1960.

Two of the four new vice-presidents -- Jean-Pierre Bemba and Azarias Ruberwa -- led rebel groups that launched a bid in August, 1998, to topple the government of Laurent Kabila, the assassinated father of the current President.

Both rebellions were backed by neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda, while four other countries -- Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Chad -- backed the Kinshasa government in what became known as "Africa's First World War" -- an allusion to the carnage that claimed more than three million lives through combat, disease and starvation.

More than 3,000 people gathered in the vast hall of the People's Palace for the investitures, offering thunderous applause as each vice-president pledged to respect the country's territorial integrity and the December peace accord that created the new government.

President Kabila will remain in his position in the new government.

The power-sharing government meets for the first time tomorrow and has until Aug. 4 to draft a plan for leading the mineral-rich country to elections within about a year.

The other two vice-presidents are Abdoulaye Yerodia Nbombasi, allied to Mr. Kabila, and Arthur Z'Ahidi Ngoma, a member of the country's unarmed political opposition.

The noisiest accolade was reserved for Mr. Bemba, head of the former rebel Congolese Liberation Movement (MLC) and a former aide to Mobutu Sese Seko, who was overthrown in 1997 after robbing billions from state coffers in the country then known as Zaire. His supporters chanted slogans of Mr. Mobutu's once sole ruling party, the Popular Revolutionary Movement.

A murmur went up during the swearing-in of 38-year-old Mr. Ruberwa of the Rwandan-backed Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) when he pledged to honour the "unity and indivisibility" of the Democratic Republic of Congo, as the country is officially known.

The RCD controlled a large swath of the east of the country through most of the war and was considered the most recalcitrant of the belligerents through a series of failed peace summits.

Installation of the power-sharing government became possible after General Maurice Baril, former chief of the Canadian Forces, helped break an impasse last month over control of a new Congolese army.

On Wednesday, the rebel leaders sounded optimistic about peace after meeting separately with Mr. Kabila.

"There is no more doubt, it's irreversible," said Mr. Ruberwa. "We are here as partners and not as belligerents."

"We have turned the page from the war," said Mr. Bemba. "The five years we passed in the rebellion gave us ... the pathways to get this country out of the crisis."

But Congo still faces numerous hurdles as it tries to unite the war-divided country. The Kinshasa government is weak and incapable of establishing rule of law across Congo, a country the size of western Europe.

Ethnic fighting is rife in the lawless Ituri region of northeast Congo, and the country's mineral riches provide a powerful disincentive for armed factions to give up fighting and yield control to a government.

Even as they vowed to respect the peace accord and the country's new constitution, fresh violence rocked the Ituri region, with 54 people reported killed and a hospital destroyed in the town of Tchomia.

Rebels from the PUSIC faction said militias allied to the rival Hema and Lendu tribes had been fighting in the region, 50 kilometres from Bunia, where a multinational force has been deployed to keep the peace.

That force does not have the mandate to go beyond Bunia. A permanent United Nations mission in Congo, MONUC, also lacks the mandate and the manpower to stop the bloodshed and horrific rights abuses swirling through Ituri.

A MONUC spokesman in Bunia confirmed there had been heavy fighting around Tchomia, but said it had not been possible to confirm the death toll.

Such incidents may form the subject of the first case to be tried by the International Criminal Court. In The Hague on Wednesday, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, chief prosecutor of

the tribunal, said up to 5,000 civilians have been killed in Ituri province since July 1, 2002, when the court came into existence and its jurisdiction began.

Congo's war broke out in 1998 when neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda backed Congolese rebels trying to overthrow then-president Laurent Kabila, accusing him of harbouring armed militias that threatened their own security.

The elder Mr. Kabila was assassinated in January, 2001, by one of his own bodyguards. He was succeeded by his son, Joseph, who pushed ahead with peace efforts, eventually leading to the withdrawal of foreign armies from the country.

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