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Congo Presidential Hopeful Claims Fraud

KINSHASA, Congo (AP)—A former rebel leader-turned presidential candidate alleged massive fraud in Congo's historic elections, but pledged Tuesday that his protest would remain peaceful as preliminary results began to trickle in.

Official, final results from Sunday's elections were not expected for weeks. But a sample of results announced by U.N. radio suggested that sitting President Joseph Kabila and Vice President Jean-Pierre Bemba had emerged as leading contenders for the presidency.

The United Nations tallied about 600,000 votes across Congo's provinces—about 2 percent of votes in small town and 65 percent in larger cities. An AP analysis of the figures showed Kabila and Bemba leading, with Harvard-educated Dr. Oscar Kashala receiving strong support in opposition areas.

Voters elected a new president and legislature to replace Congo's transitional administration, which took power after back-to-back wars that lasted from 1996 to 2002. It was the first multiparty election in 45 years of strife and dictatorship in the country the size of Western Europe, whose people remain poor despite the country's diamond and mineral riches.

Azarias Ruberwa, a former rebel leader who became one of four vice presidents in Congo's transitional administration, denounced the poll and alleged "massive fraud."

Ruberwa said Rwandan Hutu militias in the lawless east threatened to cut off some voters' ears if they did not vote for Kabila, who negotiated the end to war in 2002 and leads the national-unity government.

"This is not democracy," Ruberwa told reporters in the capital, Kinshasa.

Electoral commission officials could not immediately be reached for comment.

The Rwandan militias, who helped orchestrate Rwanda's 1994 genocide, fled to Congo after the killings ended.

Ruberwa cited other problems with voter registration and said one incident in which electoral officials allegedly emptied a ballot box and

replaced the sheets within.

He said the problems must be addressed before final results are announced and he would pursue any claims to Congo's Supreme Court. A new vote might be needed, he said. But he ruled out returning to arms.

"That's excluded," he said. "We're in the process in good faith. We took up arms for democracy."

Several leading election candidates are former rebels who still command private armed militias, and could pose a real threat to peace after the elections.

Ruberwa's party has strong support from a minority Tutsi community in Congo's east, but is otherwise unpopular and his fighters were accused of atrocities during the war. The party is considered a likely spoiler if it loses ground at the polls.

Voting was largely peaceful Sunday and the European Union and Congo's former colonial ruler, Belgium, said isolated violence had not kept the elections from being free and democratic.

Some 17,600 U.N. peacekeepers and 2,000 EU troops are deployed to help ensure peace during the vote in the Central African nation.

The Atlanta, Georgia-based Carter Center hailed the vote, saying although there were procedural problems, "on the whole, these appear at this point to be minor."

However, the Carter Center said it could not make a ruling yet on the overall fairness because vote counting continues and a run-off between the two top vote-getters in a field of 33 is possible. None of the presidential candidates was expected to win the outright majority needed to avoid a run-off, which would likely be in October.

The Carter Center, which deployed 58 international observers in Congo, said in a statement that security forces had "obstructed legitimate democratic activity" during the campaign and had restricted some candidates' movements.

But in "any first elections such as these, we are well aware that the most demanding aspects of international elections standards cannot be entirely met," the center said.

