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Congo Nears Historic Election, Praying for Peace

By LYDIA POLGREEN

GOMA, Congo — The drawing the Rev. Israel Mulenda held in his hands was as succinct a précis as any of the nightmares this vast central African nation has lived for the past decade.

In the picture, vultures ferry diamonds, gold and cobalt out of Congo and carry machine guns and tanks in. Greedy bureaucrats gobble stacks of tax dollars, and soldiers clobber civilians.

"This is where we came from," Mr. Mulenda told a rapt audience one recent Sunday morning in a packed church in this lakeside city.

He then pointed to another drawing, depicting a dream of a future: children sitting at school desks, health centers providing free care and electricity coursing through high wires to every home. "This is where we want to be," he said. "Whether we get there or not is up to you. It is up to your vote."

At the end of July, for the first time since 1965, long before most Congolese were born, the people of Congo will choose their own leaders.

It will be the most expensive election ever held in Africa, costing international donors more than \$400 million, and it will be mind-bogglingly complex. Millions of ballots and tens of thousands of ballot boxes must be distributed across a country the size of Western Europe but with only 300 miles of paved roads.

"This is as challenging and complicated an election as anything we have seen," said Colin Stewart, co-director of the Carter Center, which will help observe the voting.

Even so, the biggest challenge will not be putting ballots in place — it will be getting Congo's competing groups to recognize and respect the results, and managing the desperately outsized expectations of a population exhausted by the world's deadliest conflict since World War II.

Joseph Kabila, the president of the interim government and son of the rebel leader who overthrew the longtime dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, is considered to have the best chance among the 33 presidential candidates, especially since most of them barely register on the public consciousness.

"A lot of resources have gone to putting ballot boxes in polling centers," Mr. Stewart said. "But civil education has fallen short. A lot of people may not really know what is at stake. There is great enthusiasm but little knowledge."

What is at stake is nothing less than the future of Africa's most troubled but potentially richest nation. Congo was ruled for 32 years as a personal fief by Mr. Mobutu, who seized power in 1965 and renamed the country Zaire in 1971. He looted its copper, diamonds, gold and other minerals. The rebel movement that overthrew him has ruled since 1997, but has spent much of that time fighting a growing collection of militias seeking a share of the country's spoils, some of them backed by Congo's neighbors.

The civil war officially ended in 2002, but the conflict has raged intermittently since then, flaring up mostly in the volatile eastern part of the country.

At the end of the war, the country was carved up by the warring parties to secure peace, with the strongest militias getting top posts in the transitional government and autonomy to rule the areas they controlled. The militias were to disband and be reorganized into a national army.

In reality, the fighting never stopped completely, and some militias have refused to disarm or join the army. Other forces, like the Hutu militias who fled to Congo from Rwanda after committing genocide in 1994, continue to wreak havoc across the countryside.

The presence of these militias was the initial reason that Rwanda, one of Congo's neighbors to the east, invaded the country in 1996, and their continued presence has complicated efforts to disentangle Rwanda from Congo's affairs.

Each region's politics are idiosyncratic, which underscores the immense task of knitting a nation out of the war-weary tatters of Congo. Here in North Kivu, the governing party is the Congolese Rally for Democracy, which was once a militia backed by Rwanda.

It once held a huge chunk of the nation, a virtual empire encompassing a third of the country and much of its mineral wealth. But the Congolese Rally is unpopular because many people blame Rwanda for Congo's troubles, and the party is expected to lose much of its power in the election.

"This party has a lot to lose," said Anneke Van Woudenberg, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch specializing in Congo. "It does not have broad support, yet it has enjoyed a great deal of power. So the whole election period will be one where violence will be likely and the whole process will be incredibly fragile."

Further complicating matters, Laurent Nkunda, a militia leader believed to be loyal to elements of the Congolese Rally, has refused to disarm. No one is sure how many men he controls; estimates range from a few hundred to as many as 10,000. He is a potential spoiler in the election, Ms. Van Woudenberg said, and could act to undermine the results if the party loses.

Mr. Nkunda has been able to recruit fighters from within the camps where former militiamen are training to become regular soldiers, partly because the camps are so bad.

There is not enough food or shelter, and the soldiers live in filthy, overcrowded conditions with their families. Disease and hunger are rife, leading some soldiers to conclude that a life of fighting in the bush, with the promise of looted food, is preferable to dying of dysentery in overcrowded camps.

"The government is trying to push us back into the bush," said one soldier, a former member of the homegrown Mai Mai militia, as he waited to be sent to his next deployment in a squalid, impromptu encampment of thousands of soldiers in a stadium in Goma. "We are living worse than animals."

In that bewildering context, voters are struggling to understand what the vote will mean for them.

"What is my hope?" said Dorique Parambe, who lives with her six children in a slum in Bunia, a city in the Ituri district of eastern Congo that suffered through repeated massacres and assaults. "I hope to vote. After that, I don't know."

With the country's vast distances, poor communications and largely illiterate population, most people have only the vaguest idea what the election will mean for them. There are 9,500 legislative candidates drawn from 267 parties, and in some places the ballots will be as large as a six-page tabloid newspaper.

Still, along Congo's turbulent eastern frontier, hopes and expectations are high. "When we vote things will change," said Djimo Charles Kanoya, who fled to Gety, about 25 miles south of Bunia, from his village, Kakado, spending a month in the forest along the way. "I hope to get peace and development. We want everything to change."

In Kinshasa, the distant capital half a continent away and reachable only by airplane, political tensions are high as opposition groups boycotting the elections have called for a new national dialogue in advance of any vote.

The groups argue that the transitional government should be disbanded when its term ends on June 30, and they complain that the government did not seek their opinions when compiling the electoral timetable. Violent protests by supporters of the boycotting parties could further undermine the results.

[As many as 12 people were killed Friday when the police opened fire on antigovernment demonstrators in the port town of Matadi, Reuters reported. The demonstration came as other hard-line opposition demonstrators clashed with security forces in Kinshasa on Friday, the first full day of campaigning before the national elections.]

Still, against this backdrop, preparations for the voting have made considerable progress. Despite continuing violence, 25.6 million people registered to vote, and 70 percent voted in a referendum held in December that overwhelmingly approved a new Constitution. About 51 percent of the electorate is female, an important achievement in a nation where violent abuse of girls and women is epidemic.

Logistics, said Marie Shematsi Baeni, coordinator for the Independent Electoral Commission in Goma, are the least of her worries.

"We are more or less ready to hold the voting," she said. "I just hope the winners and losers will play their roles with honor."

This is Congo's last, best chance at peace, she said. Or as a report on the election by the nonprofit International Crisis Group put it, "If not held properly, elections may just legitimize the status quo, while creating a new class of disenfranchised politicians who could try to challenge the result with violence."

"The logic of the ballot has not yet replaced the logic of the gun," the report said. "It has merely become an appendix to it."

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