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Violence Casts Shadow Over Congo Poll

By David Lewis

KINSHASA — Clashes between supporters of the two candidates have raised tensions ahead of Congo's election on Sunday, greatly reducing campaigning and underlining the dangerous role of well-armed private armies.

The run-off vote between President Joseph Kabila and Vice-President Jean-Pierre Bemba is meant to be the final step in a drawn-out peace process to end Democratic Republic of Congo's 1998-2003 war, which killed more than 4 million people.

But days before the run-off, neither candidate has ventured out of the capital, leaving campaigning to their lieutenants. Several rallies across the vast country have been marred by clashes between their supporters.

Kabila failed to get a winning majority in the first round on July 30, necessitating the run-off with second-placed Bemba.

That outcome sparked pitched battles in August between Kabila's personal guard, using tanks and rocket-propelled grenades, and Bemba's red bandana-clad fighters on the streets of Kinshasa.

"I don't want to take any further risks," Bemba told reporters when asked why he was not actively campaigning.

Kabila's camp, which was largely blamed for the August fighting in which several Bemba houses and offices were attacked, also cited security fears.

"There are people with weapons everywhere. It's a threat," a Kabila aide told Reuters.

"The security issue is a problem. What happened in August is a threat to both candidates' security so this is why they are not campaigning."

Fighters Rearming

U.N. officials say both sides' fighters are re-arming.

"It's very dangerous to head toward elections like this where the loser still has substantial military capacity," Jason Stearns, senior analyst at the International Crisis Group think-tank, told Reuters.

During the last three years, tens of thousands of fighters from a plethora of rebel groups, militias and army factions are supposed to have been integrated into a national army.

But the process has been dogged by continued fighting, shortage of funds and a lack of political will.

"Neither of the candidates has wanted to integrate their men—they want them as a reserve force, just in case," Stearns said. "The danger is that the loser will not accept the results and contest them violently."

Kabila's presidential guard may number more than 6,000 men in Kinshasa with thousands more across the country.

As a result, Bemba has been reluctant to limit his bodyguard and now has well over 600 fighters in the capital.

Having spent millions of dollars on rallies, hats and T-shirts during the first round, Bemba and Kabila also appear to have run out of money for campaigning, diplomats say.

Both camps have concentrated on broadcasting adverts in the second round. A Kabila-Bemba television debate was canceled on Wednesday after the candidates failed to agree on ground rules.

Fears of violence are tangible, prompting many expatriates to send their families home. A European Union force, sent to back up the world's largest U.N. peacekeeping mission, has brought several hundred reinforcements to the capital.

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