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Kidnapping and Turmoil Ahead of Congo Vote

By Jeffrey Gettleman

KINSHASA, Congo — United Nations forces plunged into Congo's election-related violence again on Friday, this time rescuing a politician who had been kidnapped by rivals.

The day before, several people were killed at a prison riot in Kinshasa, the capital, after a band of political prisoners escaped.

All across Kinshasa, United Nations troops are hunkered down behind sandbags or prowling the garbage-strewn streets in armored personnel carriers bristling with machine guns and water cannons.

This is the increasingly edgy atmosphere in the prelude to the runoff presidential election scheduled for Sunday. The United Nations has spent \$500 million on the voting, saying that peace in Congo is crucial for peace in all of central Africa.

The incumbent president, Joseph Kabila, is favored to win, but his rival, Jean-Pierre Bemba, a businessman and rebel leader accused of war crimes, remains enormously popular in the capital. It is Mr. Bemba's supporters, legions of young, broke men, who are blamed for much of the violence.

In July, a few days before the first round of voting, Mr. Bemba's supporters burned a policeman to death at a rally. In August, Mr. Bemba's soldiers tangled with Mr. Kabila's troops in a downtown shootout that killed more than 20 people.

This week, Mr. Bemba's soldiers captured Nzanga Mobutu, the son of the former dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. On Thursday, Mr. Mobutu had been campaigning for Mr. Kabila in Gbadolite, a town in the west where support for Mr. Bemba is strong. When Mr. Mobutu and a contingent of armed guards showed up at a radio station owned by Mr. Bemba, a gun battle erupted, killing four people. Mr. Mobutu was not hurt, and after negotiations between the United Nations and Mr. Bemba's supporters on Friday morning, he was driven away in a United Nations tank.

Both camps accuse each other of intimidating voters. "Bemba's guys are determined to burn this country," said Kikaya bin Karubi, one of Mr. Kabila's top aides.

Mr. Bemba's supporters deny that.

"Don't believe anything Kabila's men tell you," said Oscar Kashala, an American-educated doctor who ran for president in July, lost and is now supporting Mr. Bemba. "Congolese politics have always had the color of deceit."

The country has had a dismal political history. King Leopold II of Belgium colonized it in the late 19th century to extract as much rubber and ivory as possible. His overseers were notorious for their use of the chicotte, a hippopotamus-hide whip that they cracked over Congolese backs.

That ended in 1960, when Belgium abruptly pulled out and granted Congo independence. A few years later, Mobutu Sese Seko, a young army colonel, seized power and soon metastasized into the caricature of an African dictator, building palaces and guzzling pink Champagne while his people starved. When Western support dried up, his power faded, and a former Marxist, Laurent D. Kabila, deposed Mr. Mobutu in 1997, leading to years of conflict. The fighting and chaos claimed countless lives — the International Rescue Committee estimated nearly four million.

It was only after Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and Joseph, his eldest son, took over, that the bloodshed lessened. Mr. Kabila forged a shaky peace with Congo's other warlords, including Mr. Bemba, who was named one of the country's four vice presidents.

Mr. Kabila, 35, spent much of his youth in Tanzania and trained as an army officer in China. Mr. Bemba, 44, is from one of the richest families in the country and was shipped off to Belgium for boarding school as a boy. He later went into business and then became a militia leader, and international human rights groups have accused him of encouraging his troops to brutalize civilians.

In the first round of voting, Mr. Kabila won overwhelmingly in the east, while Mr. Bemba did well in Kinshasa and the west. Mr. Kabila won 45 percent of the vote, compared with Mr. Bemba's 20 percent. International observers said the vote was mostly fair, though marred by logistical hiccups, standard fare in a country the size of Western Europe with 60 million people and only 300 miles of paved roads.

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