

Small Help for Congo

EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS and U.N. diplomats have been congratulating themselves over a plan underway to dispatch a French-led force of 1,400 troops to a war-torn town in eastern Congo. The mission may indeed represent a small accomplishment for U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and the European Union. But it is also, sadly, a token of how poorly the world has responded to years of war and mass death in central Africa. The force is assigned to a single town, Bunia, where some 400 people were massacred last month in ethnic violence, despite the presence of U.N. peacekeepers.

The new force may prevent further fighting in that provincial capital; but so far it has no mandate to act in the area outside of it -- where many of the tribal fighters have fled -- much less in eastern Congo as a whole, where warfare among a bewildering array of factions continues to consume lives in huge quantities. Even if the limited mission succeeds, the Western troops are to be pulled out on Sept. 1 -- to be replaced by more U.N. peacekeepers of the sort who failed to prevent the recent bloodshed.

African leaders and international relief groups have been warning for years that if outside powers continued to ignore -- or worse, in a few cases, continued to stoke -- Congo's grinding civil war, the country would disintegrate, and all semblance of civil order in a region the size of Western Europe would collapse. Their dire predictions now appear to be close to coming true. The war nominally ended in the last year with a series of peace agreements among rival factions and neighboring countries, and most of the foreign troops sent in by Congo's neighbors have been withdrawn. Yet in eastern Congo, the killing rages on, carried out by ethnic militias and a hodgepodge of "rebel forces," some proxies for foreign powers, seeking control over mineral resources, timber and towns. The fight in Bunia erupted after Uganda, which had long controlled the area and exploited its rich natural resources, withdrew its forces, prompting a fight for control.

Such fighting was supposed to be checked by the deployment of international peacekeepers. But the U.N. force has been far from equal to the task, not only because of its small numbers and restrictive rules of engagement but also because of its composition -- Bunia was protected by soldiers from Uruguay, who failed to deter the battle-hardened local militiamen. Mr. Annan has proposed that the strength of the U.N. force be increased to 10,800 and that its mandate be extended for another year. But funding for an expanded force faces resistance, and even if it is obtained, it may be difficult to find the troops.

Many countries have contributed to Congo's disintegration -- including the United States, which for years has neglected the problem while offering political backing to some of the governments that prolonged the war. One of those was Uganda, whose president, Yoweri Museveni, is due to meet with President Bush tomorrow. Mr. Museveni no doubt will be praised for his relative success in managing his economy and the AIDS epidemic; but Mr. Bush also ought to press him to stop supplying weapons to militias in Congo. A little U.S. pressure on Uganda won't stop Congo's endless conflict -- but like the European mission to Bunia, it would be better than nothing.

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