

ABC's of the DRC



Colonialism and Independence

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has a brutal colonial history. Beginning in the 1880s, King Leopold II of Belgium took personal control of the territory, exploiting the Congo's vast natural resources through harsh autocratic rule and the widespread use of slave labor. Under massive pressure following an international outcry against these practices, Leopold transferred control of the "Congo Free State" to the Belgian government in 1908.

Following an upsurge in nationalist sentiment and a growing demand for independence, Belgium accepted Congo's independence in June 1960, with Patrice Lumumba as Prime Minister and Joseph Kasavubu as President. Within two weeks of independence, however, Congo's new government faced a nationwide army mutiny and threats from secessionist movements.

Cold War tensions increasingly played into a hostile face-off, with the U.S. fearing that the charismatic Lumumba and his supporters would allow the break-up of the Congo and allow the Soviet Union to dominate central Africa. Supported by Belgium and the U.S., Kasavubu dismissed Lumumba, who was later arrested and, with active U.S. and Belgian complicity, handed over to his enemies. He was assassinated in 1961.

Dictatorship

Supported by the U.S. and Belgium, Mobutu Sese Seko began his 32-year rule in 1965 when he ousted President Kasavubu in a coup. Mobutu brutally quelled new rebellions and personally dominated Congo. In 1971, Mobutu

changed the name of the country to Zaire. He systematically used the country's mineral wealth to co-opt potential rivals, and to enrich himself and his allies through a patronage system so expansive that it would come to be called a "kleptocracy." Mobutu is conservatively estimated to have stolen at least \$5 billion from his country.

With the end of the Cold War, the suspension of international economic aid to the Congo and the global collapse of raw commodity prices at the end of the 1980s, Mobutu began to lose his grip on power. Following the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Mobutu provided shelter and protection not only to the two million Rwandan refugees who had fled to eastern Congo, but also provided a safe haven for the Rwandan Hutu army and militias that had directed the genocide. This provoked Rwanda and Uganda to invade Congo in October 1996 in pursuit of the Hutu military forces. The ailing Mobutu was finally ousted from Kinshasa in May 1997 and Congolese rebel leader Laurent-Désiré Kabila took over the country.

Regional Warfare

War broke out again in August 1998 when President Kabila attempted to gain independence from his regional backers and moved to purge Rwandan elements from his government. Rwanda and Uganda re-invaded Congo, supporting rebel proxies against Kabila. Whereas Rwandan forces had previously focused on pursuing the Hutus who conducted the genocide, both Rwandan and Ugandan forces increasingly became interested in controlling and exploiting the mineral-rich eastern provinces. Kabila called on Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia for help, and with their military support managed to stop the invasion. During this period, Congo was home to military forces from across the continent, almost all of whom brutalized civilians while looting vast natural resources. By mid-1999, a front line was stabilized and the Congo was effectively cut into two.

A ceasefire agreement was reached and signed in Lusaka in July 1999, and was built around three main pillars: the disarmament of the external armed groups that were using Congolese territory as a sanctuary; the withdrawal of all foreign troops; and the convening of an inter-Congolese dialogue that would lead to a democratic government. Although a U.N. peacekeeping force, known by its French acronym MONUC, was authorized to monitor the agreement, the conflict continued as all sides violated the accord. President Kabila was assassinated in January 2001 and his son, Joseph Kabila, took over the presidency.

Peace negotiations were re-launched and by the end of 2002, the Angolan, Zimbabwean, Rwandan, and Ugandan troops had fully withdrawn. In December 2002, all Congolese belligerents, civil society groups, and the unarmed opposition signed an agreement in South Africa, leading to a three-year transition which began in June 2003 and during which Kabila shared power with four vice-presidents. Rapid progress was made on paper, but the situation for civilians on the ground, especially women, remained dire. Although open fighting between the government and rebels became rare, both sides would use sexual violence as a military tactic against civilians, using its trauma to terrorize, control, and in some cases ethnically cleanse targeted populations.

Continued Conflict and Elections

Rebel groups, including dissident members of former rebel movements and untamed militias, continued to fight the government and local enemies, often seeking to maintain or establish control of mineral wealth. MONUC's efforts to protect civilians were reinvigorated in September 2004 with the expansion of its force from 10,800 to 16,700 troops and the granting of a more aggressive mandate that allows the force to take stronger measures to protect civilians. However, the sustained level of violence throughout 2004 combined with the large number of people who continued to flee their homes to avoid violence led the UN in March 2005 to describe eastern Congo as the "world's worst humanitarian crisis."

On December 6, 2006, Joseph Kabila was sworn in as the first democratically elected president since Congolese independence. While this landmark electoral process was largely free of major violence and serious irregularities, the country still has many challenges to surmount. The new government is weak and barely functioning in many respects, and faces persistent political and security challenges. Predatory armed groups, including Rwandan rebels and the Congolese army, continue to prowl eastern Congo with impunity. Congolese women and girls in particular bear the vicious brunt of this crisis.

Humanitarian Crisis

The International Rescue Committee reports that since 1998, 5.4 million people have died (more than 8 percent of the Congo's population of 66 million). Every month, 45,000 more Congolese—half of them children—die from hunger, preventable disease, and other consequences of violence and displacement. Over one million people have fled their homes within the Congo as a result of the ongoing conflict.

Eastern Congo right now is perhaps the worst place in the world to be a woman. Used as a weapon of war, rape in Congo exists on a scale seen nowhere else in the world. Often successful in its intent to destroy and exterminate, rape as a weapon of war is causing the near total destruction of women, their families, and their communities. Over 200,000 women and girls have been raped since the beginning of the conflict. Efforts to protect women and girls in the Congo are failing spectacularly.

Visit www.raisehopeforcongo.org to learn more and join the movement!

Questions? Email congocampaign@enoughproject.org.