

Congo peace talks revived after Kabila's assassination

By Chris Talbot
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Following the assassination of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) President Laurent Kabila last month, his son Joseph has been at the centre of Western-inspired peace initiatives.

No new evidence has emerged about who was responsible for the assassination. However, the speed with which the ruling group in Kinshasa took control of events and the smoothness with which Joseph Kabila took over presidential responsibilities indicates that it was a well-planned operation with Western backing.

Only a week after his father's funeral, Joseph Kabila took off on a diplomatic tour to discuss a settlement of the two and a half year-old Congo war that involves several surrounding countries: Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia whose troops prop up the DRC regime, and Uganda and Rwanda who back the rebel forces fighting to overthrow it.

After meeting President Mbeki of South Africa, Kabila junior flew to Paris to meet with President Chirac. Then he flew to Washington to take part in a "National Prayer Breakfast" hosted by President Bush. During the day he met Secretary of State Colin Powell, who is pressing for the renewal of the US-backed peace accord, agreed in Lusaka, Zambia, in the summer of 1999. Kabila held talks with US officials regarding the implementation of the accord. Later he held a meeting with Rwandan President Paul Kagame who had also been present at the prayer breakfast to discuss Rwanda's objections to pulling out of the Congo. The Interahamwe, the Hutu militia that carried out the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, are now largely based in the Congo and make up a key component of the military backing for the DRC regime.

In the evening Joseph Kabila had a dinner with business executives organised by corporate mining boss Maurice Tempelman. No details of what was said have been released, though Kabila is reported as having made an appeal for investment, claiming that he will open up the DRC economy and remove legal restrictions on business imposed by his father. He had earlier met with James Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, as well as IMF

officials, to promise future collaboration. No effort appears to have been spared in smoothing the path for a peace agreement. The primary interest in bringing some stability to this huge country is to open up its vast resources of diamonds, gold, cobalt and other valuable minerals to Western mining corporations.

Next day Kabila attended a meeting at the United Nations, where his demand that Rwandan and Ugandan troops should pull out of the Congo received widespread support. Secretary General Kofi Annan indicated that the UN would be prepared to send a full observer force to the country as part of a renewed peace initiative.

Finally Kabila flew back to Brussels to meet the prime minister and foreign minister of Belgium, the former colonial power in the Congo. He also had an audience with the king, a descendent of the notorious King Leopold II whose personal rule over the Congo first opened it up to Western exploitation, killing millions of the native population in the brutal drive for ivory and rubber.

Whilst Joseph Kabila could hardly have ingratiated himself more with various Western governments in his willingness to revive the Lusaka peace agreement, several obstacles block the path to a settlement. Whilst all the outside countries involved in the war, as well as the DRC government and the main rebel groups signed the original accord, none of the parties observed it in practice. Resumed fighting made it impossible for UN peacekeepers to be sent in. The political dialogue that was supposed to have begun between the warring parties never got off the ground. It was clear that competing interests over exploiting the country's mineral resources was the main reason for this, although Western governments blamed the intransigence of Laurent Kabila.

With Kabila senior removed from the scene, the economic interests of the other countries in continuing the conflict remain. This is especially true of Zimbabwe, which has a quarter of its armed forces in the Congo. With President Mugabe's government targeted by Britain and the Western powers as a "rogue" regime, and with an economy in a state

of collapse under punitive IMF sanctions, Mugabe is unlikely to pull out unless his army gets the rewards from diamond and mineral concessions promised by Laurent Kabila in exchange for its support.

Angola is more likely to accept an agreement, and is the main backer of the ruling clique around Joseph Kabila. After the assassination, Angola sent in more troops from neighbouring Congo-Brazzaville to prop up the DRC regime. Apart from South Africa, Angola has the biggest army in the region, and has used its huge oil wealth to develop a close relationship with US oil companies that is likely to win it support from the Bush government.

According to the magazine *Africa Confidential* an Angolan delegation to the US last November, led by Angola's military intelligence chief, met in the State Department with a military intelligence delegation from Rwanda. Similar meetings have taken place with Uganda. It is possible that the assassination and change of direction of the DRC regime was discussed, if not planned, at these meetings. Angola's leaders had become dissatisfied with Laurent Kabila's conduct of the war.

Angola has scored several military successes against the Unita rebel forces that have been fighting a war against the Angolan MPLA regime for the last 25 years. Unita has suffered from sanctions imposed by the West against "conflict" diamonds. Provided the DRC regime is compliant, like its neighbour Congo-Brazzaville, and allows Angola access to the oil and diamonds in the region, Angola would accept a peace agreement. Angola's other main concern is to prevent the DRC from being used as a base by the Unita rebel forces.

Uganda and Rwanda, both countries that receive Western support, including covert military aid from the US, have resisted Western pressure to withdraw from the Congo. Last week a summit was held in Lusaka to discuss renewing the 1999 accord. President Museveni of Uganda did not attend although Uganda did send a delegation, whilst Rwanda refused to take part, claiming that Zambia was no longer neutral in the conflict.

It is possible that Uganda may agree to withdraw its troops from the conflict, although it would no doubt expect to continue relations with the rebel movements it backs, including preserving its share of the profits from the gold and timber extracted from the Congo. The Ugandan-backed Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC), led by former Mobutu supporter and businessman Jean-Pierre Bemba, is well established in the northern part of the Congo and has support in the West, including in the Bush government.

Rwanda is clearly opposed to withdrawing its troops. In a *New York Times* interview, Kagame denied that exploiting

the Congo's mineral resources was Rwanda's main concern. He accused the Western powers of having no interest in dealing with the various militias, particularly the Interahamwe, operating in the east of the Congo and threatening Rwanda. France in particular (the main backer of the pre-1994 Rwandan Hutu regime) wanted to obscure this issue. "The whole world stood up against Unita in support of the Angolan government and threatened sanctions against everyone who would work with Unita", he said. But with the Interahamwe, "there is always ambiguity—condemnation but no action."

Kagame clearly fears that the favourable treatment his regime has received from the West since it took power in 1994 could change. It is notable that his visit to the US featured critical questioning by journalists and campaigners about the human rights record of his government.

Whatever the outcome of the horse-trading in Lusaka, it is directed by Western corporate interests in the Congo and any eventual peace deal is not calculated to benefit the population of the region. In his recent report to the UN Security Council, Kofi Annan explained that over the last year the number of internally displaced persons in the DRC had quadrupled to more than two million; and on top of this were 332,000 refugees. Sixteen million people are estimated to have "critical food needs", affected not only by the disruptions of the war but "a staggering increase in prices." According to Annan, large numbers of children were suffering from malnutrition, and HIV/AIDS infected 1.1 million people, about five percent of the population. There was a deteriorating health situation through "neglect and destruction of health facilities, lack of essential medication and the difficulty of dispatching health supplies to the regions of the vast country." A UN Inter-Agency Appeal for \$37 million launched last November, entirely inadequate given the scale of the humanitarian disaster, had only yielded 30 percent in pledges.

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