

Discovery of mass graves highlights bloody scramble for Congo's resources

By Eddie Haywood
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Last week, a team with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights together with personnel from the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) discovered scores of mass graves in Kasai Province, a south central region of the Congo currently wracked by bloody conflict between the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) and Kamuina Nsapu, a local tribal militia.

According to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 17 mass graves were discovered in early April in Kasai, which had been the location of recent clashes between the militia and FARDC. These discoveries follow the unearthing of several mass graves found in March.

Speaking to the media, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said, "The discovery of yet more mass graves and the reports of continued violations and abuses highlight the horror that has been unfolding in the Kasai [Province] over the last nine months."

The UN High Commission has declared that the human rights violations could be referred to the International Criminal Court for further investigation.

"Should there be no effective national investigation, I will not hesitate to urge the international community to support an investigation by an international mechanism, including the International Criminal Court," the High Commissioner said.

The conflict has resulted in a mass internal displacement in the Kasai Province, with millions fleeing the region for Angola and other areas of the Congo. Thousands have been tortured, killed and injured, and incidents of rape of women and children on the part of the FARDC have been reported.

In a report by the BBC, a visibly traumatized local villager recounted the horror: "They killed people and raped women. Then, the next day we saw a general. He said 'Come out of your house; we're not going to kill any more.'

"He told us to bury the people—even members of my family, even people I knew."

Another resident of Kananga told the BBC of indiscriminate killings carried out by the FARDC. "When the shooting began, my children ran and hid in a neighbor's house. But the government soldiers got into that house—three people were killed and one of my children was injured."

Another Kananga resident told of the extortion carried out by government forces: "Soldiers are coming into neighborhoods and harassing people for money. If you don't have money, they threaten to kill you."

Kamuina Nsapu, the militia named after its slain leader, is made up largely of the Luba tribe, the main tribal grouping in the Kasai Province. The militia claims to have the 'power of voodoo,' and its leaders claim that they can be protected from death by wearing specific leaves from the heavily forested Kasai region.

Underscoring the militia's rise is the overwhelming perception within the population of Kasai that the Congo's president, Joseph Kabila, is illegitimate; in the election of 2011, Kabila claimed to win the province, a stronghold of the late opposition candidate Etienne Tshisekedi. There were reports of impossibly high voter turnout and vote rigging, and intimidation at polling stations throughout the country.

MONUSCO, the UN force charged with peacekeeping and protecting civilians in the Congo, is in reality a force which seeks to maintain the exploitation of the country's vast economic resources. MONUSCO has little popular support after incidents in which the so-called peacekeeping force has taken the sidelines during massacres of civilians, such as occurred in Goma in eastern Congo during the M23 rebellion in 2012.

The Kasai Province is rich in diamonds, and is among the world's leading sources of the precious gems, making clear the capitalist interests that underlay the conflict.

The armed conflict embroiling the Kasai Province traces back to last August when government forces killed the leader of Kamuina Nsapu after the government refused to give official recognition to the tribal leader, and appointed cronies instead, which has been widely perceived in the province as an insult.

Beginning in July, Kabila deployed government forces into the Kasai Province to neutralize the group. Since Kabila's refusal to step down and hold elections last December, there has been a sharp increase in lawlessness and the rise of armed conflict across the country. With a subsequent sharp decline in support for Kabila the government is desperate to maintain the legitimacy of its rule.

The armed insurgency inflaming Kasai is just one of several

bloody conflicts currently wracking the country, mostly located in the eastern region of the country, where several foreign rebel groups use the Congo as a rear base for operations, such as M23, a rebel militia of former Rwandan Hutu rebels involved in that country's genocide in the 1990s, and a Ugandan militia opposed to the government of Yoweri Museveni in Kampala, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).

The ongoing simmering conflicts hark back to the Congo War of 1996–2006, which involved the armed forces of eleven African nations and resulted in the deaths of millions.

At stake in the Congo War were claims to Congo's rich and vast mineral wealth, which include gold, diamonds, and cobalt, as well as other rare-earth minerals used in the manufacture of electronics for the world market, such as mobile phones and laptop computers.

Similar stakes overshadow the conflict in the Congo today—the scramble to plunder economic resources, and Western capitalist interests attempting to influence the outcome.

There are clear indications that the Kabila government has fallen out of favor with Washington. The former military commander has been in power for more than 16 years, and refused to step down in December 2016 when his term ended as mandated by the Congolese constitution.

In response, the US and European Union laid economic sanctions against Kabila and several top officials in his cabinet last year, sharply condemning Kabila's refusal to leave office and accusing him of "undermining democracy."

The appeals on the part of the US and EU to democracy are a cynical fraud, given Washington and Europe's history of covert warfare in the country, their complicity in the assassination of its first elected president, Patrice Lumumba, and their support for the brutal Mobutu dictatorship. What Washington would like to see in Kinshasa is a government more subservient to its economic interests.

Last November, US congressional members wrote to then President Obama asking for expanded economic sanctions against the Kabila regime, citing evidence that "significant funds have been diverted from RDC's treasury to enrich members of the ruling elite," and asking the administration to freeze Congolese officials' assets, and to order investigations of the Kabila government.

Figuring into Washington's objectives in sanctioning government officials is the palpable fear that the Congo's vast economic resources and its profits will not benefit American corporations and banks.

Weighing heavily on Washington is the fear of China's economic influence in the Congo. China in recent years has increased its investment in the Congo and across the African continent, an encroachment the US elite regard as intolerable.

In 2013, Chinese construction firm Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Group secured a contract with the Congolese government to construct an electrical power plant in Mbuji

Mayi, the capital city of Kasai province. The 4.6 megawatt electrical power generation facility is used in the production of the region's diamonds. Also, China secured a deal with the government to invest \$100 million in Mbuji Mayi's infrastructure.

Washington is actively working to neutralize the roadblock to its domination of African economies represented by Beijing, and has sharply increased its military presence across the continent in response.

Coinciding with the expanded US military presence on the continent is increasing unrest among the African population who in the coming period will become ever more deeply opposed to the capitalist policies of the ruling class. The expansion of military operations across Africa makes clear the US ruling class is prepared to violently crush any such opposition to its dominance.

That the Congo, with trillions of dollars in natural resources under the control of a few elites, is also home to the most impoverished mass of people on earth is a devastating indictment of the capitalist system. While the Congolese elite enrich themselves, it is at the expense of the Congolese masses, of which more than half live on \$2 a day or less.

The current wars waged by Washington and the European powers for control over markets and resources across the entire globe increasingly resemble the conflicts brought on by the crisis of capitalism which beset the world powers in the last century, leading to two devastating world wars.

The acute crisis of capitalism gripping the world today makes a mockery of the claims made by US officialdom of a "new era of peace, prosperity and democracy" after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The period since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 has been marked by unending and ever-expanding war conducted by the US on the rest of the world for domination and conquest.

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