

Ethnic cataclysm looms in Congo

Africa

By Victoria Brittain

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PRESIDENT Laurent Kabila of Congo has lit the touch paper of a fire for which all of Africa will pay.

The war in former Zaire now involves five other countries directly, and at least five indirectly. But even more serious is Mr Kabila's appeal to the crudest of ethnic politics. It threatens a new genocide dwarfing in horror the 1994 pogroms that killed a million people in Rwanda, mostly from the Tutsi minority.

Last month Mr Kabila called on Congolese to take up bows and arrows, machetes and spears to kill Tutsis, "otherwise they will make us their slaves". It was an echo of the radio broadcasts in Rwanda that incited the genocide four years ago.

In Congo's capital, Kinshasa, people from the west African states of Senegal and Mali, whose features sometimes resemble the stereotype of tall, thin Tutsis, have sought protection in their embassies, while in the city's slums, mobs including children have gone on hunts for Tutsis which have ended over beating or burned bodies.

This is the ethnic politics that gave the continent the epic horrors of apartheid in South Africa, Idi Amin's regime in Uganda, Unita's 20-year war in Angola, the Biafra secession war in Nigeria and the rotting of regimes such as Daniel arap Moi's in Kenya and Mobutu Sese Seko's in Zaire.

Only four African political movements have stood out against tribalism: those of the former president Julius Nyerere in Tanzania; the guerilla armies led by Yoweri Museveni in Uganda and Paul Kagame in Rwanda; and the African National Congress in South Africa.

Mr Kabila's 15 months in power foundered once he had surrounded himself with government, military and police leaders almost entirely from his own area - Katanga - ignoring the political organisations that had battled against Mobutu's authoritarianism through the Sovereign National Conference of

accident", short-circuited the Congolese opposition groups' long political march towards democracy. He took no part in the National Conference, where civil society evolved slowly as demands were discussed and formulas for transitional government hammered out.

The instant embrace he won from Western governments and business repeated their behaviour after that other short-circuit of democracy in this region - Milton Obote's stolen election of December 1980. It took a six-year guerilla war for Uganda to overcome its legacy.

The past month's upheaval in eastern Congo, and the rebels' attempt to take it to the west - with the seizure of the main air force base at Kitona and the dam at Inga - would probably have succeeded without the intervention of Angola and its heavy artillery and air strikes.

That the Angolans moved so decisively had little to do with Mr Kabila. They were motivated by the opportunity to hit across their border at their own dissident movements: Unita, which has given up all pretence of being part of the United Nations-monitored peace process; and Flec, the separatist movement in the oil province of Cabinda, surrounded by Congo.

As the jigsaw of alliances fractured in and around Congo, former Mobutu generals and their followers have seized the chance to move out of their safe havens, including refugee camps in Tanzania and the Central African Republic, to join the side they thought most likely to win - initially the rebels.

This meant the Angolans saw the rebels as a threat, for many of these generals have been in close alliance with Jonas Savimbi and Unita. Angolan officers justify their intervention by claiming that Unita soldiers are fighting alongside the rebels, though this has been repeatedly denied by the rebel leadership.

The shifting alliances of tens of thousands of Mobutu supporters and Rwandan militias from the former regime, willing to join any army that can bring them back to power, is well illustrated in neighbouring Congo-Brazzaville. There they fought on both sides of the brief war that brought Denis Sassou-Nguesso back to the presidency two years ago. An Angolan

1990-96.

Mr Kabila's ministers of home affairs, justice, mining and transport, the central bank governor, the police inspector-general, the national security director and the armed forces chief are all Katangese - and include Mr Kabila's son and cousin.

"From Belgian colonial times the road to Katanga has been the road to unfreedom," wrote Professor Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, a leader of the Congo Democracy Movement. The organisation, which grew out of the National Conference, groups 20 parties and leads the new rebellion in east Congo.

And Mr Kabila has created a regional crisis. He has turned against the leaders whose armies helped him take power from the dying Mobutu and trained his own army: President Museveni of Uganda and Vice-President Kagame of Rwanda.

Both countries have sent units to lawless eastern Congo on joint operations with Congolese troops against gangs of former Mobutu soldiers, the fighters who took part in the genocide in Rwanda, and the Ugandan rebels from Amin's era, who have been destabilising north-west Rwanda and western Uganda.

Last month Mr Kabila requested that a crack unit of the Rwandan army be stationed in Kinshasa. When this was refused, he angrily demanded that all Rwandans leave Congo, and launched his propaganda war against Tutsis.

But before this rift emerged, Mr Kabila prepared an insurance policy for himself. He secretly trained in Katanga 10,000 of the Rwandan militia who took part in the genocide, and opened links with the Sudanese who back the Ugandan dissidents. With these two groups Mr Kabila was ready to take up Mobutu's old alliances, undermine his former allies and, he believed, consolidate Katangese power. It was a security threat that Rwanda and Uganda could not afford to take lightly.

But Mr Kabila had reckoned without the multi-ethnic Congolese army troops in the east, most of whom promptly changed sides, too, and announced they would join the rebellion against him.

South Kivu, where the population is Tutsis, is the centre of this rebellion, as it was of the one that brought Mr Kabila to power.

In the vast area of North and South Kivu, Tutsis have never been granted citizenship. In a repeat of their rebellion three years ago; they are fighting for a Congo that will grant them equal rights. The Congo Democracy Movement is multi-ethnic and promises to end tribal politics and the arbitrary rule that has characterised Mr Kabila's leadership.

Mr Kabila, known to many senior African officials as "the historical

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intervention, also triggered by the desire to cut off covert support to Unita, gave Mr Sassou-Nguesso victory.

But in Congo - unlike in tiny, oil-rich Congo-Brazzaville - instability is endemic and only the Congolese can end the fighting.

The intervention of Zimbabwe and Namibia alongside Angola to save Mr Kabila reflects a tragic misunderstanding of the situation and an acceptance of Mr Kabila's inflammatory ethnic rhetoric.

The internal consequences for both countries are likely to be serious. Zimbabwe faces widespread social unrest and cannot afford to spend at least pounds 60,000 a day on the war.

And last month Namibia's high commissioner to Britain, Ben Ulenga, resigned, partly citing his disagreement with Namibia's military adventure. Mr Ulenga was the leader of Namibia's trade unions during opposition to apartheid South Africa's occupation, but even with that old power base behind him it was an astonishing gesture in a country just as monolithic in its political system as Zimbabwe. Mr Ulenga has been swamped with messages of congratulation.

One of the few encouraging gestures of the past week came when Tanzania's President Ben Mkapa had his military training team airlifted out of Congo by South Africa. President Nelson Mandela has tried in vain to use his moral authority in the region to achieve a ceasefire. With Tanzania, South Africa sees only too clearly the ethnic horror that this war threatens.

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