

# Zaire: the final wave

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Africa

By Mohammed Sahnoun

"THE shape of Africa resembles a revolver," the Algerian author of "Wretched of the Earth," Franz Fanon, wrote, "and Zaire is the trigger." The image captures the central importance of Zaire to Africa. Trouble in Zaire means trouble everywhere.

It was King Leopold of Belgium's effort to secure the wealth of what is now Zaire that led to the Berlin Conference of 1884 at which the colonial powers divided Africa into spheres of influence and imposed most of the continent's present-day national borders.

The centrality of Zaire during the cold war led the West, fearing Soviet influence, to condone the establishment in Zaire and elsewhere in Central Africa of autocratic regimes in the 1960s.

The collapse of those regimes today can either trigger catastrophe across the whole of Central Africa or, if resolved widely, lead to the most important post-cold war development on the continent since Nelson Mandela came to power in South Africa: peaceful integration of the Great Lakes region that transcends the artificially grafted colonial borders and makes prosperity possible.

Zaire anchors that part of Africa which has the greatest potential for development. It has great mineral wealth — diamonds, gold, copper and cobalt. It has high population density but the capacity to feed not only its own people but also the rest of Africa.

Because of the water supply and extensive irrigation systems, the Great Lakes region could become Africa's breadbasket. And large amounts of land and resources remain unexploited, which is why so many international companies, as well as the big powers, are so interested in the fate of Zaire.

Because of the vast migration of populations over the centuries, Zaire has tribal links not only with the nine countries that border it but also with countries from East to West Africa.

The rebel leader Laurent Kabila now practically controls the rich, eastern part of Zaire. Kinshasa is cut off from resources and isolated. So in the short term our effort is to negotiate a soft landing, a political solution to the transfer of power, not a military one.

This means that, for stability's sake, this last phase must be an inclusive one. To humiliate the old guard by driving them unceremoniously from power will only ensure that they will regroup somewhere, sometime, to wreak havoc on any new government and continue to destabilize the region.

That is why we are encouraging Mr Kabila's movement to look for the peaceful compromise of a coalition government in Kinshasa. At the same time, the government must understand that fundamental change is necessary and the old regime is at an end.

The central question in Zaire at this moment is not about which personality will rule. The real issue is the establishment of a capable governing class, including key elements of civil society, that can stably run a modern state.

\* Second, under United Nations auspices an international conference will be convened that I call the anti-Berlin conference.

The Berlin Conference of 1884 established borders which divided areas where people had always lived together naturally, not knowing what national borders were. The movement of people and the trade in goods knew no bounds. The whole of Central Africa existed as one region.

In a sense, the aim of this new conference will be to erase the colonial intent of dividing up the spoils with state boundaries and seek instead to share them through new interstate cooperation, beginning with a common market.

The aim is to take advantage of the population links that already exist to create a web of relationships not only in trade but also within civil society — small business, the religious leaders, women's groups, the intelligentsia and, not least, the critically important

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Consequently if Zaire implodes and refugees spill out, it will spread the kind of chaos and destabilization, although on a vaster scale, with which we are already so tragically familiar in Rwanda and Burundi.

If, instead, these links between many peoples become the basis of a more integrated region, in which wealth and resources are shared, Zaire could become the other leg, along with South Africa, by which Africa gets on its feet.

Unfortunately, during the cold war Zaire's potential was squandered. Government mismanagement, corruption and violations of human rights were allowed to fester because Zaire was an ally in the global battle against communism. The west closed its eyes.

One result of that policy was that no professional-managerial class, or even an independent business class, emerged that had any power to influence affairs when the cold war ended. The country had no strategy for development, only a regime of graft.

This era of what the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka calls the "toad kings" of Africa is coming to an end, not only in Zaire but in the rest of Africa. They will not go easily, but the old guard, which took over after independence and became the corrupt political class, has exhausted its power. The final wave of African independence is at last under way, with the coming to power of a new generation of activists who demand human rights and development.

The United Nations peace plan designed to make way for this transition while bringing security and stability to the Great Lakes region has two main components:

\* There must be security and stability in and around Zaire.

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tribal elders. These groups are essential for dialogue across borders.

One approach that enables the free movement of people and goods across Central Africa, so that the density of population can be matched with the available resources, will reverse the trend of crumbling states. Only such an approach can hope to entice foreign investment.

A peaceful transition of power in Zaire can trigger change for the better across the whole continent.—  
*Dawn/IHT Service*

*(The writer, an Algerian diplomat, is the special representative of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity for the Great Lakes region of Africa. He is conducting negotiations in South Africa with the parties for a peaceful transition of power in Zaire.)*