

AFRICA

Zaire's veteran rebel may have last laugh

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Amor

Mary Braid

Moon-faced and smiley in his alligator shoes, Laurent Kabila was ridiculed at first as a superannuated revolutionary who had stumbled from the bush with a rag-tag-rebel following and the ludicrous ambition of liberating his giant and crumbling country.

When he launched his uprising in eastern Zaire in late October, the chubby Mr Kabila vowed to take the capital, Kinshasa, by Christmas. Journalist sniggered as they waited behind the length of string, drooped between two peeling wrought-iron chairs, which marked the rebels' border checkpoint outside Goma, their first bit strategic gain. Just how did he intend to transport his sneaked boy soldiers dwarfed by their AK47s, across the 900 miles of wilderness to Kinshasa, when roads petered into jungle just outside town?

In any case, who was Mr Kabila trying to fool? He was just a convenient frontman for Rwanda and Uganda in their campaign to drive Rwandan Hutu militiamen from refugee camps just over the Zairean border. Once he had served their purpose, he would be dumped and his revolution smothered.

No one sniggers now. In just five months the rebel leader has risen from figure of fun to major player on the African stage. He has beamed at the cameras with South Africa's Nelson Mandela, and this weekend his forces, with a quarter of Zaire already under their control, are negotiating in Pretoria with representatives of President Mobutu Sese Seko, who has ruled the country for more than three decades.

Their comrades, meanwhile, continue to advance. Government military resistance is melting before them as they march on the mineral-rich regions of Kasai and Shaba. Mr Kabila's home

tured Kisangani, formerly Stanleyville, where the Lumumbists made a last stand in the 1960s after their leader's death, only to be routed by mercenaries and US-backed Belgian paratroopers.

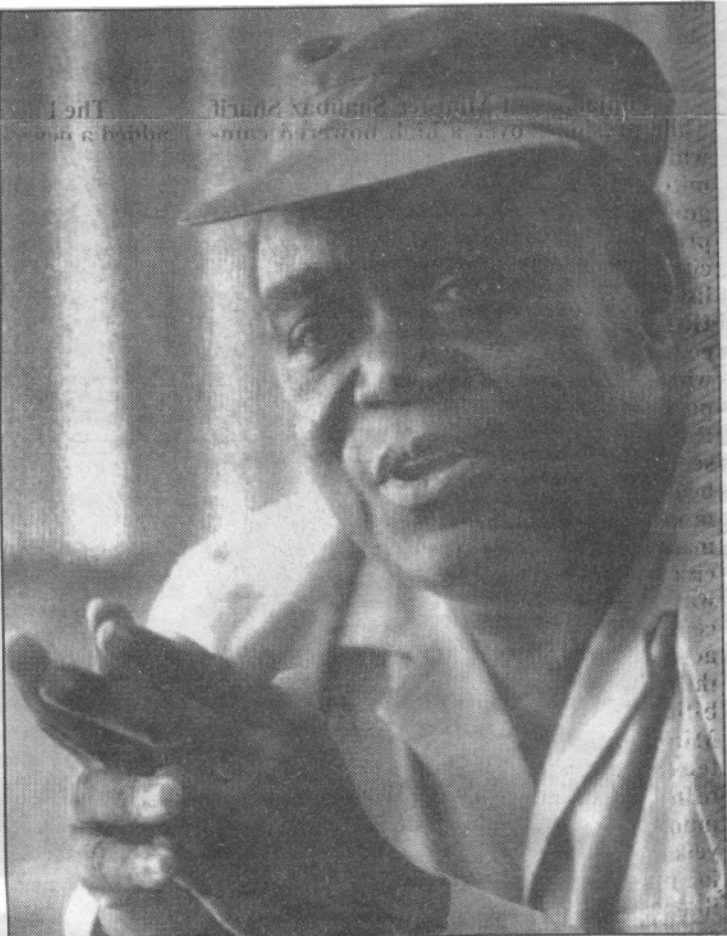
President Mobutu crushed all resistance, but Mr Kabila, who studied philosophy in France, went on to lead the People's Revolutionary Party. In the mid 1960s the Latin American revolutionary Che Guevara even pitched up to fight alongside him. Che left moths later, complaining that Mr Kabila spent more time in the bars of Dar es Salaam than he did with his peasant soldiers, that may have been so, but nobody can fault his tenacity.

Between lengthy stays in African capitals, where he forged friendships with Yoweri Museveni, who later seized power in Uganda and Paul Kagame, who led the Tutsis to power in Rwanda in 1994, Mr Kabila continued his guerrilla activities in southeastern Zaire. In 1975 he masterminded the kidnap of three American students and a Dutch researcher. They were eventually released 67 days later after an undisclosed ransom was paid.

But by the 1980s he had dropped from sight. His reemergence last year was at first dismissed as a naive willingness to be used by his old pals, Messrs Kagame and Museveni. Events suggest it may have had more to do with a keen eye for the main chance.

Mr Kabila shrugs off questions about family. His beaming geniality only evaporates when his revolutionary days are raked up. Right up until October the PRP espoused Marxism, but now he is for a free market, though he denounces the West for its support of Mr Mobutu and its exploitation of Zaire's vast mineral wealth.

Zaire watchers warn that his agenda is still a mystery. Doubters point to his command



Ever the insurgent: even Che Guevara once fought for him.

province. They took the diamond town of Mbuji Mayi, Mr Mobutu's personal piggy bank for the past 30 years. With the mines in their hands, it is the rebels who may soon be able to lump their foreign backers.

At 58, it might have seemed that Mr Kabila's dream would ever come true. He has spent his adult life in a state of perpetual, and largely obscure, revolution.

When he popped up in eastern Zaire last the few who could even remember him assumed he had died long ago. But it transpires that for as long as President Mobutu, 66, now suffering from cancer, has been in power indulging a greed so obscene it has impoverished his country, Mr Kabila has been going back and forth to the bush, trying to muster force that would oust him.

There is something of a time warp about the confrontation, which has lured many educated middle-aged or elderly Zaireans from exile to join Mr Kabila's cabinet: the have come from Belgium, France and the US to settle scores dating back, in some cases, to before Zairean independence from Belgium in 1960. Mr Mobutu, backed by the West, came to power in the military coups that followed.

Mr Kabila and those around him were once young members of the pan-Africanist, independence movement led by Patrice Lumumba, Zaire's first prime minister, who was murdered in 1961. The CIA and Mobutu are held responsible. They years must have peeled away last month when the rebel army cap-

deering of Mr Mobutu's opulent villa on the shores of Lake Kivu, not to mention the appointment of his son as a military commander and his cousin as foreign minister.

Mr Kabila insists he has no great ambition to run Zaire, he just wants to see its transition to democracy. But at this moment what he plans or says hardly matters, so desperate are Zaireans are for change. On Christmas Day, despite the physical impossibility of such a feat, rumours raced through Kinshasa that he had fulfilled his promise and like a Messiah arrived to save them. This was a man whose name was unknown in the capital only a few months before.

Mr Kabila's strongest card is that he is perhaps the only public figure in Zaire who has never done a deal with Mr Mobutu. On Thursday he refused an offer by the new Prime Minister, Etienne Tshisekedi, who had been appointed hours earlier by the President, of six rebels seats in the Cabinet.

Once again he read the public right. Mr Tshisekedi, one of Zaire's most popular opposition figures, was widely condemned for deciding to serve under a president who has survived this long by luring opponents into the fold, where they invariably become his creatures.

Mr Kabila has watched them succumb from self-imposed exile in the bush. He is the first to refuse to come on in, and as a result he is closer to unseating Mr Mobutu than anyone in 30 years. If only Che could see him now.