

Zaire: light and shadow

AT long last the end of Zaire's seven-month-old civil war seems to be in sight. It is as yet too early, though, to predict the precise form the denouement will take. The pity is that the first face-to-face encounter between Zaire's long-entrenched despot Mobutu Sese Seko and the rebel leader, Mr Laurent Kabila, on Sunday proved to be inconclusive. They are to meet again within ten days. Only the stances of the two sides were spelt out in the joint communique which was issued aboard the South African naval ship where the fateful encounter took place under the watchful eye of President Mandela. The sense of relief all around is because the positions of the two parties do not appear to be irreconcilable. It seems that they would ultimately agree to the establishment of a transitional authority and the holding of elections to enable Mr Mobutu to step down. But in the absence of an agreement on the modalities of the transition of power, the situation on the ground remains fluid and uncertain. Moreover, Mr Kabila's forces have begun to question his decision not to go in for the kill of President Mobutu's remaining forces. If they refuse to obey their commander's orders not to advance on Kinshasha, chaos and a bloodbath might become the order of the day.

In that event what Zaire has been undergoing for the last six months would pale into insignificance. Since October when Mr Kabila, an erstwhile Marxist nationalist and warlord, managed to rally a motley group of disgruntled opposition leaders under the umbrella of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (ADFL), this former Belgian colony has been in the grip of political turmoil and violence. Today, the ADFL's forces are in control of two-thirds of Zaire and, though there has been very little active fighting, the economy has been disrupted and the people, including the Rwandan Hutu refugees, have had to undergo untold suffering because of food shortages, looting and rape by the soldiers and the flight of the civilians from their homes out of panic and insecurity. All this has made the country ripe for an explosion which could have dire implications for the whole of Africa.

The fact is that Zaire had more than its fair share of problems because of its strategic location and resources. Its mineral wealth, which has been

shamelessly robbed by Mobutu and his cronies, has made the country attractive to foreign powers. Its size (it is the third largest country in Africa and has a population of 40 million) and location (it borders nine countries in central Africa) have made Zaire's existence trouble-ridden. Its heterogeneity (it has 200 ethnic groups) makes it a difficult state to unify and govern. To all this should be added the fact of the 32 years of autocratic and tyrannical rule and economic mismanagement by a dictator who came to power with the help of the Americans at the height of the cold war. Washington sustained Mobutu's dictatorship for three decades because he was a dependable ally against Soviet-backed regimes in the neighbourhood. With the cold war having ended, the West now has no use for the ailing Mobutu. Hence the decision to ditch him. In fact, the rebel leader who is certain to emerge the winner is being ardently wooed since the country's wealth will be in his hands when he takes over.

Mobutu's exit, even if it is a planned and peaceful one, will not solve Zaire's problems. It is burdened with a number of crises: food supply is precarious with famine looming large, the refugees from Rwanda pose a major obstacle to peace and normality and outside meddling in Zairean affairs continues unabated. The ADFL has been actively helped by Uganda, Rwanda and Angola and it is doubtful if these states would leave Mr Kabila alone to chalk out his country's destiny. The Rwandan refugees who are from the majority Hutu clan are not welcomed by the ruling Tutsis in Rwanda who are an ally of Mr Kabila. What will become of them ultimately remains to be seen. Food aid and distribution being used as a political weapon remains a grim possibility.

Worse is the prospect of the new leadership failing to get a political grip on the country's affairs. Some of the provinces rich in mineral resources have already been asserting their autonomy. They might be tempted not to submit to the writ of the new government and a political vacuum could result. As for the Zairean economy which has been on the slide with falling production and high inflation, an upturn is not easy to visualise. The end of the civil war could well see the beginning of a new set of problems and challenges for the new wielders of power.