

Zaire on the brink

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Time seems to be fast running out for Zaire. The latest reports indicate that Kinshasa is bracing for a determined rebel assault following Laurent Kabila's green signal to his besieging forces which already hold sway over two-thirds of the war-torn country. The first ever face-to-face meeting between President Mobutu Sese Seko and rebel leader Kabila in the six-month civil war, brokered by President Nelson Mandela aboard a South African naval vessel, does not seem to have substantially narrowed the gap between their respective positions. At the meeting President Mobutu is reported to have agreed not to contest the forthcoming election in Zaire and also offered to hand over power to an elected president. He has also proposed a ceasefire and a transitional authority leading to elections. Laurent Kabila, on the other hand, has demanded that he step down immediately and hand over power to a coalition set-up which should organise a fair and impartial election in the country. The main point of dissension between the two sides therefore is President Mobutu's resignation which he is not prepared to tender. According to a communique issued at the conclusion of the first round, further talks on the issue will be held within ten days. But judging by the rapidity with which things are moving in the wake of Kabila's order to storm the capital, it may be too late by then.

Zaire is located in a part of Africa which has the greatest potential for development. It has vast mineral wealth comprising diamond, gold, copper and cobalt. And its strategic location in Central

Africa makes it pivotal to the stability of the whole region. It is said that instability in Zaire can trigger a chain reaction and envelop the neighbouring countries as well. This is one of the reasons why the West has focussed on ensuring "stability" in the country. A remnant of the Cold War era, President Mobutu Sese Seko has ruled Zaire with an iron fist since the early 1960s and the country's pivotal position had prompted the US to condone the autocratic regime to counter the Soviet influence. The same policy was pursued elsewhere in the region. Vast amounts in the name of development aid were funnelled into Zaire to bolster the regime. And as was only to be expected, the country gradually slid into a cesspool of corruption and inefficiency. The rebellion is believed to be a popular reaction to the misgovernance. Rebel leader Laurent Kabila now practically controls the rich, eastern part of Zaire. Kinshasa is cut off from resources and isolated. A military showdown in these circumstances will certainly lead to heavy civilian casualties and destruction of the infrastructure. The only sensible option left for the two sides is to seek a negotiated settlement of the issue. Laurent Kabila's demand that President Mobutu step down immediately to pave the way for election under a neutral caretaker set-up makes eminent sense. The United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity should ensure that the country does not slide into absolute chaos which will surely prevail once the central authority is overrun by the rebels. President should be persuaded to step down to ensure a smooth transition.