



Children sit by a wall with the name Pierre Mbemba written on it outside the derelict prison in Geti, Ituri District, north eastern Congo. Mbemba, a former rebel leader and now vice-president in the transitional government poses the biggest challenge to incumbent Joseph Kabila in Congo's first ever democratic elections.

Fragile state

ITURI: "No World Cup, just militias," says a Pakistani United Nations peacekeeper providing the security for the convoy we were traveling in when asked if he had been following the recently concluded global football extravaganza in Germany.

It was an ironic statement met with light amusement but at the same time indicative of the realities of eastern DRC in 2006; the year which held football's greatest tournament, and this vast central African nation's first democratic elections.

On 30 July, the Congolese electorate will, for the first time, experience the accepted process practiced around the world to decide the individuals who will govern a country at the presidential, parliamentary and municipal levels.

In a country akin to the size of Western Europe - with only 300 km of tarmac road; an infrastructure decimated, and in some places virtually non-existent as a result of Congo's recent wars, that have indirectly claimed the lives of 4 million people; militia groups and dissident forces continuing to destabilise and displace people in their thousands in regions of the mineral-rich east - it is a huge task.

Surrounded by all of this, the United Nations is helping to organise and fund Congo's elections, contributing greatly to the estimated US\$400 million price tag the whole exercise is going to cost. In some ways, Ituri is unique within the sprawling mass of the green heart of Africa. Yet in others it is a microcosm of what the electoral process is expected to bring to the long-suffering people of Congo.

Once declared the personal fiefdom of Belgium's King Leopold II, in which he looted, abused and raped the country for all it was worth, Independence from the systematic pillage and oppression by Congo's colonial masters in 1960 promised a new dawn. It wasn't to be.

Patrice Lumumba, the charismatic leader of what was to become known as Zaire, offered much. Tragically, he was never allowed to achieve. His American and Belgium-orchestrated murder just

six months later dashed the euphoria of the post independence period and sealed the fate of the Congo for the next 32 years.

Supported and put in place by the CIA, who viewed him as a "friend and ally" as the battle lines of the Cold War between the east and the west were etched across Africa, Joseph-Desire Mobutu rose to power on the shoulders of his "foreign backers".

Africanising his name to Mobutu Sese Seko, he viewed himself as some kind of god-like deity. State television would portray him as a figure descending from the clouds as Zaire's heavenly leader. But behind this holy portrayal, the plunder continued.

It is alleged that during his three decades in power Mobutu amassed billions of dollars in Swiss bank accounts from the pillage of his country's natural wealth.

In 1997, rebels led by Laurent-Desire Kabila and supported by Congo's eastern neighbours Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, toppled Mobutu from power, bringing an end to his near four-decade reign.

Yet Kabila's relationship with his former allies soon turned sour. Former friends became foes and a new war erupted with various rebel groups enjoying the backing of the Kampala and Kigali governments.

Kabila was assassinated by one of his bodyguards in 2001 heralding his son, Joseph, to take over. Now, having led the country as transitional president for four years and former rebel leaders occupying positions as vice presidents as part of a power sharing agreement, the main protagonists are seeking election from the Congolese people as their country's first democratically elected leader.



Transitional President and presidential candidate Joseph Kabila addresses a campaign rally in Bunia, Ituri District. "We have been through a very long and painful transition...but after the elections we will certainly have peace and stability. It will be the future and hope of our country," he told the gathered crowd.

It is a parlous and uncertain period. Given that Jean-Pierre Bemba of the Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC) and Azarius Ruberwa of the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) - who both laid down their weapons to become VPs - are running alongside the youthful Kabila, one of the biggest uncertainties is what will happen when either one, or perhaps both former rebel leaders, do not win the election? Part of the reason for their cessation of fighting was to take a

seat at the table of government in Kinshasa and enjoy the fruits of political power and leadership. When this is no longer the case, there is the risk that eventual losers will try other ways of maintaining their harvest having lost their position of power and authority and status of influence. After all, it worked before.

For the people of Ituri, though, the elections are seen as some kind of panacea, or silver bullet to their woes and persistent problems.

In Ituri's district capital of Bunia town, many are hopeful. Although having lost his voter card while escaping fighting between militias and the Armed Forces for the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) in May, 28 year old Beo Deogratias is upbeat.

"I want to vote for my nation to make it a better one. The new president will organise the whole country."

Waiting patiently for his replacement outside the Independent Electoral Commission on Bunia's main street he explains that having the card is beneficial for more than just allowing him his right to exercise his vote.

"When you do not have a card in the village, the government soldiers suspect you of being a militiaman because they do not usually have them," he adds.

"We need these elections, Deogratias continues, "and we need a leader who is capable. Look at how people live around here," he says, gesturing to some children scratching about in the dust.

"We are suffering because people do not have work; there are so many unemployed. Our president must be able to take care of the country and help people find jobs."

Away from the barbwire and sandbag fortified gun emplacements and checkpoints on every junction and intersection constructed by the United Nations Mission in Congo (MONUC) in Bunia, the situation remains precarious.

Despite a Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme set up to encourage militia fighters out of the bush and having seen several thousand enter the process as a result, many continue to fight.

In Ituri alone, there are a myriad of groups active in various areas. Some are affiliated with each other under the loose umbrella organisation known as the Movement for the Revolution of Congo (MRC). Others fight their own battles.

A proportion of the militia and the groups they belong to are legacies of Congo's second war when groups backed by DRC's neighbours fought government forces and militia groups under the command of Kabila senior.

It is a complex web of subversive and dissident forces. Elsewhere in the east of the country Rwandan rebel groups and those accused of orchestrating the 1994 genocide still roam the jungles of the Kivu's, while a dissident Congolese Army General, Laurent Nkunda, remains at large and continues to pose a potential threat to the electoral process and stability of the area. Back in Ituri, where profitable gold deposits and other natural resources lay just below the lush, green surface of its rolling hills, eyes from just across the border will be watching closely to see what the elections bring.

Although Congo's war officially ended in 2003, the fighting in Ituri did not. A vicious and bloody inter-ethnic conflict between the Hema and Lendu groups erupted as their differences were exploited by outside forces seeking the financial dividends which the extraction of Ituri's lucrative mineral wealth brings.

The Hema and Lendu are the largest ethnic denominations in Ituri. Historically, the Lendu refused colonisation by the Belgium's who simply left them out of all possibilities to access business opportunities and to develop as people.

When they left following independence, the Hema took over all their properties and through the government administration put in place by Mobutu, were able to officially buy land.

This process more or less surmounted to the stealing of Lendu land. And with the Lendu being the majority in Ituri, the feeling of injustice and abuse of power from the administration favouring the Hema, began to grow.

While ethnic differences always existed in everyday life, they never erupted into conflict. Thus resentment lingered and when external powers stepped in with their own economic interests and agendas, the two group's differences were exploited and fueled. The result was massacres, killings and mass displacement of the population.

The ethnic fighting has now dissipated, yet the exploitation of Congo's natural wealth goes on.

A UN official in Bunia, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that such outside forces are not just DRC's neighbours. "When we look at the history of Congo and why Mobutu was able to stay in power for nearly 40 years, we can easily see that the external powers having the biggest influence here in Congo were not just African.

"These powers, even now, have very important economical and political interests here in Ituri. The United States, European countries, Russia, China and Japan all have 'black' industries here in the Congo that are exploiting the resources."

In mid-2005 the American-based group Human Rights Watch released a report documenting the role of foreign countries and companies in fueling the fighting in Ituri.

"Competition to control the gold mines and trading routes has spurred the bloody conflict that has gripped this area since the start of the Congolese war in 1998 and continues to the present... Rather than bringing prosperity to the people of northeastern Congo, gold has been a curse to those who have the misfortune to live there."

The reports findings stated that the trade in gold was just one example of a wider trend of competition for resources in Ituri and other districts of the east which resulted in human rights abuses taking place in mineral rich areas throughout the Congo. "The link between conflict and resource exploitation raises broader questions of corporate accountability in the developing world," the report concluded.

While militia attacks are no longer specifically concentrated against the civilian population, as was overwhelmingly the case before, people continue to be displaced in large numbers as a result of fighting between militia and FARDC forces.



Displaced children sit next to a graffiti covered wall in the small town of Geti, Ituri District eastern Congo.

Just two weeks before the elections, tens of thousands of people were on the move around the areas of Geti and Aveba, 50 km south of Bunia, following militia attacks on government held positions.

Such belligerent forces are vehemently opposed to the presence of the FARDC and the whole electoral process and their ability to cause trouble and disruption on Election Day is very real. Speaking at the end of June, Petronille Vwaweka, the District Commissioner of Bunia, pointed to the fact that many people are not sensitised enough on the concept of free and democratic elections and would not be able to understand what is going to happen and what the process

means. "People are not yet well enough informed about the conduct of the elections. Campaigning has just begun and will conclude towards the end of July and I do not think the time is enough for the population to be adequately informed about the situation."

She added that she saw the future of the DRC as uncertain. "It is important for the Congolese to elect good people who will be able to bring about positive changes in terms of the political and economic development of Ituri District and the rest of the country."

The hope is that the new democratically elected government will not have to go through the variety of problems the transitional government has experienced. Many changes and developments have not taken place because it was very difficult for the five individuals leading the country to agree on decisions and ultimately their implementation.

Now, following the elections, with only one leader and a constructive opposition there will be the possibility to do things that have up to now not been achieved.

One such basic fundamental that has caused many problems has been the paying of FARDC soldiers. For the institution charged with pacifying dissident elements and providing security for the population, the paying of a decent salary and leading them to loot from the local population, is one such basic which will underpin their discipline and conduct.

Yet with a large percentage of the Army in Ituri, as an example, having formerly been militia fighters - and being militia trained as opposed to having received formal military training - many have simply switched sides.



With a lack of training, resources and discipline, the Congolese Army has struggled to contain the fighting in many areas of eastern DRC without the help of United Nations peacekeepers.

This aspect, whereby previously militias would simply use a gun to obtain more or less what they wanted from the local population, combined with the lack of a regular wage has been one of the major problems the new Congolese Army has faced.

In Kinshasa, the official number of soldiers declared at the ministry of defense is in the region of 300,000, while there is less than half this number in the whole country. The government pays for these 300,000; the question is where does the money go?

General Mbuayama Nsiona, the Overall Commander of FARDC in Ituri District says the problem is knowing the total number of soldiers in the army. "Once this is concluded things can be handled much better and better planning can be made to improve conditions. At least salaries are being paid regularly every month," he says.

Realistically, there is no silver bullet that Beo Deogratias and so many others in Bunia, Ituri and across eastern Congo hope the elections will be. The solutions to the myriad issues can only

come from a political level. With the establishment of a government both willing and capable to bring change for the population, then the DRC will begin to experience a slow but constant reconstruction.

Speaking at a rally in the centre of Bunia in mid-July attended by a mass of enthusiastic people thousands strong, Kabila spoke of bringing peace and stability. "We have been in war and division. I say this is the time for peace in Ituri, not fighting," he told the huge crowd.

Amongst the heat and the dust and the surging mass of people young and old that day, Raymond Kituku was cheering his support and praises for the man they call "Baby Rico". "Kabila is 99 per cent plus one, 100 per cent he is going to win. I will vote for him."

As people began to disperse after the rally, the unemployed 20 year old explained that people like Kabila because he talks of such things that will make the future better. "When Kabila becomes president, he will first think about the people and how they are surviving in DRC," he said. "I think as soon as possible after the elections we are going to have water, electricity, jobs and security and education. He will build houses for people in Ituri, in eight months he can do this."

It was a utopian vision, and one perhaps encouraged by Kabila's closing comments of his speech. "You should vote for this young candidate. You should know my visions and objectives," he said. "The first, peace in Ituri. And the second, reconstruction of Ituri and Congo." It was music to the ears of Kituku and the thousands of others who had waited all day to hear their candidate of choice speak.



A supporter of President Joseph Kabila's People's Party for reconstruction and Democracy (PPRD) marches through the main street in Bunia as part of Congo's Independence Day celebrations on 30 June, 2006.

The work to be done in Ituri alone is so great. Speaking on the tarmac of Bunia Airport before his departure - ironically the only paved area in the whole town - Kabila said: "We have been through a very long and painful transition, yet it is not today but after the elections we will certainly have peace, we will certainly have stability. It will be the future and hope of our country."

Such a young man emanates an air of confidence and charisma. On the several walkabouts he took in Bunia and also the town of Aru further north during his brief period campaigning in Ituri, he looked calm and at times humbled by the frenetic welcome the people gave him. Yet at other

times, times when he has a moment to reflect, he looks pensive and thoughtful, staring out to the horizon, arms behind his back in quiet contemplation.

"I would like to ask the population of Bunia, of Ituri District, Orientale Province and the whole of the Congo, to move and vote to express their opinion on the 30 July and to put across the hope and needs of the people," he added before boarding his jet.

In a country so vast, Kabila, or whoever will become Congo's president, will have a monumental task on their hands. Change may take decades, and will only come if those in power really want to better the life of the Congolese people.

The accomplishment of the most basic of social services would bring so much. The regular paying of doctors, nurses, teachers and investing in services for the population would begin such a transformation.

And this in turn will perhaps provide the only solution in giving an alternative to all the combatants in Ituri. The DDR programmes are very limited if they integrate former fighters back in to a reality which does not offer them anything. Even if they are taught a skill or a job, a business and the means to start it, if there is no money circulating, then there is no way they will survive; just one of many reasons why the armed groups in Ituri have been able to recruit combatants so easily.

On a larger scale, if the extraction and sale of Congo's vast natural wealth is conducted in a proper and transparent manner, whereby it is taxed and those revenues then filter down so the population reap the benefits, the transformation could reach every corner of the country. Congo's leaders, at all levels, have the responsibility to ensure this happens. This too, though, is a big ask.

"The international community has neither the responsibility of the capacity to change the destiny of the country or the people from here in Ituri," the UN official in Bunia said. "We are just buying time for them, we are hoping the new government will assume these responsibilities. The high expectations people have in these elections is a risk. People, I worry, will be disappointed."

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