

## **DON'T LET THE DRC GO UP IN FLAMES** Election Fears Threaten New Mass Violence in the Congo

By Roméo A. Dallaire, Frank Chalk and Kyle Matthews

“Eat their money, but don't vote them.”

(Advice given by some church and civil society leaders to Congo voters)

Former *New York Times* correspondent Howard French said it best: “Something is wrong in the way we think of Africa.” What’s wrong, French makes clear, is our expectation that Africa’s role is to provide us with “an escalating sense of horror.” That was the story from Rwanda in 1994 and during the Second Congo War (1998-2003) from provinces like Ituri and the North and South Kivu provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

True, it need not always be that way. On November 28<sup>th</sup>, 18 million Congolese turned out to cast their ballots in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s presidential and legislative elections, standing in line patiently for hours in the pouring rain, hoping for the best despite flawed voters’ lists, late deliveries of ballots, and attempts at intimidation. To make the recently concluded election possible, thousands of Congolese staffed 63,865 polling stations, often staying at their posts for days despite poor shelter, overcrowding, and little food or water.

In a perfect world, the Congolese would find their reward. But the DRC is far from a perfect world. It is a complex and a multi-layered country. What began on December 2<sup>nd</sup> as a trickle of stories reporting widespread voting irregularities observed by election monitors of the European Union and the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa has turned into a flood.

The two leading candidates are the sitting president, Joseph Kabila, and Etienne Tshisekedi, nearly 79 years old, who casts himself as a zealous reformer. Citing unacceptable certification of impossibly high rates of voter turnout in multiple locations where nearly all votes went to incumbent President Joseph Kabila, the Carter Center has delivered the coup de grace to claims of a clean Kabila victory, concluding that the provisional election results announced by the DRC’s Independent National Commission (CENI) “lack credibility” and lending credence to opposition charges that Pastor Daniel Ngoy Mulunda, the DRC’s National Election Commission Chair, is biased by his blood relationship to the Kabila family. Ngoy Mulunda certainly did not enhance his credibility

when he proclaimed Joseph Kabila elected as president without providing an independently verifiable list of all poll by poll election results, something he is required to do by Congolese election regulations. The Archbishop of Kinshasa, informed by reports from the Church's election monitors, declared on Monday that the Election Commission's report conformed neither to truth nor justice.

So where do we go from here?

An outbreak of mass violence in the streets of Kinshasa and other large cities in the DRC led by a suddenly unified opposition is a definite possibility. Worrisome signs are everywhere.

According to informed sources in Kinshasa, soldiers belonging to the violence-prone and trigger happy Republican Guards surround the house of Etienne Tshisekedi. More than 3,000 persons, many of them politicians, have fled Kinshasa for Brazzaville, the capital of the neighboring Republic, Congo, and more are fleeing every day. After Tshisekedi instructed his supporters to stand by for further instructions, possibly the prelude to calling them into the streets, the Kabila Government ordered cell phone companies in Kinshasa to block SMS text messaging all over the country until further notice and instituted curfews in Mbuji-Mayi, a Tshisekedi bastion.

In a precautionary move the World Bank and many western embassies encouraged their expatriate staff to leave the DRC even before election results were announced. Leaders of the DRC's Roman Catholic Church, which fielded the largest network of independent election monitors, declared on December 4<sup>th</sup> that the Congo was "a high speed train heading straight for a brick wall, and we feel there is no one to stop it."

Is there anyone to stop the train?

We must not simply turn the page. Canada and other industrial countries will suffer along with the Congolese if the DRC goes up in flames—Canadian mining companies unable to function, progress in public health and other Canadian-funded sectors undone, and an outflow of Canadians and skilled Congolese to safer territory. DRC would again become a safe haven for militias focused on pillage and rape, as well as destabilizing vulnerable neighboring countries like Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda.

How can Canada and other countries work to avoid such consequences?

We recommend the following actions:

1. The election results must not be recognized by other governments, which should pay heed to the excellent advice of British MP Eric Joyce, who chairs the United Kingdom's All Party African Great Lakes group. Joyce was one of the first to allege that President Kabila had stolen the election. He warns that it would be “highly dangerous and irresponsible for the UK Government and the international community to allow this election to be falsely declared in the names of fraudsters and crooks” until the election results are scrutinized and approved through a transparent verification process.
2. Verifying the presidential election result by checking against the *process verbaux*, the minutes from each individual polling station signed by the official election monitors, is crucial. A high-profile panel of senior African leaders--supported by the African Union and the United Nations--should supervise the recount process and, once the winner is determined, mediate disputes arising from the election results.
3. Ottawa and Canadian diplomats in Central Africa, joined by the United States Government, should pressure the Government of Democratic Republic of Congo to protect the lives of all presidential candidates and remind them that the International Criminal Court is already prosecuting politicians from Kenya and Ivory Coast who allegedly promoted or failed to stop political violence. Pre-emptive round ups of political activists in Kinshasa and other cities must stop.
4. Whichever candidate comes out the winner following a peaceful and transparent ballot counting process and mediation, the defeated candidate should be assisted to exit gracefully. Winners and losers need to act on the wise words in Accra, Ghana last July of President Barack Obama: “Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions.”

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