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Congo

Imperialist contradictions

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The double defeat of French and Belgian imperialism is cause for celebration. This is France's first major defeat in Africa since Algeria won its independence in 1963. As for the former colonial power (remember the "Belgian Congo"?), Brussels had just managed to re-build its cosy relationship with the Mobutu dictatorship, when it imploded like a rotten fruit.

Throughout the 1990s, France has repeatedly intervened in its African "backyard." Presidents Mitterand and Chirac supported Rwandan leader General Habyarimana, despite knowing that his regime was planing this century's third major genocide. The French army trained the Rwandan army and the interahamwe militia. When the FPR rebellion started, Paris repeatedly intervened to save Habyarimana.

The summit of this shameful interventionist policy was Operation Turquoise in July 1994. The French army interposed itself to allow the orderly withdrawl of the defeated regime's army and the genocidal militias, which set up a state-within-a-state inside the refugee camps of eastern Zaire. From July 1994 until November 1996, France hoped to use these refugees as a tool for the creation of a new pro-French regime in Rwanda. The spinal column of this new regime could only be Habyarimana's defeated genocidal army. With French support, this rump regime used one million hutu refugees as a human shield, and a source of new recruits. Those media crying so bitterly about the fate of the remaining Hutu refugees in Zaire seem to have forgotten the grand "humanitarian operation" which created that exodus.

Paris supported Zairian dictator Mobutu Seke Seko until the last minute. France helped Mobutu recruit Bosnian Serb mercenaries, apparently through the "good offices" of the National Front of Jean Marie le Pen. Hundreds of French soldiers were disguised as mercenaries, and thrown in to the regime's last desperate counter-attack. Switzerland and Belgium finally decided to deny Mobutu entry. France let him enter, and run his affairs, from his luxury home on the Mediterranean Cote d'Azur.

Who's counting on Kabila?

With the regional "gendarme" backing Mobutu, where did Kabila get sufficient international support for his lightning offensive across the heart of Africa? Mainly from Congo-Zaire's neighbours: Angola, Uganda, and the new regime in Rwanda. The Mobutu dictatorship had been a constant menace to the security of all three countries. Jonas Savimbio's Unita was threatening to bring his rebel troops out of their Zairian bases, and resume hostilities against the government in Luanda. In the East of Zaire, Mobutu provided bases for guerrillas fighting the Museveni government in Uganda, and, of course, the remnants of the genocidal Rwandan regime.

The early victories of Laurent Kabila's Alliance forces in the Goma and Bukavu region were partly due to direct and indirect support from the Ugandan and new Rwandan governments. We can only approve of their aid.

Once the Alliance had taken the initiative, and started making quick headway against a Mobutist army that disintegrated and fled, the United States decided that they were more likely to benefit from supporting the Alliance and Zaire's neighbouring countries, than a dictator who's days of were clearly numbered. Uganda and Rwanda were already priority states for American diplomacy in the region.

The South African connection

South African capital found a common interest in supporting the American initiative. South African mining companies and banks have long had their eye on the copper belt to the north, and Congo-Zaire's Shaba province in particular. South African capital was more than ready to invest in Congo-Zaire, as soon as stability could be guaranteed.

President Nelson Mandela, who's rule is based on a historic compromise with the white capitalist class, was also determined to see Mobutu fall. Partly because of the dictator's previous co-operation with the Apartheid regime in supporting Angola's Unita rebels, and partly because the corrupt, sclerotic Kinshasa regime contradicts the new image of Africa which Mandela wants to promote, so that the continent can reduce its isolation from the global economy, and benefit from it.

Thanks to the compromise between Mandela and South Africa's white capitalist class, the United States now has the possibility of exercising considerable influence over a large part of southern and central Africa.

The Alliance is by no means a puppet of the United States. But Washington will clearly have considerable weight in Laurent Kabila's deliberations in the coming months. Unlike France, the US recognised, and declared, that Mobutu should retire, at a sufficiently early point in the conflict to be (almost) credible. Kabila also knows that it was Washington which blocked France's plan to deploy a multi-national military force in Zaire in November 1996, to prop up the dictatorship.