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“Congo: Turning Point?”

The world’s worst arena of atrocities is also one of the least known. Attracting far less media attention than Darfur and Chechnya, three million people have perished from war and war crimes in the last decade in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly known as the Belgian Congo and Zaire).

There is now hope that the slaughter may finally end. In the second round of Congo’s first arguably free national elections, on October 29, President Joseph Kabila defeated Vice President Jean-Pierre Bemba for the presidency by a resounding margin of 58% to 42%.

But the hope is fragile. Congo is politically split in two. Kabila’s votes came mainly from the Swahili-speaking eastern region, while Bemba won big in the Lingala-speaking west, which includes the capital city of Kinshasa.

Polarization is mirrored by distrust. Officially, Kabila’s victory margin was more than 2.5 million votes – 9.4 million for Kabila versus 6.8 million for Bemba. International observers, including the Carter Center, declared the vote sufficiently free and fair to deem Kabila the clear winner.

Bemba, however, claims his count shows that he won by 52%. Over a million Kabila votes, he argues, were cast in the wrong locations and must be disregarded. Many Lingala speakers support him. Last week, for example, the top cleric in this largely Roman Catholic nation, Cardinal Frederic Etsou, “ask[ed] the international community to abstain from all attempts to impose on the people of Congo he [-- meaning Kabila --] whom they have not chosen as their president.”

So far Bemba, who maintains a well-armed private militia in the capital, has kept his men in their barracks. While saying he “cannot accept” the official results, he promises to “use all the legal channels” to challenge the tally, now under review by Congo’s Supreme Court.

And if legal channels fail? Will Bemba – who until recently led an armed rebel group against the central government – take up arms again? One must hope that his real goal is simply to position himself for a powerful role in a Kabila government.

What happens next will not only be critical for the sixty million people of Congo, it will also be an important test for what could be called a “low intensity” intervention strategy by the international community.

That strategy, in effect for the last several years, has already failed in a fundamental sense: it has allowed millions to die.

Yet there was no political will by governments or electorates in Europe or North America, let alone Russia or China, to mount the massive military intervention that would have been required to save Congo. In view of that reality, “low intensity” intervention was the only available option – short of doing nothing. It may have succeeded at least in limiting the carnage and ending it sooner.

A range of measures were used. South Africa led in brokering a peace process. The United Nations imposed an embargo on arms flowing into armed groups in Congo. A Security Council committee publicly reports on violators and requires neighboring countries to register flights in and out of Congo.

Recognizing that Congo’s “dirty diamonds” help to fund rebel groups, the so-called “Kimberley Process” – a coalition of governments, non-governmental groups and diamond companies – decertified Congolese diamonds from international marketing.

Last December the International Court of Justice found Uganda liable to pay reparations for human rights and other violations committed by Ugandan troops in Congo. The International Criminal Court has opened an investigation of war crimes in Congo. Its first suspect, accused of recruiting child soldiers, is currently in pretrial hearings in The Hague.

The UN sent an armed force of 17,000 soldiers and police to Congo. While too small to keep the peace if widespread fighting were to resume, the UN force has helped to protect civilians in a few trouble spots, and to monitor human rights violations.

For instance, the UN monitors reported that during one four-day offensive in 2002, the rebel group controlled by Bemba committed 117 arbitrary executions, 65 rapes including rapes of children, 82 kidnappings and 27 cases of torture. Bemba, an agile politician, responded by saying that he was shocked, shocked, and by court-martialing a few of his men.

To safeguard this year’s elections, the UN force was supplemented by 1,400 European Union troops in Kinshasa. However, the European troops are scheduled to leave Congo before the end of the year. The UN force mandate expires in February, although it will probably be extended.

Let us hope that these various interventions, combined with war weariness and perhaps with a preference by Bemba to feather his nest in the comfort of the capital, rather than return to the bush, will spare Congo further catastrophe.

But that hope is not a prediction. Americans should pay more attention to Congo in the coming weeks. Has that country at long last reached the turning point, or will it descend once again into the Inferno? And if it does, how will we respond?

Doug Cassel’s commentaries are broadcast on the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM, generally on Wednesdays during the noon hour. Views expressed are personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.