

“Small World” Article for Brandon Sun, Sunday, July 30/06

Election Day in Troubled Congo Watched by World

By Zack Gross

One event that is not entirely overshadowed by the Middle East conflict is today's national election in the Democratic Republic of Congo, once known as Zaire. Nestled in Central Africa, this large country, almost two-thirds the size of Europe and bordering nine other nations, has been the home of poverty, corruption and war and a source of regional instability for more than a generation.

Among the international observers to this election, that boasts thirty-three presidential and almost 10,000 parliamentary candidates, are a contingent of Manitobans – development and church workers and former refugees from the Central African region – who will report on the fairness and efficiency of this first democratic exercise since the country achieved independence from Belgium in 1960.

Historical looters here have included King Leopold of Belgium who declared Congo his personal possession at the end of the Nineteenth Century and Colonel Mobutu Sese Seko who seized power in the turmoil after Independence and ruled Congo corruptly and brutally until 1997. He was deposed at that point by Laurent Kabila, whose son Joseph has more recently ruled the country and is the leading candidate to continue as President.

Since 1998, with at least six other bordering countries involved, a civil war has raged, with the prize being Congo's incredible natural resource wealth, resulting in over four million dead. This conflict, often called Africa's First World War, has contributed to the spread of HIV/AIDS through rape and sexual slavery, and has also featured child soldiering. It has kept a potentially rich nation in poverty.

Under Sese Seko, much of the wealth produced was transferred to his European bank accounts and luxurious villas. More recently, the war has been drawn out by competing armies wishing to extract “blood” diamonds, coltan (an essential component in cell phones), copper, cobalt, oil reserves and forestry products. Congo boasts possession of thirty percent of the world's diamonds and seventy percent of the world's coltan. A plan to use the flow of the Congo River to supply electricity across Africa will need peace and good management to be implemented.

Currently, a 17,000 strong UN peacekeeping force is stationed in Congo, the largest such force worldwide, with a billion dollar budget. While many of the armed factions agreed to share power until the election is decided, Congolese are wary that those who lose in the vote will just take up arms again. The process was given a boost in the week leading up to the election when major militias in the east of the country finally agreed to lay down their arms under an amnesty agreement that would see them ultimately integrate into the national army.

Colonial rule divided up Africa in ways that ensured future conflict. The fifty-six million Congolese represent many ethnic groups, with everyone speaking a variety of tribal languages, as well as French and English. Kinshasa, the largest city and capital near the Atlantic Ocean, is a hot and humid typical West African city and major international trading centre. It has supermarkets and designer shops, skyscrapers and tree-lined boulevards. But war and mismanagement have created a seamier side to the once beautiful city, with uncollected garbage, begging children and dreadful slums.

The country's second city, Lubumbashi, is far to the south in drier, cooler territory. This is mining country, geologically and geographically part of southern Africa. Katanga, this southernmost province, attempted to break away from Congo after Independence, under the leadership of Patrice Lumumba, in part to retain its mining wealth. Amidst high international intrigue, involving the superpowers and the United Nations, this effort ultimately failed, but made for daily front-page news. Today's election may provide some glue to hold the nation together.

Tens of thousands of Congolese are living as refugees, so effectively getting out the vote is seen as a major challenge. If the various factions facilitate the free movement of citizens, rather than impede them, and if all sides abide by a fair result, then, say United Nations spokespeople, this election will be a boost, politically and economically, for all of Central Africa.

If not, and expectations are not always high among the population, given the history of violence and corruption, the whole region will suffer, including Rwanda which is coming out of a dark period and doing well, and Uganda which recently had its own disputed election and faces an on-going war in the North with the Lord's Resistance Army.

This lazy summer July Sunday in Manitoba is a crucial day in the on-going saga of Central Africa.

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