

Document 34/24 (09.04.97)

Source: US Department of Defense Date: 09 Apr 1997 -----

Senior U.S. Defence official testifies on Zaire

*97040901.AAF

(U.S. troops ready if needed for non-combatant evacuation) (2500)

WASHINGTON -- U.S. armed forces have been prepositioned near Zaire "with the sole and publicly stated purpose of conducting a non-combatant evacuation operation" of U.S. citizens, if such action becomes necessary, a senior U.S. Defense Department official told a U.S. congressional committee April 8.

In testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa in the U.S. House of Representatives, Vincent Kern, deputy assistant secretary of defense for African affairs, told the lawmakers: "We have absolutely no intention of intervening in the Zairian conflict or using our forces to influence the events in Zaire. We have no strategic interests in Zaire."

Kern emphasized to the lawmakers that an emergency evacuation of U.S. citizens and personnel from Zaire would only take place if ordered by the State Department.

Following is the Kern text, as prepared for delivery:

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I would like first of all to thank you for the opportunity to be here today and to talk about an important area of considerable interest to us and to the future of Central Africa -- Zaire.

Since the early 1960s, then the Congo and later Zaire has been a focus of African policy for successive administrations. It is important to remember, Mr. Chairman, that Zaire is a complicated and perplexing mosaic of contrasting ethnic groups, competing regional interests, and bewildering political rivalries.

Zaire is Africa's second largest country, about the size of the United States east of the Mississippi River. It has more than 250 distinct ethnic groups speaking hundreds of different languages among its 45 million citizens. Today, however, 35 years after its independence, Zaire stands at the precipice of its most serious political crisis. Zaire is paralyzed by a dizzying economic decline, widening political fissures, and a burgeoning civil war. This crisis stems from a confluence of overwhelming public discontent with the Zairian government, the corrosive effects of 32 years of President Mobutu's autocratic rule, and the influence of regional states.

Before proceeding, it would be useful to digress a few moments and discuss how we arrived at this crisis. Throughout its history, Zaire has never been able to develop a strong national civic society. It has experienced repeated popular revolts and insurrections as various ethnic groups and warlords competed for political power and for control of the country's vast economic wealth.

From Zaire's past, several distinctive patterns have emerged. First, the central government has always been racked by internal fractures that never effectively addressed the systemic issues that gave rise to the repetitive insurrections and conflicts. Second, when confronted with rebellion, the country's leaders consistently turned to external assistance to restore central authority and order. For example, within days of its independence in June 1960 from Belgium, Zaire immediately plunged into chaos when the country's military, the Force Publique, mutinied and the country's richest provinces, Katanga and then South Kasai, declared their secession.

Belgian troops quickly intervened and later the U.N. launched a major peace enforcement operation that forcibly reintegrated these provinces under national control. A few years later, in the summer of 1964, a massive revolt directed from Stanleyville, now Kisangani, rapidly engulfed eastern Zaire and spread to more than one-half of the country. The fledgling government turned to Belgian, South African, and Rhodesian mercenaries and European military assistance to defeat the rebellion. In 1977 and then again in 1978, when Katangan gendarmes invaded the southern province of Shaba from Angola, the government called upon the intervention of the Belgian, French, and an inter-African Francophone force from such countries as Morocco and Chad with U.S. assistance to restore order.

In reaction to the 1964 rebellion, the Commander of the Congolese Army, then Colonel Joseph Mobutu, ousted the Zairian government and assumed full executive powers as head of state. By the early 1970s, his reign brought an element of political stability, minimized the threats to territorial fragmentation, and reduced the influence of ethnic and regional forces. In the process, however, the Zairian people have paid a terrible price. His regime has fostered corruption and political repression and squandered much of the country's wealth.

The average Zairian is woefully poor and much worse off today than his parents 30 years ago. In the late 1980s, our relations with Mobutu's regime began to sour as concerns mounted over Mobutu's human rights record and lack of a political plurality. We worked with our European allies and with key Zairian political leaders to forge a comprehensive transitional political arrangement to bring the installation of a democratically elected government responsive to the needs of its citizens. The transition, initially scheduled for a five-year period, has now dragged on for seven years. Mobutu's intransigence and various regional crises repeatedly delayed the transition calendar and created political paralysis that affects Zaire's ability to address economic and political problems.

During this period, the Department of Defense played a major role training and equipping the Zairian Armed Forces, the FAZ. Thousands of Zairian officers passed through the hallways of U.S. military training centers under our IMET [International Military Education and Training]

program. We also provided military equipment such as vehicles, transport aircraft, and troop support equipment under various security assistance programs.

However, human rights abuses, political and military strife, and Zairian default on loans brought this relationship to a close. We suspended all security and economic assistance to the government of Zaire in September 1991. Since then, we have not provided any training or equipment to the FAZ or the other Zairian security services. The suspension of security assistance has not affected our humanitarian assistance program, however. We continue to provide excess military property and air transport assistance to American churches and NGOs in Zaire. For example, last summer we funded the shipment of medical supplies, clothing, and a tractor donated by the Epworth United Methodist Church of Holland, Ohio, to the United Methodist Church of Lubumbashi.

We also transported \$400,000 worth of medicines provided by the American NGO Americares and the Catholic Medical Mission Board for distribution to Zairian hospitals and clinics operated by Catholic and Protestant church groups in the capital city of Kinshasa and in the interior of the country.

The immediate crisis in Zaire has its roots in the explosion of violence and genocide in Rwanda in 1994. When the former Hutu regime in Rwanda orchestrated the slaughter of as many as 800,000 Tutsis and Hutus, an estimated one million Hutus fled into eastern Zaire ahead of the advancing Tutsi rebel force, the Rwanda Patriotic Army. The former Hutu regime, including tens of thousands of former Rwandan Army soldiers and Interahamwe militia, settled into a vast array of refugee camps along the Rwandan border. The Zairian government authorities, motivated by greed, openly supported the former regime, providing access to weapons and sanctuary that permitted the former regime to launch repeated cross-border incursions into Rwanda.

At the same time, the presence of more than a million Rwandan Hutus proved to be a serious destabilizing factor on the fragile ethnic mosaic of eastern Zaire. The Hutus operated in cooperation with Zairian security forces and other local ethnic groups to kill thousands and deliberately expel up to 300,000 Zairian Tutsis from the Masisi region of North Kivu in an apparent attempt to create a Hutu homeland. Moreover, local Zairian politicians used the Hutus to exploit hostility among the various ethnic groups and the Banyamulenge, a small Zairian Tutsi ethnic group of about 400,000 living for centuries in the highlands of South Kivu. To make matters worse, following a formal Zairian Parliament decision in 1995 to withdraw Banyamulenge citizenship, the Zairian Deputy Governor of South Kivu ordered the 400,000 Banyamulenge out of Zaire. In early September 1996, the FAZ and other ethnic groups began attacking Banyamulenge villages.

The Banyamulenge, fearing the same fate as their ethnic brethren in the north, took up arms last fall and fought back. They joined with other regional ethnic groups who were also displaced by the Hutus as well as disparate political opposition factions to form a loose coalition. This coalition rapidly transcended the Hutu-Tutsi ethnic fault lines and became a more broad-based political entity called the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire.

The Alliance has resolutely pursued a singular and common political goal: the ouster of Mobutu. Laurent Kabila, from the south and leader of [a] long-standing southern-based opposition party, moved from spokesman to become the leader of the Alliance. The Alliance quickly routed fleeing FAZ forces in the Kivus and forced the peaceful repatriation of nearly 700,000 Rwandan refugees. Not surprisingly, the local population and tribal leaders rallied to the Alliance cause. Many Zairians have apparently caught the fever as the Alliance continues to receive significant popular support. In just a few short months, the Alliance has captured almost one-third of Zaire, including its spectacular gain over the weekend, the diamond-producing region around Mbuji-Mayi, and now appears poised to capture the remaining economic treasure chest, the mineral-rich Shaba province and Zaire's second largest city, Lubumbashi.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to address persistent press reports of an Alliance link to the armed forces of Uganda and Rwanda. The Zairians in particular and some of our European allies in general believe that the Alliance is largely an external force created and sponsored by Uganda and Rwanda. We also hear of reports of the presence in eastern Zaire of Ugandan and Rwandan personnel and resources. Both Ugandan and Rwandan officials have admitted publicly that they provided some training and armaments to the Alliance.

It is also clear that an undetermined number of Ugandan and Rwandan soldiers, perhaps demobilized Ugandan soldiers and Rwandan soldiers on extended leave, have been observed participating alongside the Alliance in eastern Zaire. It is useful to point out, moreover, that there is clearly an implied link between Ugandan and Rwandan security interests posed the destabilizing presence of one million Hutu refugees and the massive Zairian popular discontent with the Mobutu regime. However, there is no evidence that leads us to believe that either organized Ugandan or Rwandan units are fighting with or directing the Alliance. Rather than an emphasis on external support, most of the Alliance's success to date can be directly attributed to popular support and the incompetence of Zairian security forces, who loot and flee at the first hint of an Alliance advance.

Of particular concern, we also hear repeated reports of Katangan involvement in Zaire. As I noted earlier, the Katangans, the former gendarmes of Katanga, now Shaba, Province, fled to Angola in the mid-1960s. Since then, the Katangans have become a focal point for persistent Angolan and Zairian meddling in each other's domestic affairs.

On the Zairian side, Mobutu has vigorously supported various Angolan opposition groups with sanctuary and arms. For its part, the Angolan government has frequently dangled the Katangan threat, as in 1977 and then again in 1978. As Kabila's Alliance gained steam in the east, the Zairian conflict and Mobutu's weakness appear to be too tempting for the Angolan government. We believe that Katangans are actively supporting the Alliance, particularly based on reports of well-armed Katangan units fighting alongside the Alliance in eastern Zaire, most notably in the final assault on Kisangani. Moreover, Kinshasa's overzealous press referred last week to a significant presence of Katangans in Angola's Cabinda Province and sounded the alarm of an imminent attack into Bas Zaire. Such an event, if true, would pose serious consequences on the fragile Zairian dynamic.

Meanwhile, the Alliance's remarkable success in the east has exacerbated the inherent paralysis, confusion, and competition among senior Zairian leaders in Kinshasa. Earlier this year, the Zairian government, taking a page from its successes in the 1960s and 1970s, deliberately pursued a policy of military confrontation with the Alliance. It hired hundreds of mercenaries, purchased massive quantities of armaments and weapon systems, and launched a well-publicized counteroffensive. The fall of Kisangani in mid-March put an end to the government's military option. In the capital, unfortunately, there appears to be a stark political vacuum that does not lend itself to a quick resolution of the conflict.

The fall of Kisangani and possible violent repercussions in Kinshasa prompted the U.S. and our European allies to deploy forces into the region in anticipation of a possible non-combatant evacuation operation. In late March, the Secretary of Defense authorized the deployment of approximately 675 U.S. Army special operation troops, helicopters, and U.S. Air Force air liaison teams, or TALCE, and refueling aircraft in the neighboring countries of the Congo and Gabon under the command of Major General Ed Smith. I assure you, Mr. Chairman, that if called upon, our military forces stand prepared and ready to evacuate American citizens from Kinshasa, with the same level of professionalism as was recently exhibited in the evacuation operation from Albania.

As part of this repositioning of forces, the Secretary of Defense also authorized the deployment of a Marine Expeditionary Unit aboard the USS Nassau to the region. The Nassau arrived last week and will shortly assume the mission of the evacuation force. The Nassau provides a more robust capability that will permit the redeployment of some of the JTF assets to their bases in Europe and the United States.

I would like to state firmly here, Mr. Chairman, that the Department of Defense has repositioned forces in the region with the sole and publicly stated purpose of conducting a non-combatant evacuation operation at the request of the Department of State. We have absolutely no intention of intervening in the Zairian conflict or using our forces to influence the events in Zaire. We have no strategic interests in Zaire. In Africa's most volatile zone, we do not wish to tread unnecessarily on fragile ground and put our soldiers at risk.

Lastly, I would like to highlight the contributions of our European allies who have also repositioned forces in the region in anticipation of an evacuation operation. For the moment, the French, Belgians, and British have deployed combat troops, support teams, and aircraft. Each contingent remains under national control and has its headquarters in Brazzaville. Moreover, the Portuguese have placed military aircraft on standby in Portugal. I am happy to report to the committee that coordination and cooperation among the participating forces are excellent. The commanders are sharing information, coordinating plans, working out important technical details that will facilitate a possible evacuation operation. For the moment, there is no intent to conduct a combined operation as each nation retains its sovereign right to evacuate its citizens at the time and location of its choosing.

This concludes my formal statement. I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to talk with you today. I am, of course, available for any questions.