

The Congo: An Opportunity for American Leadership

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The assassination of Laurent Kabila gives peace another chance in Congo, but the moment has to be grabbed. Despite the paranoia in Kinshasa about white conspiracies, America is better placed than anyone to do that. It's an early opportunity for Secretary of State Colin Powell to show a legion of sceptics that the new Administration really does have some diplomatic will and capacity.

The immediate task is to persuade the newly installed President, Mr. Kabila's son Joseph, and those around him, to re-embrace the July 1999 Lusaka peace agreement, which is the only way out of the present mess. Its fundamental principles are disarmament of all armed groups, disengagement of foreign forces, and dialogue on the political future of the DRC.

So far the agreement has proved hollow, freezing the armies in their positions but not stopping the fighting. More than a year later, the promised United Nations peace-keeping mission consists of only 218 unarmed observers. The belligerents have been left in the ludicrous position of policing the cease-fire themselves.

So one of the messiest and ugliest wars in the world continues unabated, with all parties now looking for a return on their investment as the price of their exit. The foreign interveners all want to exact their share of the Congo's treasures.

But continuation of the war risks further heavy loss of life, fragmentation of the country and destabilisation of its nine neighbours and potentially the entire continent. What can be done to stop the misery, and where does the US in particular fit in?

Applying the Lusaka agreement will require leadership. Washington can exert influence over Rwanda, Uganda, Angola and Zimbabwe.

Laurent Kabila's death removes one obstacle. He was dependent on foreign allies, particularly Angola and Zimbabwe; his legitimacy was based on nationalist, anti-Tutsi rhetoric against the "invading forces" of Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi. Joseph Kabila's first reported statements suggest a more constructive approach: the task now is to consolidate that.

Despite the complexity of the situation, and the continuing uncertainty as to who if anyone is exercising real power in Congo, it is possible for the US, with South Africa, to persuade the belligerents back to the peace table. U.S. leverage is strong over Uganda and Rwanda, given Washington's standing as their most prominent and important international backer.

That is not to say the task will be easy. The Ugandan military, like all those fighting in the Congo, has enriched itself on gold, timber and minerals and will be reluctant to relinquish the spoils.

In the case of Rwanda, President Paul Kagame will not withdraw without the disarmament of the genocidal forces that perpetrated the Tutsi massacres of 1994, and found a home and

backing under Laurent Kabila. This means the critical focus for US pressure in new negotiations will need to be the provisions of the Lusaka agreement relating to the disarmament of all armed groups.

What of Kinshasa's allies? Presidents Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Eduardo Dos Santos of Angola have indicated they are tired of fighting; Mugabe's costly involvement in DRC is deeply unpopular at home. And Angola, facing a fresh Unita assault, is afraid of stretching its military resources too far.

Mr. Mugabe is notoriously resistant to western pressure, but Angola must know that a resumption of US support for Unita cannot be entirely discounted from a Republican administration.

The most immediately useful point for Washington to make to Zimbabwe and Angola is a military one. Any provocation now by either of them risks a new military offensive from Rwanda and Uganda, whose military strength has been proved.

A race between rebel groups and their Rwandan and Ugandan sponsors to Kinshasa, with the prospect of yet another unpopular, illegitimate government being imposed, should be the last thing that Zimbabwe and Angola should want.

Since Lusaka was signed, all sides have violated the ceasefire and none has abandoned the military option. An even uglier war of succession looms

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