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Peace Accord Signed in Congo

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

JOHANNESBURG, Dec. 17 — After two weeks of intense negotiations in South Africa, Congo's rebels signed a peace accord with the Congolese government today, hoping to end the war that has ravaged that country and roiled the continent for four years.

Under the power-sharing agreement, Congo's president, Joseph Kabila, will lead a transitional government for 18 months that will pave the way for the country's first democratic elections.

Mr. Kabila will have four vice presidents, one from each of the two principal rebel groups, another from the unarmed political opposition and another from Mr. Kabila's political party.

Cabinet positions and parliamentary seats will also be divided among rebels and opposition parties.

The agreement comes just months after Mr. Kabila signed peace pacts with Uganda and Rwanda, the countries that backed Congo's rebels. Meanwhile, Zimbabwe and Angola, which sent troops to support the government, have withdrawn most of their soldiers.

Government officials in Congo said they were optimistic today, but mindful of the enormous challenges ahead.

Fighting still rages in some parts of Congo and previous peace talks have fallen apart. In coming months the government and rebel armies must put aside their animosities to create a national army.

"The combination of these agreements with these aggressor states and with the rebel movements will pave the way for peace, we hope," Kikaya bin Karubi, Congo's information minister, said in a telephone interview from Kinshasa today.

"I don't see problems ahead, but you can never be 100 percent sure," Mr. Karubi said. "I'm cautious. I just hope everybody is as determined as we are to see peace prevail."

Major hurdles throughout the talks have been guaranteeing the security of rebel officials in Kinshasa, reforming the army and dividing key posts between the factions.

Spokesmen for both the rebel groups and the government said that while today's deal moved toward resolving these issues, the key test would be implementation, particularly on demobilization and reintegration of thousands of troops from the various factions.

"I hope that everybody will be dedicated, or committed, to peace," the secretary general of the Ugandan-backed Movement for the Liberation of Congo, Olivier Kamitatu, told reporters in Pretoria. "The biggest challenge will be the reunification of the army."

Theophilus Mbemba, a member of the government negotiating team, said the time had come for all sides to get serious.

"The Congolese people have suffered much over the past 40 years," he said. "I think now it is enough."