

Kabila Protest Shows Tensions in Congo's Regions

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Reuters

KINSHASA—Congoese police dispersed stone-throwing demonstrators during a campaign visit by President Joseph Kabila to an opposition stronghold, witnesses said on Monday, as tensions build ahead of historic elections.

Opposition supporters in the southern mining town of Mbuji Mayi attacked U.N. and government vehicles traveling from the airport late on Sunday, but the president's convoy was not hit as he entered town after dark, witnesses said.

The violence highlights political antagonism caused by a boycott called by some opposition parties and complaints of irregularities just a week before Congo's first free elections in more than 40 years.

Ahead of Kabila's trip to Mbuji Mayi, leaflets were distributed warning the president against visiting the town, which produces millions of dollars of diamonds every year but lacks electricity and running water.

"Police were dispersing the crowd as we drove into town," an eyewitness told Reuters by phone from Mbuji Mayi on Monday. "We heard there were continued demos in the city after dark."

The eyewitness said police were chasing demonstrators down sidestreets and had fired tear-gas. U.N. officials said the atmosphere in the town remained tense on Monday.

Kabila, favorite to win the July 30 vote, on Monday left Mbuji Mayi, a bastion of the popular UDPS opposition party which has shunned what it calls a fraudulent electoral process.

The election is supposed to draw a line under Congo's brutal 1998-2003 war, which has killed some 4 million people, mostly from hunger and disease. But analysts have warned the campaign could deepen divisions in the vast central African state.

"You might have a situation where the government is not seen as legitimate in all provinces or amongst all ethnic groups. This could create long-term problems of urban unrest or political crises," said Jason Stearns, senior analyst at International Crisis Group.

Antipas Mbusa Nyamwisi, a former rebel leader and one of 33 presidential candidates, told Reuters he was withdrawing his candidacy to campaign for Kabila and "avoid destabilising the country."

Violence in the East

Meanwhile, five members of a family who had fled violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo's eastern Ituri district were killed after they left a refugee camp to fetch food.

“A family of five people were killed, their bodies burned and their houses destroyed,” Ituri district commissioner Petronille Vaweka told Reuters by phone from Bunia.

The weekend killings took place near the village of Gety in Ituri district, just one part of Congo's east where fighting continues despite three years of official peace and the presence of thousands of U.N. peacekeepers.

Gety is home to some 40,000 civilians who have fled recent fighting between U.N. peacekeepers, the Congolese army and militia fighters. U.N. aid workers say about 1.7 million Congolese are displaced, and many millions more will have to vote under the threat of attacks by gunmen.

Despite the official peace, more than 1,000 people still die every day, mostly from war-related hunger and disease. The U.N. agency UNICEF said more than half of those dying are children.

A U.N. official said men from Congo's army, which remains ill-disciplined and is frequently accused of human rights abuses, could be to blame for the five deaths near Gety.

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