

Unloved for trying to keep the peace

Violence has been spreading again, but Congo's rulers still want the UN to go.



FOR the past 11 years UN peacekeepers, now numbering 20,500, the body's largest mission in the world, have been propping up Congo's government and fledgling security forces. So it seems odd, as the government faces a new wave of violence and instability, that it wants to kick away the struts. The UN mission, which costs \$1.4 billion a year, has been widely faulted for—among other things—buckling under pressure in the face of assorted rebels. But if the peacekeepers were to leave in a hurry, Congo could descend again into mayhem. That, apparently, is a risk President Joseph Kabila may be willing to take, in the hope of finally being master of his own house.

During its civil war from 1998-2003, 5m Congolese may have died as a result of violence, disease and starvation. Since then, thanks largely to the UN, the chaos has generally been contained. The UN oversaw two sets of messy multi-party elections in 2006, the first since independence in 1960, reaffirming Mr Kabila as president.

In the past four years the UN mission has tried to help improve governance and security. But standards are still abysmal. Congolese soldiers and rebels habitually rape hapless civilians. Corruption is rife, the courts rotten. The UN reckons that 70% of the country's prisoners, most of them kept in vile conditions, have yet to be tried. Foreign investors remain wary, though an American firm, Freeport-McMoRan, has put \$2 billion into a mining project. The Chinese, less fastidious than most Westerners about human rights or contracts, have been most active.



Fighting continues sporadically here and there. In the east the army is trying to oust Rwandan rebels of the Hutu tribe, who arrived in 1994 as they fled from reprisals after taking part in the

slaughter of some 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis and moderate Hutus. In the far north-east, rebels of a murderous Ugandan messianic cult, the Lord's Resistance Army, still occasionally commit massacres. Elsewhere, especially in the east, various local militias continue to roam menacingly across the country. Earlier this month rebels attacked Mbandaka, capital of Équateur province, an opposition stronghold in the north-west and briefly captured its airport. At least 36 people were killed, including three UN workers. Last week, a particularly unpredictable bunch of rebels captured eight aid workers, one of them Swiss, in South Kivu province (see map).

The UN has been training and supporting Congo's regular forces. It supplies them with food, firepower and transport. The government says its army has improved. It points to the success in defeating the rebels in Mbandaka. Its Belgian-trained commandos also secured the release of a captured Spanish doctor. The government says its army, which has acquired some 40 new tanks, will be ready to take full charge next year. By the by, the government sneeringly accused the UN of failing to protect citizens during the attack on Mbandaka.

Moreover, Congo's rulers say they are fed up with being castigated by foreigners and want to be accorded the dignity due to a sovereign country rather than accept the humiliation of what they say amounts to an indefinite international "trusteeship". So the government says the UN's peacekeepers should start leaving in June, when the country is to mark the 50th anniversary of its independence from Belgium. All UN troops, says the government, should be gone by the middle of next year, before Congo's next scheduled elections.

The UN Security Council, which oversees peacekeeping, may bow to some of the government's demands. The latest plan is to withdraw some 2,000 peacekeepers from about a third of the country's provinces, including Équateur, by the end of June and to remove the whole lot by August next year—after the hoped-for election. The Security Council is expected to vote next month to extend the peacekeeping mandate for another year, alongside a plan for a speedy exit.

The UN's senior representatives in Congo would have preferred the withdrawal to have been spread over three years. The French head of a fact-finding delegation due to visit Congo has warned against a "premature" exit. It is questionable whether Congo's army, which is estimated to number from 130,000 to 155,000, will be able to keep the peace on its own. It is a barely trained amalgam of more than 40 militias. About 60,000 regular soldiers have reached retirement or are close to it but the government has not paid them off. Lobbies such as the Brussels-based International Crisis Group say the government has squandered the help it has been getting from abroad and that the country risks becoming ungovernable all over again.

One reason for Mr Kabila to hesitate before casting out the UN forces is that a strong and unified regular army under a coherent central command could, judging by the past, be tempted to launch a military coup. The president must be mindful that his father, Laurent-Désiré, who held the post before him, was assassinated in 2001 by one of his own soldiers in a failed coup. Kabila fils has a personal bodyguard of several thousand handpicked men, outside the army command, who tend to speak Swahili and hail from the eastern and south-eastern region where he can count on his most loyal support. Most of Congo's regular soldiers speak Lingala, the lingua franca of the west. Mr Kabila still wants Western governments to pour more money into his forces. But there is little co-ordination between the various branches. Whether the UN stays or goes, outsiders are increasingly loth to throw good money after bad.

Fonte: The Economist, Apr. 15th 2010. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 20 abr. 2010.