

The Congolese National Army: In search of an identity

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INTRODUCTION

The Congolese National Army has had one of the most complex, albeit short, histories of any of the world's armed forces. The army was shaped by the Congo's own changing status and often without a sufficiently broad or long-term view of its role. This is why—from the pre-colonial days of Belgian King Léopold II's governorship until today—it has been difficult to establish what the army's role actually was, and is.

This chapter attempts to trace the long and winding history of the Congolese National Army and its search for an identity. This is because an understanding of its history may help the army to formulate a new role for itself that accords with the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC's) intrinsic importance in the Central and Southern African regions and, indeed, in the world. While it is not difficult to trace the pre-independence period (that is, until 1960), the subsequent history has been ever-changing and often obscure, allowing little reliable insight. An additional difficulty has been provided by the secrecy applied to matters relating to the army by the different post-independence regimes. We shall nevertheless attempt to sketch the history of the several armies and militias that were the forebears to today's evolving Congolese National Army.

THE FORCE PUBLIQUE: HISTORY OF A PRIVATE MILITIA

Created on 4 August 1888 by Belgium's King Léopold II, Governor of the Independent State of the Congo, the *Force Publique* was first and

foremost a political and economic instrument of suppression against the Congolese people.

As the Congolese people needed to be coerced to work for the directors and governor (the Belgian King)—the effective owners of the Congo of the time—it was necessary to create a militia for the purpose. This private militia was composed of foreign mercenaries and Congolese, and was trained by Belgian officers. It therefore bore a similarity to a modern example, the South African company Executive Outcomes, which hired itself out for peacekeeping and other quasi-military involvements in various, mainly African, countries.¹

When, in 1908, the Belgian government transformed the Independent State into the colony of the Belgian Congo, the *Force Publique* continued to suppress the native Congolese, whom members of the force called, with contempt, *Basenzi*, which could be translated as ‘wild monkeys’.

In the name of Western capitalist civilisation and philanthropy, the *Force’s* role was to break all resistance to the economic exploitation of the Belgian state. As an instrument for sustaining the Belgian economy during this period, the *Force* spread terror by amputating hands and lashing corpses.²

On the other hand, the *Force* notched up some achievements in the campaign against slavery. And it also had reason to be proud of its contributions to the Allied victories in the two world wars.

During the First World War, the Congo armies of 1916 did a great deal to put an end to German power in East Africa when they drove the enemy from the provinces of Ruanda and Urundi, which were subsequently awarded to Belgium under a League of Nations mandate. In naval operations on Lake Tanganyika, and in a brilliant campaign culminating in the capture of Tabora, the Congo armies materially helped Great Britain to wrest from Germany what became the Tanganyika Territory.

During the Second World War, these armies played their part in liberating the then Abyssinia from Italian rule. Units of the *Force Publique* were transported in barges some 1,600 km up the Congo River to Aketi. From there, the barges were carried by train and truck another 1,300 km to Juba, where they were launched on the waters of the White Nile. The Italian forces were given the impression of facing a much larger force. The mountain fortress of Saïo was cut off from supplies and the Italian commander surrendered with eight other generals and more than 6,000 officers and men to Gen Gilliaert and the combined Belgian and Congo forces. For this and subsequent campaigns, the *Force*

Publique was equipped with American jeeps, tommy-guns and mortars.³ It has to be said, however, that these exploits were undertaken as part of the Allied armies with which Belgium and the *Force Publique* were associated.

THE POST-INDEPENDENCE CONGOLESE ARMY

At independence in 1960, the Belgian commander of the *Force Publique*, Gen Émile Janssens, declared: “After independence equals before independence.” This statement caused a mutiny and a rapid Africanisation of the *Force’s* officer corps.

The ‘Congolisation of the Army’ faced a lack of skills at officer and command levels. Officer ranks were distributed to all non-commissioned officers (NCOs) above the rank of sergeant. These men were instructed to “take their units in hand”. An officer training school was subsequently established at Luluabourg (now Kananga) early in 1961.

A dispute for the top command of the army now arose between the regional and political army supporters of President Kasavubu and Prime Minister Lumumba. The contestants were colonels Lundula and Mobutu, both of whom had been NCOs in the previous *Force Publique*. Col Mobutu emerged as the winner.

On 14 September 1960, under Mobutu’s command, the Congolese National Army—*Armée Nationale Congolaise*—(ANC) suspended the 1959 Brussels round-table constitution.

It was this first coup that gave President Kasavubu encouragement to oppose the legitimate Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba. The constitutional crisis that followed led to Lumumba’s assassination on 17 January 1961.

Before this, the country had already fallen into civil war when, only ten days after independence, the Katanga copper province leader, Moïse Tshombe, backed by his *Gendarmerie Katangaise*, declared Katanga’s secession.

This secession was overcome after the intervention of United Nations (UN) troops. At the same time, the ANC had had to crush another attempt at independence, this time by His Imperial Majesty Kalonji in the Kasai diamond province.

After these secession attempts and after the removal of Lumumba from government and his assassination in Katanga, where he had been taken to his enemy, Moïse Tshombe, a rebellion broke out involving almost half of the country.

As this rebellion was seen as pro-Communist, it was heavily supported by communist countries, with the 'free world' ranged on the government side. Training programmes, armaments supplies and technical advisers from the Soviet Union, China, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Cuba, Mali and Tanzania backed the rebels, while similar support from the United States, Belgium, anti-Castro Cubans and European and South African mercenaries came in on the side of the government.

This civil war lasted from 1963 to 1967. Meanwhile Moïse Tshombé had succeeded to the prime ministership after he had won the legislative elections in the capital, Kinshasa. The conflict between the President and the Prime Minister continued, providing the now Lt Gen Mobutu with the opportunity to overthrow President Kasavubu and to take power on 24 November 1965 "for five years", which, in fact, became 32 years.

PRESIDENT MOBUTU'S DESIGN FOR THE ARMY

Encouraged by the strong support he enjoyed from Western countries in the context of the Cold War, President Mobutu was able to place the ANC, which in October 1971 became the Zairian Armed Forces—*Forces Armées Zairoises* (FAZ), under his sole authority. He personally promoted and dismissed officers, ordered equipment and directed military operations. His posts included Supreme Commander, Commander-in-Chief, President of the Superior Council of Defence and Minister of Defence.⁴ This 'personalisation' of the army led to a façade of legal decisions that regularly attempted to remodel the face of the army at any sign of an internal, political or external crisis that threatened the President's regime. Unfortunately, and in contrast to the objectives he sought to bring about by these numerous perilous legal exercises, President Mobutu was progressively destroying the army that he had so strenuously built up.⁵

The following headings deal with such objectionable practices as the politicisation and tribalisation of the army, the creation of privileged units within the army and the de-professionalisation of the biggest part of the army. This last was in order to benefit some units of the army such as the elite Presidential Special Division (DSP) or Praetorian Guard, the Reinforced Division and the 31st Paratroop Brigade.⁶

POLITICISATION

President Mobutu politicised the army formally through the Defence and Zairian Armed Forces Act of 1977, which placed the army under the

command of “the President of the Popular Revolution Movement [MPR, the country’s political party] and the President of the Republic”.⁷

The party soon transformed the army into a ‘specialised organ’ of the MPR, and the members of the army had to pay homage to the Founding President of the MPR. They were also psychologically conditioned to pledge their allegiance at all times and in all places to their ‘Guide’, the Founding President of the MPR. This period witnessed numerous decrees and other written or oral decisions concerning the army that would end by harming its organisation and professionalism.

Some of the decrees relating to the structure of the army under Colonel, later General and then President, Mobutu were:

- The creation of the ANC on 8 July 1960 with the requirement that Congolese be promoted from the ranks to assume the direction of the army even though they lacked the required skills and experience.
- The incorporation of the National Gendarmerie into the ANC and the subsequent integration on 1 July 1963 of the forces of the former secessionist armies of Katanga and Kasai into the ANC.
- The re-establishment of the National Gendarmerie as a separate body on 31 July 1972 to replace the dissolved National Police, and the subsequent reintegration of the National Gendarmerie into the FAZ. These manoeuvres included the re-appointment of only some members of the National Police, a sweeping adjustment of ranks and the demobilisation of unwanted policemen.
- President Mobutu’s vision for a trusted and nationally and regionally efficient FAZ included the creation, with the assistance of foreign partners, of several high-level training centres in the country. In the 1970s these centres were so successful that recruits came from other African countries, such as Togo, Chad, Burundi, Rwanda, Niger and the Central African Republic. Women also joined the army and performed well even in such special corps as the Paratroops. At this time, the FAZ numbered some 70,000 officers and other ranks. In 1974 the government allocated 5.7% of the country’s gross national product to defence development.
- In 1975 President Mobutu began reorienting the FAZ from an external defence role to domestic law enforcement. The gradual

transformation of the FAZ from objective control to subjective control weakened the armed forces both operationally and organisationally.⁸

- The National Defence and Armed Forces were again reorganised on 1 July 1977. This move was triggered by the ‘moral defeat’ of the forces in the face of aggression by South Shaba (Katanga). But it also signalled the centralisation of all civil and military defence powers into the hands of President Mobutu and the legal integration of the army into the structures of the MPR.
- The Civil Guard was created on 28 August 1984. Its initial mission was to protect borders and national parks, as well as to protect civilians. Some years later and without any legal basis, the Civil Guard—then commanded by Gen Philémon Baramoto, a close tribal member of President Mobutu’s family—was surreptitiously incorporated into the army.

There followed a period during which all branches of the defence organisation were expanded, leading analysts to conclude that the Zairian army had become the second most powerful in sub-Saharan Africa—after the former South Africa Defence Force. This said, however, the strength of the FAZ relied heavily on foreign aid and on foreign training programmes.

TRIBALISATION

To guarantee the loyalty of the army, President Mobutu began progressively appointing members of his own tribal group—and, rarely, some loyal officers from other ethnic groups—to key army posts. His DSP was led and manned by his ethnic Ngwandi brothers and other tribes from the northern area of Equateur province. At the same time, the entire army was subjected to a series of ethnic or tribal purifications on grounds such as fictitious coups. These ‘purifications’ were followed by the summary execution of suspected officers from other ethnic groups. In her book *The Dinosaur*, Colette Braeckman recalls numerous schemes that were part of President Mobutu’s strategy to prevent the regular army from destabilising his regime.

Within this climate of permanent suspicion, Maj Mpika and his fellow officers, just graduated from their American military academies, were in

1977 accused of having fomented a coup with the complicity of the United States (US) Embassy in Congo. And the next year it was the turn of Maj Kalume and his fellow officers, graduating this time from the Royal Military School in Brussels. All were executed in spite of protests from Belgian officers. Later still, the efficient Gen Mukobo, a victim of the jealousy of his colleagues, was relegated for some years to a Kisangani outpost. Then again, Col Mbo—a brilliant Mirage pilot trained in France and now flying transport aircraft—was killed when his Hercules C130 exploded in mid-air not far from Kinshasa under suspicious circumstances.⁹

PRIVILEGED UNITS

As is often the case in an army in the service of a dictator, President Mobutu's army included at least three distinct armies. His Praetorian Guard, the DSP, was under his direct command and benefited from modern equipment and privileged funding and conditions of service. Officially, this division numbered close to 15,000 men, organised into two commando brigades loyal to the president. These men, in excellent physical condition, were trained by senior Israeli officers in Egypt and North Korea. From the DSP, the best candidates were appointed to the famous Dragon Battalion, which was suspected of clandestine operations against students in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi.

The second and third armies-within-an-army were the Paratroop Corps, based in Kinshasa and Kamina, and the Military Operations and Intelligence Service (SARM), to both of which President Mobutu gave particular attention. The Paratroop Corps benefited from special logistical and command support provided through French and Israeli military co-operation. The rest of the 50,000 men of the FAZ were more of a phantom army, with their officers and generals making their living from corruption and illegal practices. These 'soldiers in corners' were mainly left to their own devices. To survive, these vagrant soldiers behaved so extortionately towards the civilians around them that they irreversibly destroyed the healthy relations that should have existed between the military and civil society. Indeed, they created the general discontent that led to the fall of the entire regime, as well as the army.

DE-PROFESSIONALISATION

De-professionalisation manifested itself through a lack of communication between the various structures and branches of the military organisation

and through the overlapping of commands, military forces and specialised services. These manifestations often led to conflicts of influence and power between generals, between military authorities and between members of the MPR.

In this climate of permanent suspicion and conflict, a pattern of patrons and clients soon revealed itself in the army. According to this pattern, each promoted general had an entourage of members of his own ethnic group or tribe, to whom he assigned ranks and other privileges without regard to their qualifications in relation to the other members of the division, battalion or other unit.

ARMED FORCES DEFENCE POLICY, MISSION AND ORGANISATION

The role of the Congolese defence forces is to defend a huge country of some 2,340,000 km²; nearly eighty times the area of Belgium or nearly twice the area of South Africa. The DRC is bordered by nine countries—clockwise from the north-west: Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, Tanzania and Angola—seven of which are from time to time racked by their own internal crises.

Various constitutions—changing with the successive regimes—have been in force since independence. Of these, the most recent, dating from the year 2003, has given the greatest clarity to the status of the country's army, including the roles of the supreme commander and the Defence High Council. The 2003 constitution requires the FAZ to have a fair balance of ethnic groups, good skills, morality, exclusive Congolese citizenship and a minimum age of 18—which definitely excludes the former *Kadogo* (child soldiers) from these forces. The armed forces are constitutionally under civilian control, which means that the military are legally accountable to the nation through these civilian representatives. The roles of the army and of the police are clearly separated in this new transitional constitution.

For the first time in the history of Congo, Parliament democratically debated and, in October 2004, passed the Defence and Armed Forces Organisation Act. By contrast, all previous laws relating to the army were enacted through the will of successive heads of state, who kept full control over the military in their own hands.

Unfortunately, even this new law transformed the Republican Guard into a special Army Corps under the direct order of the President of the Republic.

DEFENCE EXPENDITURE: A TABOO

In the interests of ‘defence secrecy’, the Congolese defence budget was previously not made public. Defence expenditures were also funded from different sources, including the President’s secret allocations and funds provided by public companies. (In addition, some non-defence private and state expenditures were charged to the defence transport, health facilities and housing budget.) Contributions by foreign countries in supplies and training for the Zairian—and later the Congolese—armies were also significant, with the result that the 1.1 % to 5.7 % of Congolese gross national product (GNP) allocated annually for the country’s defence was by no means a reliable figure for the resources actually earmarked for defence.

During the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL) invasion in January 1997, President Mobutu allocated US\$150 million “for the Army’s requirements and its modernisation”. Much of this money was used to pay Serbian, French, Italian and Chilean mercenaries.¹⁰

Later, during the 1998–2000 war, the governor of the National Bank complained publicly that expenditure on defence had reached 80% of all state expenditure.

The defence budget for 2005 is now under preparation. It should include the high cost of integrating and creating a new Defence Force, and of parts of the disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation (DDR) process, which an international consortium of donors (led by the World Bank) is willing to fund to the tune of US\$150 million.

ZAIRIAN FOREIGN MILITARY INTERVENTIONS**ANGOLA**

As the protector of “Western ideological interests in central Africa”, President Mobutu committed two FAZ brigades to the 1970s’ war in Angola on the side of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola’s (FNLA’s) Holden Roberto, against the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola’s (MPLA’s) Augustino Neto. This intervention ended in disaster for the former and a victory for the Soviet- and Cuban-backed MPLA. In the opinion of the Zairian officers:

the failure of the operation was due to FNLA leader Holden Roberto’s refusal to order the final offensive on Luanda, while the Soviets and the Cubans had organised one of the largest airlifts of arms in history.¹¹

A decade later, and again with respect to Angola, the government of Zaire was engaged in long-term military support for the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola's (UNITA) Jonas Savimbi. This support took mainly the form of providing an arms transit link with the Kamina airbase, which was a secret US Central Intelligence Agency operation exposed by the *New York Times* in 1987.¹²

OTHER OPERATIONS

Congolese troops offered efficient military assistance to many African countries or regimes in their times of crisis. Examples of these countries were Nigeria and Burundi in 1971, Chad in 1982–83, Togo in 1986 and Rwanda in 1990.

In 1971 Congolese troops helped the Nigerian army to end the Biafran secession. In the same year President Michombero from Burundi benefited from the assistance of Congolese troops to restore his government.

In 1982 the government of President Gukuni Weddei of Chad was threatened by the invasion of his country by Libyan forces backing powerfully armed northern rebels. When the French tactical air operations could not stop the rush of the invaders to the capital town of N'djamena, Zaire offered its army to counter the invasion, with the logistical support of Washington and Paris.

Three Zairian battalions were deployed—one in N'djamena in the centre of the country, one in Musuro in the west, and the third in Abeche in the east. They were provided with their own air cover by Zairian Airforce Mirage-Vs.

The Chad mission marked a success for the Congolese forces. Even though they were not trained for desert operations, these forces pushed the enemy back to the Libyan border.¹³ In 1986 Congolese forces were sent in support of Togolese President Eyadema after an attempted coup. In 1990 Congolese paratroopers helped Rwandan President Habyarimana to counter an insurgency and to stop a Rwandan Patriotic Front (APR) invasion of Rwanda from Uganda.

CIVIL–MILITARY RELATIONS: FROM 'FORCES OF ORDER' TO 'FORCES OF DISORDER'

From colonial times, the Congolese defence forces have always been involved in domestic policing activities, even when they had no training

for this type of work. The country's separate police force was abolished in 1972 and replaced by a gendarmerie and, in 1982, by a civil guard, both of which were integrated into the defence forces.

Although the police force was re-established in 1997, it was still regarded, even for its domestic role, as inferior to the defence forces, whose officers and men near retirement age often end their careers in the police force.

The belief that the army was empowered to use force against any civilian was born during the colonial period and stayed with the Congolese people long after independence. Even today, the military forces are viewed with suspicion because they continue to be used to enforce politically motivated policies that are generally unpopular. Many people denigrate some soldiers as 'owls'; a cultural reference associated with witchcraft.

In the days of the *Force Publique*, military personnel lived in barracks and operational areas that were generally out of bounds to civilians. As descendants of the *Force Publique*, the *Forces Armées Congolaises* (FAC), later the FAZ, as well as today's armed forces of the DRC have retained this aura of not being part of the rest of the population.

In the same way as the colonial forces, the FAC was regarded as a self-centred and heartless body of men trained to fight and kill. It was an instrument of repression and, because of this, most Congolese were convinced that there was nothing to be gained from associating with its members. If anything, the army forces were to be avoided at all costs. The military was seen as the enemy of the ordinary people; and this hostility was worsened by the actions of the national intelligence network, which stamped out any dissent.

THE IMPACT OF CONDITIONS OF SERVICE

As in many other African countries, several coup attempts in Congo were engineered by an alliance of civilians and military personnel. Indeed, on several occasions civilians and disgruntled military officers teamed up to remove regime leaders from office.

There was also discontent within the military. Low and irregular pay was the primary cause for the army's criminal behaviour. Only the highest-ranking officers and the presidential units received sufficient pay to allow them to maintain a basic level of subsistence. Most officers and other ranks received wages that were insufficient to feed and clothe their families, and they often went for months without being paid.

As a result, members of the defence forces often exploited or even stole from the local community in order first of all to make ends meet, and then to enrich themselves—which was a sure formula for the breakdown of trust between the military and the civilian population. As one example, paratroopers who had not been paid went on the rampage in Kinshasa in September 1991, and their action was followed by widespread looting throughout the country.

With some units led by Congolese Army Gen Mahele, France and Belgium sent in troops to restore order and to protect foreign citizens. Another wave of military-led pillaging and looting occurred in early 1993 following the introduction of a new Z5 million banknote that many merchants had refused to accept from the military personnel who had been paid with it. Less serious, but nonetheless routine, looting has continued, to the extent that many citizens have been prepared to pay the ‘contributions’ demanded by soldiers as the price for being left alone.

THE ARMY’S CONSTRUCTIVE ROLE

It should not be forgotten that the FAZ has from time to time also played a constructive role in its own country, through, for example, its participation in various civic action programmes. There was the occasion during a joint Zairian–US military exercise when Zairian engineer units built a number of bridges in the Shaba region that restored vehicular travel between some towns for the first time in ten years.

At the request of the government, army engineers also quickly and cost effectively repaired damaged university buildings. In 1976, also, the military health service rescued people in the area of Yambuku near Bumba who had been affected by the lethal Ebola virus, while the same service subsequently participated in several anti-epidemic missions throughout the country.

Later, in 1997, President Laurent Kabila created the National Service, which was a paramilitary corps tasked with providing the army with food and with training the youth in a range of reconstruction and developmental activities.

ARMED CONFLICTS DURING PRESIDENT MOBUTU’S REGIME, AND ANGOLA’S REVENGE

The rundown and disorganised state of the army gave the Congolese no confidence in either of its twin roles, which were to defend the

Congolese territory and to secure a military victory over a potential enemy.

The army's structural and operational insufficiencies became apparent on 8 March 1977, when armed elements of the National Front for the Liberation of Congo (FNLC) launched an attack from Angola on the mineral-rich Zairian province of Shaba (Katanga). It was only through the intervention of the Western community that the army and the regime it was supposed to protect were saved. In this case, the rationale for the Western mobilisation was the Cold War that had divided the world into two opposing blocs.

A year later, in 1978, there was a similar scenario when the 'Second Shaba War' was fought successfully, only because of military assistance provided by the West, Morocco and Israel.¹⁴

Similarly, again, Zaire was able to obtain co-operation in times of crisis from Taiwan and South Korea—something which more than anything else illustrated the masterly way in which the Mobutu regime was able to play the big powers off against one another in the context of the Cold War, and the strategic position and minerals and other riches of Zaire.

KABILA'S AFDL FORCES

At the end of 1996, Laurent Kabila launched a flash liberation war from the Kivu region that ended with the capture of Kinshasa on 17 May 1997. The attacking force totalled some 40,000 AFDL troops including contingents of Congolese, Rwandans, Erytreans, Somalis, Ugandans, Tanzanians, Kenyans and Ethiopians. The aim of this force was to liberate both the Congo and all African countries under dictatorships. In the south, the AFDL received strong military support from Angola.

No holds were barred to serve Kabila's objective of overturning the Mobutu regime, and child soldiers were not only recruited into the AFDL forces but also led many of their most dangerous operations. Gen James Kabarehe—a Rwandan officer, now his country's chief of staff—was appointed the first commander of the FAC. His special mission was to track down the Rwandan Hutu refugees who were assumed to have been responsible for the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994. Although the FAC then continued to hold power in Congo, it had no legal framework between 1997 and 2002.

Kabila's AFDL forces rounded up some 40,000 members of the previous regime's FAZ force and confined them to a concentration camp

at the Kitona training base 500 km south-west of Kinshasa. No fewer than one in ten of these FAZ members died of starvation and lack of medical care. In their frustration, generals of the former FAZ said of the AFDL army:

Today, even more than yesterday, our country looks like a giant castle located in a forest. In the castle enormous wealth is stored, but the castle has no security system, no fence, no rampart and no guards, and the naive owner relies on the goodwill of thieves.¹⁵

THE FIRST AFRICAN WORLD WAR

After the Congolese alliances with foreign troops ended in 1988 due to a disagreement on the apportionment of political leadership positions, the Banyamulenge group created the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD), or the Congolese Democratic Assembly, allied to Rwanda. The RCD launched its revolt from Goma in August 1998. Some months later, another rebel force, the *Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo* (MLC), or the Congo Liberation Movement, emerged in the north-west of the country. Later on, too, a smaller rebel group, the Mai-Mai Resistance Movement, was formed in the east of the country to support the government forces against the RCD (Goma) troops in Kivu.

In this new war, the government forces suffered from a shortage of skilled officers, while the RCD and MLC forces were trained and supported by Rwandan and Ugandan officers. The two rebel forces invaded half of the country, and my mid-August 1998 the RCD Goma troops were threatening the country's capital town, Kinshasa, after launching an epic 2,500 km air attack on the Kitona training base.

Three Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries then came to the assistance of the government forces—Zimbabwe with 11,000 troops, Angola with perhaps 10,000, and Namibia with perhaps 2,500—and in a quick counter-attack were able to repulse rebel troops that had already entered the capital from the east.

The Zimbabwean Air Force played a decisive role in the war. Zimbabwean Air Group Captain Chingono said:

In many cases we were left with no choice but to strike at rebels hiding out in churches, and these attacks caused substantial structural damage to the buildings. During the battle to defend Kinshasa, the rebels failed to appreciate the effectiveness of air power in any conflict.¹⁶

According to Kumar Rupesinge, the military intervention in the DRC by these three SADC countries was not cleared by the membership of SADC as a whole, and this caused a crisis in the political relations between President Mugabe of Zimbabwe and President Mandela of South Africa.¹⁷ When Burundi troops backed the rebels along Lake Tanganyika, three countries—the Central Africa Republic, Chad and Sudan—gave strong support to the government forces. Some analysts then dubbed this Congolese crisis as the first ‘African world war.’¹⁸

INTER-CONGOLESE DIALOGUE: THE HARDEST MILITARY NEGOTIATION

Failing to conquer more territory and under pressure from the international community, the various armed factions in Congo negotiated the Lusaka Accord in July 1999. This Accord ended the war and mapped out a new institutional framework for the country and for new DRC defence forces.

From then until 2002, Congolese leaders met on several occasions in different cities in Africa to debate the implementation of the Lusaka Accord. While political issues were ultimately agreed at Sun City in South Africa, culminating in the Pretoria Inter-Congolese Dialogue, military issues required longer negotiation.

The main military obstacles were the different viewpoints put forward by government and rebel representatives relating to the formation of a single defence force. The conflicting concepts presented were whether there should be ‘integration’ or ‘restructuring’. The first would entail the ‘fusion’ or ‘absorption’ of rebel forces into the government army, while the second would require the government army and other forces to negotiate the shape of a single force made up of all their various components.

Congolese civil society participated in these negotiations and played a key role both in drafting the basis of a common understanding for the shape of an entirely new defence force, and in backing the combined South African–African Union–UN mediation team.¹⁹

The Inter-Congolese Dialogue led to the creation of a new command structure of the army. According to Lt Gen Motau, the South African defence mediator at the dialogue: “All the armed factions are represented in such a way that no single faction can control a part of the command chain and so use its position to harm other factions.”²⁰

The sharing of positions in this command structure was another tough issue, with the government wanting to retain the key posts of chief of

staff and chief of the ground forces, as well as the command of the crucial military regions of North Kivu and South Kivu. The rebels objected, reminding the government representatives that: “No party won the war.”

Ultimately, the posts of chief of staff and chief of the air force were allocated to the government, while RCD (Goma) was allocated chief of the ground forces, and the MLC chief of the navy. The regional military commands were shared fairly between all the forces (government, the three RCD factions, the MLC and Maï-Maï).²¹

The current membership of all the armed forces to be integrated into the defence force totals some 345,000. The DDR national plan aims to demobilise almost half this number, but the integration process—which will shape the individual and the army profiles—is still in the conception stage.

INTEGRATING THE CONGOLESE ARMED FORCES

As well as the above-mentioned forces involved in the defence force integration process there are five Ituri militias—the UPC, FAPC, FNI/FRPI, Pusic and the FPDC. Other combatants who went into exile will also benefit from the integration. They are mostly in the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), Angola, Benin, Chad and several European countries. Their number is estimated at 20,000. No quotas have, however, yet been agreed for their integration into the new defence force. The integration plan requires a gradual establishment of the defence system at four levels.²²

- The territorial defence forces will be called the Coverage Force and will be made up of light infantry brigades under regional commands throughout the country.
- A quick response force will also be made up of brigades. It will be characterised by mobility, firepower and flexibility, and it will be able to be deployed in any part of the country within 72 hours.
- The main defence force will be organised and equipped as the main arm of the country’s defence strategy. It will comprise some heavy armoured divisions.
- The air force and navy will be developed and equipped to allow them to carry out their respective duties.

The new Defence Force Headquarters' schedule provides for:

- The immediate setting-up of the Coverage Force and its integration and training by June 2005.
- The creation of the Quick Response Force in the short-term (2005–2007).
- The creation of the Main Defence Force in the medium- to long-term (from 2007). The UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) and an international UN committee will establish guidelines for the integration of this force.²³

CHALLENGES FOR THE NEW CONGOLESE DEFENCE FORCE

The challenges facing the new Congolese Defence Force include:²⁴

- erasing all links with former force leaders;
- providing a training programme for the under-disciplined Mai-Mai;
- disarming armed Hutu refugees and Ituri militia;
- preventing hostilities at the Kivu borders;
- combating the proliferation of illegal arms; and
- building a republican army capable of defending the huge country.

In order to speed up the formation of the new army, the following co-operation accords have been concluded:

- with Belgium, which has already trained and equipped a combat brigade for Ituri;
- with South Africa, which is advising on the process;
- with Angola, for training new integrated brigades; and
- with the US and the Netherlands, which have additional and different inputs.

In May 2004 senior members of the military from SADC countries, led by Botswana Chief of Staff Lt Gen Fisher, met their Congolese colleagues in Kinshasa for discussions on the creation of a basis for the constructive exchange of experiences.²⁵ In addition to this programme and with the support of several donors, the DRC government is developing a DDR plan for about 200,000 combatants and 25,000 child soldiers.

CONCLUSION

Until now, the Congolese people have been excluded from policy and other decision-making affecting the country's military institutions. No one outside the High Command has known anything about the composition or organisation of the army, or its command structure, or its budget. Owing to this, the army did not have a healthy relationship with the civilian government or the population as a whole. The actual relationship, indeed, was constantly contradictory and was marked by the army's repression of the population.

Emerging from this state, today's politicians—as well as the Congolese people as a whole—are anxious for change. They want to see the creation of a republican army that both respects and earns the respect of the civil authorities. The population has had a serious interest in the debates on army issues that started with the 1991–92 Sovereign National Conference, and which continued with the Inter-Congolese Dialogue and the present debates in the Senate and in Parliament.

Both the Congolese people and the army professionals are seeking to establish the army as an institution that:

- stabilises the state;
- ensures people's security;
- protects the country's institutions and its sovereignty;
- secures the integrity of the country's borders; and
- contributes to the stability of neighbouring countries.

All dream of an army whose principles support the ideal of security for the population. This explains the relentless way the Congolese people are debating the questions relating to the new army and its restructuring. There is an almost universal desire for an army that will bear no resemblance to the armies of the Belgian king, the Belgian colonial government, President Mobutu and presidents Kabila, father and son.

The first step in the development of the country's defence and national security system is the formation of what is called the 'New Congolese Restructured and Integrated Army'. The process should then continue until this body develops into a national institution that is both republican and apolitical. Wrong directions would include:

- papering over the present cracks, either by a simple unification of the military commands, or by the redeployment of present units so that they are blended in ways that would represent only adjustments; and

- fusing the various armies and militias. This would merely disguise the certainty of an eruption sooner or later that would bring about a new and possibly even more disastrous war, and whose outcome would be a victory for one faction or another that would probably lead to a new military dictatorship.

Instead, what we have to achieve is the creation of an entirely new army with an ideology, structure and organisation unlike anything that has previously existed in the DRC.

NOTES

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