

# 'All-out war' feared as Congo goes to the polls

**As the campaign for the Nov. 28 election becomes increasingly violent, Canada is criticized for sending only six election observers**

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JOHANNESBURG — One of Africa's biggest and most unstable countries is sliding toward a resurgence of armed conflict as a crucial election campaign is increasingly tainted by fraud allegations and violent clashes.

Few people are expecting a fair vote on Nov. 28 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and analysts predict that the mounting distrust is likely to trigger more violence after the election. Up to five million people have died since 1998 in Congo in one of the world's bloodiest civil wars.

Despite the danger signs, the international community has cut back its support for Congo's democratic process after providing massive funding for Congo's first-ever democratic election in 2006. The Canadian government is facing criticism for sending only six observers to monitor the election in a vast country of about 72 million people and 62,000 voting stations.

Congo, formerly known as Zaire, is one of the most mineral-rich and strategically important nations in Africa, attracting billions of dollars of investment by Canadian mining companies alone. A fragile peace agreement was reached in 2003, but fighting has continued in eastern Congo since then, with private militias and

President Joseph Kabila has lost popularity since the last election, and the opposition is stronger, analysts say. The main opposition candidate, Etienne Tshisekedi, has drawn up to 80,000 people at his rallies.

But there are concerns that Mr. Kabila will not permit a free election. Police have disrupted or halted many of the opposition rallies with brutal tactics. Four consecutive rallies by Mr. Tshisekedi's party have turned into violent battles with police, who have fired tear gas and beaten and arrested opposition supporters. Regardless of who wins the election, many observers expect the losers to take to the streets, sparking a new war.

The U.S.-based Carter Center, which is monitoring the Congo election, warned that the campaign has been plagued by "serious incidents of intimidation and violence." In a statement this month, it said there are "serious threats" that must be addressed immediately if the election is going to be held on schedule.

It noted that political activists have attacked each other and set fire to buildings and vehicles. "Reports in the media of youth mobilization, possibly armed, suggest that political parties are not competing in good faith in the electoral process and raise the spectre of increased election violence," the Carter Center said.

Fraud is another serious concern. With barely a month remaining in the campaign, Congo's election commission has refused to disclose details of the voter registry, the vote-counting system, or even the planned location of the polling stations. By some estimates, there could be two million invalid names among the 32 million voters on the registry, including children and government soldiers. Opposition parties and civil society groups are demanding an audit of the voter registry — a demand the government has rejected so far.

Jonas Kabiena, co-ordinator of a network of about 200 civil society groups in Congo, says the election commission is so far behind schedule in its preparations that it cannot possibly organize a free and fair election by next month. There is a great risk of violence and chaos if the commission pushes ahead with the election on Nov. 28, he said.

Glenys Babcock, a Canadian policy analyst who travelled to Congo this month, said the situation is deteriorating. "There will be violence after the election," she said. "The possibilities range from a few deaths to all-out war, depending on the outcome of the election."

The European Union and the Carter Center are training or deploying more than 400 observers in the lead-up to the election, but many analysts say this is severely insufficient for a huge country with few roads and poor communications.

Liberal MP John McKay said the team of six observers that Canada is sending to Congo is much smaller than Canada's contribution to elections in other countries, even though Canada has "serious economic interests" in Congo. It shows that Africa is being neglected in Ottawa's policies, he said.

"Canada is prepared to engage in a very robust fashion in a military mission like Libya, but it's far less robust when it comes to aid and diplomacy," he said.

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