

## Africa Report by Linda de Hoyos

### Congo's New President Comes to Washington

*The assassination of President Laurent Kabila has brought about a danger of the partitioning of the Congo.*

**T**he actions of the new President of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Joseph Kabila, leave no doubt that the murder of his predecessor, and father, on Jan. 16 was a fully planned assassination from the top down. In the days since he has taken power, Joseph Kabila has taken steps to reopen negotiations to end the three-year war in the Congo, which now involves the armed forces of seven African countries.

Since his swearing in, Joseph Kabila, under the apparent direction of Foreign Minister Leonard She Okitundu, has made clear signals that he wants to bring an end to the war that has engulfed the country. The war began when Uganda and Rwanda invaded the Congo in August 1998, in a bid to overthrow Laurent Kabila, whom they had forcibly imposed on the Congo in May 1997. When Kabila began purging the Rwandans from his Army officer corps, Rwanda and Uganda invaded the Congo. Kabila responded by calling upon Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia to come to his country's defense.

Two and a half years later, the war in the Congo now pits Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi on one side, and the Congo government, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Angola on the other. In the ensuing period, it is estimated by the International Rescue Committee that 1.7 million Congolese have died as a result of the war in the eastern Congo, where Uganda and Rwanda have imposed a brutal occupation.

In the immediate days before the murder of Kabila, the Rwandan troops had managed to seize the town of Po-

weto in copper-rich Katanga, expanding their territory.

Behind the Ugandan and Rwandan armed forces in eastern Congo stand various companies of foreign powers, which are reaping the benefits of the cheap mineral wealth now flowing out of the country toward points east. These include Canada's Banro Resources and Barrick Gold. The British government is Rwanda's largest donor and has embarked on a program to anglicize the former Belgian colony which, until the Rwandan Patriotic Front's military seizure of control over the government in 1994, was French-speaking.

Not until December 2000 did the international community take any action against the wholesale looting of eastern Congo by means of the Ugandan-Rwandan-Burundian forces. In late December, the United Nations Security Council finally called upon Uganda and Rwanda to leave the country.

The occupation of nearly two-thirds of the Congo by the British-backed eastern nexus has proceeded under the cover of the Lusaka Accords, signed by all parties in July 1997. The accords, orchestrated by Washington diplomats under the direction of then-Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Susan Rice, gives full credence to the bizarre claims of Rwanda and Uganda that they must occupy two-thirds of their neighbor's territory for "security reasons."

In the face of this travesty, Laurent Kabila took a stand of intransigence, while also severely oppressing any po-

litical opposition in the areas of the country under his control, causing the body politic in Congo to disintegrate even further.

His son Joseph is now making a bid to reopen channels that had previously been closed. Upon the invitation of U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.), Kabila traveled to Washington, where he attended the National Prayer Breakfast of the U.S. Congress on Feb. 1. The invitation had been backed by a letter of condolences sent by President George W. Bush to Joseph Kabila, which addressed the Congolese head of state as "Mister President" and expressed a desire to reopen relations.

On the evening of Feb. 2, a reception was held in Kabila's honor, sponsored by the Corporate Council on Africa, whose chairman is Maurice Tempelman. Tempelman, a patron of the Africa-America Institute of New York, is a Belgian diamond dealer who conducted major business operations in the Congo during the era of President Mobutu Sese Sekou.

At the same time, and not coincidentally, Paul Kagame, the President of Rwanda, was in Washington, and was also invited to the National Prayer Breakfast. He and Kabila met and discussed the prospects of negotiations for a peace settlement, although no details of their discussion have been reported.

The swiftness of the volte-face in the Congolese government leaves no doubt that the murder of Laurent Kabila had been long prepared for. The danger now is that a peace deal for the Congo will be contingent upon the government's acceptance of a de facto partition. If this is the case, either the war will continue in its current form, with terrible consequences for the Congolese people, or a partitioning will bring about not only more war, but the threatened disintegration of many more African nations to come.