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Democratic Republic of Congo (1996 - 2005)

Mobutu Sese Seko ruled Congo, which he renamed Zaire, and has now been renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for more than three decades, from 1965 to 1997. Mobutu's kleptocratic and autocratic rule impoverished the nation, but the war that led to his ouster grew out of conflicts in neighboring countries. Between 1996 and 2005, an estimated 3.8 million people died from the war in the DRC. Millions more were displaced from their homes. At times, more than a dozen substantial armed groups operated within the country, and smaller groups also proliferated. The fighting was financed to a large extent by the natural resource wealth of the DRC, including diamonds, gold, oil, timber, and coltan (a valuable mineral used in the manufacture of computer chips).

In the wake of the Rwandan genocide and war of 1994, hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees fled to neighboring Zaire. The Hutu militias that had carried out the genocide continued to operate out of the refugee camps, perpetrating cross-border attacks. The new Rwandan government, supported by the Ugandan army and Zairian Tutsis, attacked the camps. The fighting subsequently spread. Finding the Zairian military weak and lacking in popular support, Congolese opponents of Mobutu and their external allies fought their way across the country to the capital, Kinshasa, where they installed rebel leader Laurent Kabila as the new president in 1997. Mobutu fled to Togo and then Morocco, where he soon died of cancer.

Within months, the governments of Rwanda and Uganda has grown dissatisfied with Kabila and fomented a rebellion against him. But the new president had military support from other African governments, including Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe. Backers of the new regime were rewarded for their help with mining rights and contracts.

By 1999, with the war having reached a stalemate, the foreign forces agreed to a ceasefire. A United Nations observing and peacekeeping force, MONUC, was established. Laurent Kabila's son, Joseph, became president when his father was assassinated in early 2001. Negotiations for the withdrawal of foreign troops proceeded.

As external troops were withdrawn, fighting intensified in some areas among warlords and rebel groups who were not party to the negotiations. In the gold and coltan-rich northern Ituri Province, in particular, the pullout of Ugandan troops sparked fighting between the Hema and the Lendu militias that previously had been armed by the Ugandans, prompting deployment of French peacekeepers to Ituri.

Peace negotiations led to agreement to form a transitional government in 2003. A new constitution was passed by parliament in 2005 and ratified by voters, paving the way for presidential elections that returned Joseph Kabila to power in 2006.

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Timeline

1960 - Congo becomes independent from Belgium

1965 - Mobutu takes power in coup

1971 - Mobutu renames the country Zaire

1994 - Genocide in neighboring Rwanda, refugees flee to eastern Zaire

1996 - Rwandan-backed forces attack Hutu refugee camps, push into Zaire

1997 - Laurent Kabila leads rebels to Kinshasa, ousts Mobutu and becomes president

1998 - Rwandan, Ugandan-backed rebels retake much of DRC; Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia back Kabila

1999 - DRC and foreign governments with troops in DRC sign Lusaka ceasefire accord, but fighting continues

2000 - MONUC begins peacekeeping mission

2001 - Laurent Kabila assassinated; his son, Joseph, becomes president

2002 - Uganda and Rwanda pull back troops

2003 - new constitution creates transitional government; Ugandan troop withdrawal sparks ethnic fighting in Ituri

2005 - Parliament adopts a new constitution

2006 - Presidential elections; Joseph Kabila declared winner in run-off