

After Elections, What Now for Congo?



Electoral commission workers tally ballots at a polling station

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This is IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English.

This week, people in the Democratic Republic of Congo voted for president and parliament.

On Friday, President Joseph Kabila took an early lead in the vote count. Election officials have said they will publish the full results by Tuesday, when his term ends. Some of his ten opponents want the votes cancelled.

Parliamentary results are not expected until January.

Human Rights Watch says election-related violence killed at least eighteen civilians and seriously wounded one hundred others. The government says it is preparing for the possibility of more violence after the results are announced.

The United Nations urged calm after international observers reported widespread voting problems. African observers considered the election a success.

The huge central African country was supposed to vote just on Monday. But voting continued through Wednesday after ballots and voter lists failed to arrive at some polling stations.

Congo is no stranger to violence. The country formerly called Zaire has faced international pressure to stop an epidemic of rapes. Five years ago it passed stronger laws against sexual violence.

Then, in February, a military court in eastern Congo sentenced an army commander to twenty years in prison for crimes against humanity. Lieutenant Colonel Kibibi Mutware was found guilty of sending his troops on New Year's Day to rape, beat and steal in Fizi.

The United Nations noted it was the first time a high-level DRC commander was arrested, tried and sentenced for conflict-related sexual violence. Judges also sentenced three of his officers to twenty years, and five soldiers to long sentences as well.

All sides in the DRC have long used sexual violence as a weapon of war. This woman told her story to reporter Heather Murdock.

WOMAN [in Swahili]: "I was married and I was pregnant. Rebel soldiers came to loot and they raped me. [They] killed my baby and now I have a disease."

Officials and activists agree that the situation is better now in eastern Congo. Congo's two thousand six rape law has made a difference. The central prison in North Kivu is crowded with men found guilty of rape. But lawyers and victims say lawlessness in the countryside means many rapists go unpunished.

North Kivu's Justice Minister Francois Tuyihimbaze Rucogoza says most of the victims live deep in lawless rural areas. But he says the rape law has slowed the rate of attacks.

FRANCOIS TUYIHIMBAZE RUCOGOZA [in French]: "The military helps impose justice in places we cannot go. For example, where there is a military operation, they help us punish the perpetrators of sexual violence."

At the same time, officials say international pressure to stop the rapes in Congo has had an unintended effect. The law, they say, establishes no difference between sexual violence and sex under the age of eighteen.

Yet when younger girls get married, that means their young husbands are technically guilty of rape. This prisoner named Kakule says he is guilty only of marrying young and not being able to pay a dowry.

KAKULE: "I went to my girlfriend's family to propose marriage, but I had nothing to give for a dowry. When her family realized we were still together, they accused me of rape."

Aids workers and victims say the only real way to stop the rapes is to end the many years of conflict that Congo has suffered.

And that's IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember

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