Democratic Republic Of Congo Essay, Research Paper

Democratic Republic of Congo: A country torn by War

In October of 1996, an uprising in Eastern Zaire grew into a wider anti-Mobutu rebellion led by veteran guerrilla fighter Laurent-Desire Kabila. He was leader of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of the Congo. Kabila’s army continued to grow and on May 16, 1997 Mobutu relinquished power and fled the country . Kabila then declared himself head of state and changed the country’s name from back to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Soon after the fall of Mobutu, Kabila’s regime was facing widespread accusations of human rights abuses and corruption. Uprisings in 1998 then plunged the country into another period of anarchy, which was aggravated by the involvement of Uganda, Rwanda and Zimbabwe . On January 16, 2001 Kabila was shot dead by one of his army officers. To avoid another power vacuum, Kabila s ministers decided to appoint Kabila s son, Joseph Kabila, as President of the Democratic Republic of Congo .

In order to have a better understanding of the conflicts taking place in that region today, we must link it back to its roots in the 19th Century. Zaire’s precolonial past is characterized by considerable complexity. A diversity of social ethnic groups developed in Zaire, ranging from small, autonomous groups of hunters to centralized chiefdoms and large-scale state systems of the savanna, from the settled village communities of the interior to the predominantly Muslim and Arab trading communities in the east . The first known inhabitants were the pygmies. People from other parts of Africa began to move into the area about 2,000 years ago and in the 1400’s, several separate states, such as the Kongo, Kuba, Luba, and Lunda developed in the savanna. It was around 1482 that Portuguese seamen along with Diogo Cam, a Portuguese explorer, began stopping at the mouth of the Congo River and that Portugal established diplomatic relations with the Kongo kingdom (it was the Portuguese who named the region Kongo) . This kingdom, which then ruled the coastal region, soon developed a slave trade with the Portuguese. From the beginning of the 1500’s to the 1800’s, hundreds of thousands of people were enslaved in the Congo area and sent to North or South America as slaves. From the 1500 s to the 1800 s, links with Europe steadily increased as missionaries and traders penetrated ever further into Central Africa .

From 1840 to 1872, the Scottish missionary, David Livingstone, engaged in a series of explorations that brought the Congo to the attention of the Western world. During these travels, Livingstone was out of touch with Europe for two years. Henry Morton Stanley, a journalist, was commissioned by the New York Herald to conduct a search for him. The two met at Ujiji, on the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika, in 1871. Three years later, Stanley was commissioned to continue the explorations begun by Livingstone. With three British companions, Stanley began his descent through the Congo from its upper reaches, completing his journey in 1877. Returning to Europe, he tried to interest the British government in further exploration and development of the Congo but met with no success. His expeditions did, however, attract another European monarch.

Stanley’s adventures brought the Congo to the attention of Belgium’s King L opold II, a man of boundless energy and ambition. The European occupation of Africa was well under way, but the Congo River basin remained for the most part unknown to Europeans. With no great powers contesting its control, the area appeared to present an ideal opportunity for Belgian expansion.

Recruiting Stanley to help him in 1878, L opold II founded the International Association of the Congo, which was financed by an international consortium of bankers. With the support of this association, Stanley arrived at the mouth of the Congo in 1879 and began the journey upriver. He founded Vivi, the first capital, across the river from present-day Matadi and then moved further up the river, reaching a widening he named Stanley Pool (now Pool de Malebo) in mid-1881. There he founded a trading station and the settlement of L opoldville (now Kinshasa) on the south bank. The north bank of the river had been claimed by France, leading ultimately to the creation of the colony of French Congo. The road from the coast to Vivi was completed by the end of 1881 and Stanley returned to Europe. He was back in Africa by December 1882 and sailed up the Congo to Stanleyville (now Kisangani), signing more than 450 treaties on behalf of L opold II with persons described as local chieftains who had agreed to cede their rights of sovereignty over much of the Congo Basin. In 1884 Stanley returned to Europe.

At the Conference of Berlin, held in 1884-85 to settle disputes among the European nations and in essence to partition Africa among them, thirteen powers, following the example set by the United States, separately recognized L opold II’s International Association of the Congo, which had already adopted its own flag, as an independent entity. Shortly afterward the association became the Congo Free State. This name was chosen because Leopold claimed that the country was supposed to be free of discriminatory taxes for all the interested European powers. By the General Act of Berlin, signed at the conclusion of the conference in 1885, the powers also agreed that activities in the Congo Basin should be governed by certain principles, including freedom of trade and navigation, neutrality in the event of war, suppression of the slave traffic, and improvement of the condition of the indigenous population. The conference recognized L opold II as sovereign of the new state.

Shortly thereafter, L opold II proceeded to transform the Congo Free State into an effective instrument of colonial supremacy. Indigenous men were promptly recruited into his nascent army, the Force Publique, manned by European officers. L opold II also led numerous military campaigns to bring the different ethnic groups into one unified country. Some of these campaigns resulted in the suppression or expulsion of the previously powerful Afro-Arab slave traders and wary merchants. Only through the ruthless and massive suppression of opposition and exploitation of African labor could L opold II hold and exploit his personal fiefdom. This led L opold II to wipe out any opposition that he saw as a threat to his regime. Among those who resisted Belgium s sovereignty were the Babua and the Budja in the 1900 s, and in addition to that, there were mutinies in the Force Publique in the 1890 s. Likewise, other religious or spiritual movements against Belgium flourished in the 1920 s. However, they were quickly eradicated.

L opold’s rule of the Congo Free State was harsh. His emissaries evicted Muslim traders and secured control of the mineral rich area Katanga in the southeast. The people of the Congo Free State were treated cruelly under the rule of Leopold II and many perished. This harsh rule caused such an international scandal that, in 1908, Leopold was forced to surrender control of the region to Belgium.

For almost the entire period of the Congo Free State (1885- 1908), the peoples of present-day Congo were subjected to a long sequence of wars, repression, and regimentation. The impact of this colonial experience was so devastating, and its aftermath so disruptive, because the initial shock of European intrusion was followed almost immediately by an intensive exploitation of human and natural resources.

When Belgium gained control of the region, it was renamed the Belgian Congo. While the Belgium rule was sometimes rather harsh, the government did improve working and living conditions somewhat. In the mid 1950’s, the Africans of the Belgian Congo began to demand self rule and set up political parties. The Belgium government, confident that it would eventually regain economic control, agreed to give over their political power to the people. On June 30, 1960, Joseph Kasavubu and Patric Lumumba became the president and prime minister of the Belgian Congo.

Directly following the independence of Congo, a power struggle emerged between Kasavubu and Lumumba. On September 14, 1960, Colonel Joseph Mobutu, the Congo’s army chief of staff, militarily intervened in the power struggle and arrested Lumumba. Mobutu then returned the power to Kasavubu in 1961. In August of 1964, the country was renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 1965, Mobutu took advantage of a time of political crisis and named himself president. It was in 1970 that Mobutu established his Popular Movement of the Revolution (MPR) as the sole political party of the Congo. Mobutu changed the country’s name to the Republic of Zaire in October 27, 1971, and in 1973 he issued a “Zairianization” policy which allowed the government to seize 2,000 foreign-owned businesses. Many of these businesses failed however, because of the inexperience of the new owners, and the Zairian economy began to crumble.

Despite this, Mobutu and his friends continued to gain money by making profit from the country s mineral wealth. Throughout the 1970’s and the 1980’s, opposition to Mobutu’s rule grew and in 1982, the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS) was formed. In 1990, Mobutu announced the creation of the multiparty democratic system and in 1992, he agreed to form a coalition government.

Today, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has a rather poor economy and most of its citizens are farmers. It is a developing country, however, and contains many valuable resources. One of the Congo’s main economic resources is copper mining. In fact, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the world’s leading producers of copper. Agriculture is not one of the Congo’s economic strong points , and it is mostly focused on small plots that families farm for their own needs. A few crops that are raised for sale include cocoa, coffee, cotton, and tea. Because of these valuable resources, the Democratic Republic of the Congo could soon become a prosperous and wealthy country. While the Democratic Republic of Congo is still a rather poor country, at least, it still has its independence.