**DR Congo vote Dec. 20, tensions with Rwanda**

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By Geoff Hill

Congo’s troubled elections this week have already scored at least one small victory for peace.

Some of the more than 100 armed groups near the border of Congo and Rwanda, including the M23 rebels feared for their violence against civilians, are set to begin a three-day truce Monday negotiated by the Biden administration to allow for Congolese elections on Wednesday.

According to unconfirmed reports over the weekend, the cease-fire may be extended.

President Felix Tshisekedi, 60, seeking a second and final five-year term in office, told The Washington Times that he is “committed to creating more jobs for the Congolese in general and youth in particular” and has set a goal of “6.4 million new jobs by 2028.”

In a massive country with great natural wealth and huge political challenges, the incumbent said in an interview days before the vote that he is focused far more on kitchen-table issues.

Despite holding power in Kinshasa for the past four years, Mr. Tshisekedi said many of Congo’s deep-seated difficulties have yet to be resolved.

“The problems and challenges I am tackling are the result of negligence or indifference from public authorities, which goes back several decades. They are structural or even systemic,” he said.

The elections on Wednesday will include votes for nearly all of the members of the National Assembly, almost all of the elected members of the 26 provincial assemblies and, for the first time under the new constitution, members of a limited number of municipal councils. The combination sets up the prospect for a significant shift in political power.

The outcome of the vote is likely to have an outsized impact as well. Unrest and instability in Congo, Africa’s second-largest country by area and fourth by population, routinely lead to disruptions and conflict with its eight bordering countries as the U.S., Russia and China look for allies and markets in the region.

Whether Mr. Tshisekedi wins or loses, the presidential election will challenge Congo to find a peaceful, democratic power transfer under the new constitution.

Rights groups say the run-up to the vote has increased uncertainty.

In August, the U.N. Joint Human Rights Office said the electoral environment was characterized by “arbitrary arrests and detentions, abductions and threats targeting political opponents, excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators, and hate speech and incitement to violence.”

The private watchdog group Human Rights Watch has cited violence by supporters of the ruling party and leading opposition candidate Moïse Katumbi, 55, the charismatic former governor of the mineral-rich Katanga province.

“Congolese authorities need to act urgently to prevent violence before, during, and after the vote, to stop a dangerous situation from getting even worse,” Thomas Fessy, senior Congo researcher at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement Saturday. “Political parties and candidates should publicize their anti-violence stance and help ensure that people have the opportunity to vote for the candidates of their choice.”

In the most severe incident, Cherubin Okende, a member of parliament and spokesman for Mr. Katumbi, was found dead in his car in Kinshasa in July with gunshot wounds to his body. Two candidates running for the national legislature were shot in recent days, according to the Agence France-Presse news service.

**Security concerns**

All sides recognize that the Congolese elections are proceeding in an extraordinarily difficult security environment.

**The special U.N. representative in Kinshasa, Bintou Keita, told the Security Council last month about a risk of open conflict between Congo and neighboring Rwanda. Robert Wood, a State Department delegate at the briefing, said, “The speed at which Rwanda and the DRC approached the brink of war in recent weeks has been alarming.”**

Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Mr. Tshisekedi and Rwandan President Paul Kagame last month. Avril Haines, White House director of national intelligence, followed up his phone calls with trips to Kinshasa and Kigali to “de-escalate tension.” U.S. negotiators developed the truce in the wake of those meetings.

Mr. Tshisekedi has repeatedly accused Mr. Kagame and the Rwandan government of funding and arming the M23 and other guerrilla groups that have brought devastation to large areas of Congo. Independent inquiries by the United Nations and human rights groups suggest Mr. Kagame is involved, but he denies the allegation. After the 1994 Rwanda genocide, he said, many of the killers found sanctuary across the border in Congo and are trying to topple his government.

Mr. Tshisekedi and Mr. Katumbi have addressed campaign rallies across Congo, though police have stopped some of Katumbi’s events and arrested some of his bodyguards.

Congo supplies more than half the world’s cobalt, vital to the batteries used in electric vehicles, along with lithium, gold, copper and diamonds. On the global corruption index published by Transparency International, Congo ranks among “the Dirty Dozen” countries at the bottom of the list, including Venezuela, Yemen and North Korea.

Despite billions of dollars in aid over the decades, World Bank figures show that less than a quarter of the population has access to electricity and 80% of homes lack basic sanitation.

Mr. Tshisekedi may be right to concentrate on pocketbook issues. Focus groups conducted by all parties show unemployment as the main complaint, followed by electricity, corruption and the ongoing war in the east.

That hasn’t stopped the leading candidates from indulging in provocative rhetoric and warning of perils that could lie ahead.

At rallies, Mr. Tshisekedi has likened Mr. Kagame to Adolf Hitler. The two leaders have not met for more than two years, and peacekeeping forces from the United Nations and a group of East African states are set to leave by the middle of next year.

With 19 candidates from various parties vying for the presidency, political forecasters say Mr. Tshisekedi is the favorite, if only because his rivals appear set to split the opposition vote.

**Relying on the private sector**

Whoever wins the presidential election faces the challenge of meeting expectations. The Congolese people have voiced their difficulties in a way unthinkable under the authoritarian regimes of Mobutu Sese Seko and Joseph Kabila.

Two-thirds of the population of 100 million live on less than $2.15 a day, unemployment is high and the gross domestic product is just $67 billion, equivalent to the state of Montana.

Mr. Tshisekedi said Congo’s economic woes can be addressed only through a relentless focus on supporting and expanding the private sector. He said the job would require outside support.

“The United States has a big role to play in the Congolese investment market, and we need this country to be a haven for business, where investors return again and again because their projects have been successful,” he said.

Mr. Tshisekedi said it is deplorable that the Congo River ranks among the biggest in the world but “so many households do not have access to drinking water.”

Electricity, he said, is an even bigger problem. “We must meet the basic needs of our citizens, and we must do it now. Over the next five years, we will increase the rate of access to electricity to 50%.”

Regarding the long-running war in the country’s east, he said many people are working for peace but the international community “has neglected the conflict and looked the other way.”

For 30 years, he said, “Rwanda has stimulated its own economy at the expense of the DRC.” Congo claims Rwanda is removing minerals under cover of the warfare and violence sparked by the rebels.

The president said he wants “diplomatic actions in favor of peace,” but his government is “resolutely committed to reestablishing the authority of the state” across the country.

At his rallies, Mr. Katumbi, the son of a Congolese mother and a Jewish Greek father, has trained his rhetoric on the same issues of jobs and electricity. He said he would fulfil the long-held plan for a highway connecting all parts of the country and argued that Mr. Tshisekedi’s first term in power shows he is not the man to revive the Congolese economy.

“Tshisekedi and his cronies robbed us of the hope he promised when they took office in 2019,” said Mr. Katumbi, adding that little had been achieved in the president’s first term.

He told voters to look for and report any signs of cheating or miscounting of ballots. During the 2019 election, the powerful Congolese Catholic Church mobilized some 40,000 observers who concluded that an opposition candidate, Martin Fayulu, won by a large margin, with Mr. Tshisekedi in second place.

Under Mr. Tshisekedi, Congo has hewed closely to U.S. foreign policy. While many African nations abstained in U.N. votes on the Ukraine-Russia war, DRCongo sided with the U.S. on all five motions condemning the Russian invasion. Opposition figures have expressed concern that the U.S. will accept a certain level of fraud to keep Mr. Tshisekedi in power.

**Rwanda and the vote**

The election will pass, but a solution to the long-running clash with neighboring Rwanda has proved elusive. Tshisekedi and Kagame have traded ever more barbed accusations. An all-out clash between their armies would destabilize the region and could have a devastating effect on transportation, tourism and the chronic flow of refugees.

Like most of the opposition, the Rwanda National Congress operates in exile. Its secretary-general is Etienne Mutabazi, a former U.N. investigator on the Rwanda genocide. Now an academic, he has been a consultant to the American Bar Association and lectures widely on conflict and human rights law.

Speaking in Johannesburg, he said a battle between the armies of Congo and Rwanda “is almost inevitable.”

He said Mr. Tshisekedi was right to say the world had looked the other way.

“For years now, this has been the most lethal war on the planet,” he said. “More than 5 million have died in a conflict that has flared over and again. And much of the blame lies with President Kagame of Rwanda, who the U.N. has repeatedly shown is backing the rebels.”

Mr. Mutabazi believes Tshisekedi wants to secure his legacy as the man who ended the bloodshed “no matter what it takes.”

A senior defense attache at an embassy in Kigali who asked not to be identified by name said, “A Congolese invasion of Rwanda is possible, especially once U.N. peacekeepers are withdrawn, but it would not have the support of Britain, the U.S. or the European Union and could drag on for years.’ Rwanda’s troops, he said, were “better armed, better trained and better paid” than their Congolese counterparts.

At the U.S. Embassy in Kinshasa, Ambassador Lucy Tamlyn said Washington is working “to address the tensions in eastern Congo by promoting bilateral diplomatic solutions and regional mediation efforts.”

She said annual U.S. trade with DRCongo has more than doubled to $332 million since 2019 and the new embassy compound under construction in Kinshasa is “a demonstration of our enduring commitment. The United States is by far the largest donor to the DRC, including over $1 billion in humanitarian and bilateral assistance in 2022.”

She said this funding is transparent and well-monitored.

The area is home to the world’s second-largest rainforest after the Amazon. “The United States believes the DRC can lead the world to a greener future through its stewardship of the Congo Basin while generating economic growth and jobs,” she said.

Along with programs on health, democracy and human rights, the ambassador said, Washington’s goal is to help “equip this country to realize its vast potential and enable it to become an anchor of stability and prosperity on the continent.”

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