

# Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a vast country of great geographical diversity. It borders [Angola](#) and [Zambia](#) in the south, [Tanzania](#), [Burundi](#), [Rwanda](#) and [Uganda](#) in the east, [Sudan](#) and [the Central African Republic](#) in the north, and [the Republic of Congo \(Congo-Brazzaville\)](#) in the west. The country



takes its name from the Congo River, at the mouth of which the DRC has a tiny but strategic Atlantic coastline. A string of lakes, including Lake Tanganyika, line the DRC's eastern border. These have provided the topography for arguably the world's most destructive irregular warfare in recent generations. Most of the country has a tropical climate and vegetation; grasslands in the north, mountains in the east, and drier plateaus in the south are the exceptions. The DRC has immense mineral wealth, including copper, gold, diamonds, coltan, cobalt and manganese, but these resources have proved a curse rather than a blessing.

From early times densely forested areas have been home to communally organized hunting and gathering bands of 'Pygmies', a catch-all term covering the Batwa of the eastern borders through to the Baka groupings on the border with Congo-Brazzaville and the Central African Republic. On the forest fringes and rivers, agricultural and fishing communities showed much greater social and economic differentiation. By the fifteenth century powerful kingdoms had developed in the south and west of the country. The largest of these was the Kingdom of Kongo, which extended in all directions from the mouth of the Congo River. Portuguese explorers arrived towards the end of the 15th century, followed by missionaries. Slave traders arrived soon after, and engaged in booming business with the Kingdom of Kongo, which had previously applied the practice in local wars of conquest. The European connection accelerated slave raids and contributed to a significant depopulation of the continent's interior.

In 1881 King Leopold II of [Belgium](#) organized a unique variety of colonialism in what is now DRC, vesting himself with sole ownership of the entire territory and following such brutal and exploitative policies as to cause, even then, an international outcry. Congolese were enslaved en masse to collect rubber, ivory, and other resources for the Belgian king and his concessionaries; communities that didn't produce faced brutal collective punishment, including the amputation of hands and execution. Leopold's hellish 'Congo Free State' regime is thought to have caused the deaths of 10 million Congolese-and perhaps as many as three times that

number. From 1908, in response to the first sustained international human rights campaign, the territory was taken out of Leopold's personal possession and became a regular colony of the Belgian state, called the Belgian Congo.

Change only came slowly, and forced labour continued, even if formally banned. Belgian rule relied heavily on customary local authorities, though this often involved the disruption of pre-existing political relations, the creation and manipulation of chieftainships, and the entrenchment of ethnic divisions. This process was also reinforced by an educational system, implemented mainly by the Catholic Church and confined almost entirely to primary level, which favoured certain regions, additionally serving to formalize linguistic divisions. From the 1920s resistance was primarily expressed through messianic movements, notably Kimbanguists and Jehovah's Witnesses, whose supporters faced persecution before and after independence. The latter group in particular remain controversial in the political centre, Kinshasa (formally Léopoldville).

Pro-independence sentiment steadily gained ground through the 1940s and 1950s. Congolese chafed ever more at white privilege and colonial constraints, and in January 1959 massive rioting shook the capital, Léopoldville (now Kinshasa). A deep divide within the independence movement pitted advocates of federalism against advocates of a unitary state. Federalists claimed that with the country's size and diversity, it would be impossible to insist on unity in the short-term; 'unitarists', who took inspiration from pan-Africanism, argued that federalists were really separatists, and suspected that it was no coincidence that advocates of federalism tended to come from richer provinces, especially mineral-rich Katanga.

Belgian opposition to the radical unitarist nationalism of Patrice Lumumba's Mouvement National Congolais (MNC) encouraged the escalation of regional and ethnically based parties during the hectic transition to independence. At Congolese independence in June 1960, federalist Joseph Kasavubu became president, and Lumumba became prime minister. Immediately the southern province of Katanga, which has had strong economic links to neighbouring Zambia for centuries, declared independence. A prolonged period of chaos and civil war followed, in which regional and ethnic factors came to the fore. Lumumba was arrested at the end of 1960 and executed two months later, with the connivance of Belgian and American secret service operatives: at the height of the Cold War Washington in particular disfavoured Lumumba's socialism. UN forces were dispatched to Katanga, and in 1963 Katangan leader Moïse Tschombe revoked the province's secession; President Kasavubu appointed him prime minister the following year.

In 1965 western-backed General Joseph-Desiré Mobutu came to power through a coup. Despite the continuation of insurrectionary movements in Katanga and in the north-eastern province of Orientale, Mobutu at first achieved comparative stability by the ruthless suppression of opposition and by increasing the concentration of power in presidential hands. In 1971 he took the name Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga ('The all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, goes from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake and arising from the blood and ashes of his enemies like the sun which conquers the night'). He also renamed the country 'Zaire' as part of a campaign of

African authenticity. Mobutu extended the legacy of Léopold and Belgium, not so much governing Zaire, but plundering it for his own wealth and power, while servicing the parallel networks of patronage and reward that constituted his own conception of African political economy.

Zaire's costly defeat alongside the United States and South Africa in Angola in 1975 combined with economic collapse tied to falling copper prices and disastrous economic policies to provoke a succession of army mutinies. Renewed rebellion broke out in Shaba (Mobutu's name for Katanga), which was only suppressed with the help of Moroccan and later French and Belgian troops, helped by considerable numbers of informally recruited French and other mercenaries. Increasingly Mobutu moved members of his own Ngbandi and related groups – Lingala speakers from Equateur province – into positions of power, particularly within the elaborate security apparatus. A decade after his overthrow, many of these individuals, often operating with great economic independence, remain influential within the 'shadow economy' of Congolese power politics.

Instability, indebtedness and economic decline, combined with gross corruption and pervasive human rights violations, continued through the 1980s without threatening the support from Mobutu's external backers until the end of the decade and the end of the Cold War. External pressure led to the formal establishment of multiparty politics in 1990, but the political parties that emerged—some 230 of them—were little more than kinship corporations, vying to control elements of Mobutu's decaying patronage apparatus. Increasing popular discontent exploded into widespread rioting in many cities in 1991, following army massacres of students (the actual scale of which is contested by some) in Lubumbashi and of demonstrators in Kinshasa. In 1992 Mobutu launched a pogrom against the Kasaï in Shaba (Katanga) province, but it became increasingly clear that his grip on power was slipping: the Kasaïan episode itself was rapidly co-opted by Mobutu-appointed regional governors for their own ends of power, prestige and access to resources. The same year, a long-postponed all-party Sovereign National Conference, with transition to democracy on its agenda, elected Etienne Tshisekedi as prime minister.

This precipitated a crisis with the military and with Mobutu, who refused to ratify the appointment and the provisional constitution. In 1993 the country had rival governments and rival prime ministers. One response of pro-Mobutu factions was to play the 'ethnic card' with a vengeance, precipitating further anti-Kasaïan riots and mass expulsions – apparently following a strategy equating democracy with instability and ethnic hatred, as a justification for blocking reform and maintaining Mobutu in power. Mobutu's control of the central bank and other sources of finance, combined with rivalries among Tshisekedi's supporters, enabled him to gain the upper hand in 1994. A period of hyperinflation outstripping anything yet seen in Sub-Saharan Africa ensued, accompanied by the dollarisation of the economy in urban areas, and the reversion to a combination of forced self-sufficiency and anarchic pillage in rural zones. What was left of the transportation and communications networks outside Kinshasa's inner suburbs fell apart.

Following the 1994 genocide in neighbouring Rwanda, many Hutu extremist perpetrators

joined hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees who feared retribution in eastern Zaire. From there, the militants, with the support of Mobutu, launched attacks on the new Rwandan government, as well as on Congolese Tutsi, the Banyamulenge. In 1996 Rwanda and Uganda sent their own forces into eastern Zaire. They deployed the veteran Lumumbist rebel Laurent Kabila, an associate of the Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara, in a westward sweep toward Kinshasa, backed largely by swahiliphone armed forces often only nominally under his control. In the process, Rwandan government forces and Kabila's forces killed thousands of Hutus: combatants and non-combatants alike. Meanwhile, in 1996, 50,000 marched in Kinshasa to protest Mobutu's continued rule, one month before the announcement that the dictator had prostate cancer. In early 1997, South African President Nelson Mandela and an American envoy hosted a meeting between Mobutu and Kabila, and urged Mobutu to step down. He finally fled the country as Kabila and his allies took Kinshasa in May 1997. The predicted massacre of the capital's inhabitants did not take place. Even before Kabila's forces had reached the capital, though, new contracts had been signed between Kabila and American mining companies for exploitation of copper and other resources. The fallout—legal, economic, and military—continues to the present.

Kabila renamed the country the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). However, he quickly fell out with Rwanda and Uganda, and in 1998 these countries sponsored rebel movements to invade the DRC anew. The rebels also had the support of the then Tutsi-dominated Burundian securocracy, while the Kabila government had that of Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia, at least two of which were ambitious to expand their economic footprint in the DRC's potentially huge resources of exploitable minerals. Seven nations were now directly involved, and because their various roles were often rewarded in natural resource concessions, they had little incentive to withdraw. Other countries, from Chad to Ukraine, were involved through the supply of armaments, personnel, banking and money laundering facilities. Media circles began referring to the DRC crisis as 'Africa's First World War'. Fighting continued despite a July 1999 ceasefire agreement and deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission (MONUC) in 2000 that was understaffed and had a weak mandate. A study by the International Rescue Committee found that between 1998 and 2004, nearly four million people in the DRC—the equivalent of the entire population of Ireland—died as a result of the war.

[^top](#)

Main languages: French (official), Lingala, Kikongo, Tshiluba, Swahili

Main religions: Christianity (mainly Roman Catholicism but also burgeoning evangelical Protestantism in urban areas), Kimbanguinism, a highly personalised neo-Christian belief system prevalent in the south west; traditional magico-religious systems, and Islam. Overlaps between one or more of these practices are commonplace.

The hundreds of ethno-linguistic groups include Kasaians, Banyarwanda, Hunde, Nyanga, Nande, Bangala, Batwa and Bambutu. (Adequate statistics are unavailable.)

For a country with a population of almost 60 million, variously assessed as having 250 ethnic groups and up to 700 languages and dialects, definitions of minorities are complex even by the standards of the region. Ethnicity, while a powerful mobilizing force in politics, has been a particularly fluid and changeable category, linguistic and regional agglomerations being overlaid with factors of religion, class and education. Nor are the most vulnerable minorities necessarily the smallest or most marginalized.

[^top](#)

Through a combination of neo-Maoist ideology, stubborn Congolese nationalism, and lack of easily mobilised personnel and resources, Laurent Kabila never managed fully to impose order upon the Kinshasa region, let alone the rest of the country and its relations with the outside world. He rapidly lost friends around the globe. Kabila was assassinated in January 2001 by one of his own Swahili-speaking bodyguards of eastern-DRC origin – although who coordinated the killing remains unknown. His son Joseph Kabila assumed the presidency amid frequent accusations among Kinshasa opposition circles that he is a Rwandan adoptee or even an impostor.. Under international pressure in 2002, he entered into a power-sharing government with rebel factions and civil society in July 2003. Like his father, Joseph Kabila's reach barely extended beyond Kinshasa; a vacuum of power persisted in most of the country, especially the east, and was filled by various and competing militia factions, as well as destitute army units who paid themselves by stealing and terrorizing local populations. Joseph Kabila's hold on power was particularly tenuous because he was raised in the Swahili-speaking Katanga province and Tanzania, and his command of Lingala, spoken in Kinshasa and elsewhere in the west, is not fluent. Violence in north-eastern Ituri province flared despite improved security in Kinshasa, and French-led EU peacekeepers intervened in 2003 to quell the violence in and around Ituri's capital Bunia. In July 2003 and October 2004 the UN Security Council bolstered MONUC to a nearly 17,000-strong force, and gave it a new mandate to protect civilians 'under imminent threat of violence'.

The National Assembly adopted a new constitution in May 2005. The document limited the president to a maximum of two five-year terms, decentralized some powers, and generally weakened the executive in favour of the legislative branch. During the war, hatred had been stirred up against the Banyamulenge people in particular through demagogic accusations that the group was 'foreign' (more specifically, Rwandan); the new constitution defined as citizens every ethnic group that had been present at independence in 1960, a definition that includes the Banyamulenge.

In 2006, the first free elections for 40 years, they were won by the incumbent Joseph Kabila with an estimated 58 per cent of the vote, mostly from the Swahili-speaking east, creating concern about his ability to overcome the divide with the Lingala-speaking west. Despite initial court challenges, his main opponent Jean-Pierre Bemba – a former rebel from the Equateur region – signalled he would accept the result.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) based in The Hague has jurisdiction over crimes committed in the DRC since 1 July 2002, following the ratification of the Rome Statute of the Court by the DRC on 11 April 2002. On 19 April 2004 the president of the DRC referred the situation of crimes committed in the DRC to the ICC's Prosecutor. As a result, militia leader Thomas Lubanga was surrendered to the Hague-based court in March 2006, and on October 18, 2007, the ICC formally indicted Germain Katanga, one of the key military leaders of the FNI, for crimes against humanity, among other charges, after he was handed over by the Congolese authorities.

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## Minority based and advocacy organisations

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### General

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Association de défense des droits de l'homme (Congo) (ASADHO)

Tel: +243-12-216-53

Email: [libertas@ic.cd](mailto:libertas@ic.cd); [ngefa@hotmail.com](mailto:ngefa@hotmail.com)

Centre d'Accompagnement des Autochtones Pygmées et Minoritaires Vulnérable (Rwanda)

Tel: +243-977-06-271

Email: [camvorg@yahoo.fr](mailto:camvorg@yahoo.fr)

Fontaine d'Espoir pour Filles et Femmes

Email: [info@fontaineespoir.org](mailto:info@fontaineespoir.org)

Website: [www.fontaineespoir.org](http://www.fontaineespoir.org)

Programme d'Intégration et de Développement du Peuple Pygmé au Kivu

Tel : + 377-93-10-72-49

Union pour l'Émancipation de la Femme Autochtone (UEFA)

Tel: +250-0852-7744, 0863-7014, 0882-9705, +243-81-3178-341

Email: [uefafr@yahoo.fr](mailto:uefafr@yahoo.fr)

### Ngbandi

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Voice of the Voiceless (VSV)

Tel: +243-88-40394

Email: [vsv@ic.cd](mailto:vsv@ic.cd)

Website: [www.congonline.com/vsv](http://www.congonline.com/vsv)

### Batwa and Bambuti

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Email: uefafr@yahoo.fr

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## Batwa and Bambuti

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