

Congo Militia Chief Signs Peace Deal before Polls

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By David Lewis

Reuters News

KINSHASA—A Congolese warlord heading a coalition of eastern militias has agreed to lay down his arms and allow voting in historic elections set for Sunday.

The deal signed by militia chief Mathieu Ngudjolo with Congo's military in northeast Ituri district late on Wednesday was good news for U.N. peacekeepers who are trying to guarantee security for the polls in Democratic Republic of Congo.

But analysts said it was not clear whether the agreement would bring long-term stability to Ituri, where rebel violence has continued after the official end of a 1998-2003 war. The United Nations, which has its biggest peacekeeping operation in the world in the Congo, welcomed the agreement struck ahead of Sunday's first multi-party elections in 40 years in the vast, mineral rich country.

But it wanted to see concrete action.

"The two parties have agreed on the integration of the MRC (Congolese Revolutionary Movement) fighters and a general amnesty for all members of the movement," said a statement issued after Wednesday's talks and seen by Reuters.

Ngudjolo, who heads a loose coalition of militia fighters in Ituri called the MRC, is one of the last rebels holding out in Ituri, where ethnic violence and clashes between militia groups fighting over mines have killed tens of thousands of civilians.

"The two parties will ensure that displaced people will be allowed to move freely so they can go to where they have registered, vote and then return home," the handwritten agreement added.

Sunday's polls, supervised by the United Nations, are aimed at ushering in a new era of peace and prosperity for the Congo following the recent war that has killed an estimated

4 million people through conflict, hunger and disease.

Although the war officially ended in 2003, rebels and militias have continued to fight in the east, adding to the humanitarian crisis and hitting the organization of the polls.

DOUBTS OVER DEAL

Some Congo experts expressed skepticism about the deal with Ngudjolo, which follows another struck earlier this month with Peter Karim, an Ituri warlord who kidnapped seven U.N. peacekeepers.

Karim had vowed to disarm in return for becoming an army colonel but, so far, he has failed to disband his fighters.

"There needs to be a political solution to this problem. Legitimizing warlords in this area is not going to bring long-term peace," Anneke van Woudenburg, a Congo specialist for U.S.-based Human Rights Watch, told Reuters.

"This is again sending the message that if you want to be a general in the army, you can pick up a gun and kill people."

A Congolese military commander in Ituri said Ngudjolo's demands -- that he and his men join army units in the region -- would also be a problem.

"I don't think he will really carry this out," General David Padiri told Reuters. "The conditions he is demanding are unrealistic."

The international community pays more than \$1 billion every year for the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Congo and has invested over \$400 million in Sunday's polls, which are the culmination of peace deals that ended Congo's last war.

A spokesman for the U.N. peacekeeping force, which has fought against the eastern militias, said it was taking the peace deal seriously.

"But we are waiting to see what concrete action these people coming out of the bush are going to take," said Major Hans-Jakob Reichen.

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