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Warlord Leads Incumbent in Congo, Election Observers Report

By Jeffrey Gettleman

NAIROBI, Kenya—The race for president of Congo took a surprising turn on Wednesday, when local election observers announced that Jean-Pierre Bemba, a warlord accused of severe human rights abuses, was leading against the incumbent, Joseph Kabila, according to preliminary results.

United Nations officials, however, urged Congolese voters to stay calm and not to race to any conclusions until all votes from the elections on Sunday had been counted. The count was not expected to be finished for weeks.

The United Nations and donor countries have spent \$458 million on these elections, which were the first free elections in Congo in decades and were intended to end years of turmoil.

"Nobody should be jumping the gun about claiming victory or crying foul," said Kemal Saiki, the chief spokesman for the United Nations mission to Congo. "There are mechanisms in place. Let them work."

A small fraction of the vote has been counted, but, according to the League of Voters, a large election-monitoring organization in Kinshasa, Congo's capital, Mr. Bemba is ahead of President Kabila, 42 percent to 25 percent.

"There are two big fishes in this country right now," said Sadin Banza, president of the league.

The National Network for the Observation and Monitoring of Elections in Congo, another prominent election group, agreed that Mr. Bemba was well ahead. If no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote, a runoff between the top vote-getters will take place in October.

On Tuesday, the United Nations radio station in Congo announced that Mr. Bemba, 43, and Mr. Kabila, 35, were the front-runners among the 33 candidates for president, but on Wednesday, the radio station would not reveal more results, saying it feared inciting violence.

Voters also selected among 9,700 candidates for 500 national assembly seats.

Several lesser candidates for president are already contending that the elections were rigged, deepening worries that the relative calm that surrounded the voting may not last.

At the same time, a disquieting political schism seems to be opening up in Congo, with Mr. Kabila winning overwhelmingly in the east and Mr. Bemba dominating the west.

Congolese and foreign observers are now concerned that the election, instead of unifying the country as intended, could accentuate regional differences and spell more war.

Since it was hastily granted independence from Belgium in 1960, Congo has had an especially weak sense of state, with constant rebellions and secessionist movements. Part of the reason is the country is so big - the size of Western Europe - and so inaccessible. Congo has only 300 miles of paved roads and endless miles of thick jungle.

In 1997, a *mélange* of rebel groups led by Laurent D. Kabila overthrew the dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, who was reviled for wasting Congo's mineral riches on palaces and parties while his people starved. When Mr. Kabila was killed by a bodyguard in 2001, his son Joseph took over and agreed to share power with other warlords and hold elections.

Mr. Kabila calls himself "the artisan of peace," and backers said he had helped end fighting that killed millions of people. But he never seemed able to shake rumors that he is not authentically Congolese. His Web site says he was born in northeastern Congo, but many voters say he was born in Rwanda or Tanzania, where his father was in exile. Growing up in Tanzania and not fluently speaking Lingala, one of Congo's national languages, have not helped.

Mr. Bemba has his own problems. Human rights groups have accused his militia of grotesque abuses, including cannibalism, during fighting in eastern Congo. Several international organizations have tried to get him indicted on war crimes charges.

Mossi Mwassi contributed reporting from Kinshasa, Congo, for this article, and Anjan Sundaram from Bunia, Congo.

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