



A man displays his voter registration card in Tchomia internally displaced people's camp on the shore's of Lake Albert in Ituri District, north-eastern DRC, July 2006.

Congo's elections: Hope for salvation

BUNIA: Life has been hard on John Walpol. War denied him the chance of an education. Without an education he had no hope of a job, and without a job, no means to earn money. His vocation in life was to join the Ituri National Front (FNI) militia group and survive through the barrel of a gun.

Now, disarmed and demobilised, he stands outside the Independent Electoral Commission offices with dozens of others in the dry and dusty main street of Bunia town in Ituri District, full of hope.

"With these elections, there will be big change after all the problems we have had," he concludes with conviction. "We will have a better future."

Standing over his shoulder, 28 year John Bosco, a carpenter from Bunia interjects and agrees that everything will transform following Congo's first democratic elections in over forty years.

"I will vote for Joseph Kabila, so the insecurity ends and the economic situation will improve," he says. "Kabila will win, everyone will vote for him; women, men, even young children," he says laughing, while at the same time revealing the depth of expectation many Congolese have in the forthcoming electoral process.

Yet such hope is also a tremendous risk. After decades of misrule, plunder and war, Congo's social and economic infrastructure is virtually non-existent.

The expectation and sanguinity the Congolese have installed in the virginal process that will ultimately give credence to their nation's name could well fall short of such high hopes.

A country the size of Western Europe with its administrative capital Kinshasa over 3,000 km away from the optimism of Bosco and Walpol, there is nothing but dense, near impenetrable jungle in

between.

There are no transport routes linking one side of the Congo with the other. In the whole of country, there are only 300 km of tarmac road.

The volatile, mineral rich east of the country is home to a complex web of militia groups who stalk the countryside. Legacies of conflicts from the late nineties and early 21st Century, they prey on the local population, creating instability and perpetuating the suffering that has plagued the region for so long.

Figures put the death toll of Congo's wars over the last decade at an astounding 4 million people. An estimated 1,000 more continue to perish daily from preventable diseases.

Yet despite all of this, the Congolese electorate will cast their vote on 30 July in the hope that the torment they have endured since gaining independence from Belgium in 1960, will be over.

Such a big ask will not herald change over night as Bosco appears certain will be the case.

"Everything will change after the elections. Business will be more, transportation will be easier and schools will start again," he declares assertively.

"The roads should be built and civil servants should be paid. Kabila can do this; he is young, like me."

Supporting the electoral process is the biggest United Nations peacekeeping force in the world. A number of 17,000 sounds impressive enough, but with the problems of Ituri and the Kivu's and Katanga to the south, they are spread too thinly

Struggling to impose their authority ahead of the elections, MONUC continues to conduct joint operations with the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) against the armed groups still active in Ituri.

"All this insecurity is linked to people not having work," says unemployed Lokana Butso. "These militias are looking for jobs and because they do not have any other means, they use their arms to survive. This is the origin of the militias."

Despite the surrounding insecurity and absence of basic substratum in which to carry out an election, John Ukunya Undiga, the Head of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) in Bunia, is in confident mood.

"We are almost ready for the election," he says. "All the materials needed, apart from the ballot papers, are already deployed in the different locations.

Those locations are many. In Ituri alone there are 2,579 different polling stations where almost one and a half million registered voters will cast their ballot.

Producing a mock ballot paper, Undiga points out people will not vote for parties, but like in most other elections around the world, candidates representing the parties.

He enthusiastically ticks a box with an anonymous face and meaningless party acronym at random to show how people will vote. Those who are not able to write, he is quick to point out, will dip their finger in ink and simply mark the paper.

But the minimal jurisdiction local authorities have on the ground suggests the whole process is dangerously exposed to potential fraud and rigging.

Not so, says Undiga. "We will have five representatives from the IEC and officials from the political parties at each polling station."

Results will then be counted while they all watch as witnesses, with MONUC transporting the ballots back to the IEC headquarters in Bunia by helicopter.

With the electoral authority apparently fairly well prepared given the circumstances, the big question is, are the electorate?

During the referendum to vote in favour of the new constitution or not, Undiga says people were voting either way without knowing what they were voting for, having not been sensitised enough beforehand.

"They didn't have time for campaigns then because of lack of money. But this time things are going to improve because MONUC are assisting us."

That assistance has come, Undiga says, in the form of a helicopter to transport trained workers of the IEC to the numerous villages in order to educate people about the elections.

Not everyone, though, shares the confidence of Undiga and the others around Bunia.

"Politicians have promised us that after the elections we teachers are going to get a wage. They are liars, I am not sure of them," says Joel Bernard on the steps of his church down a dusty, potholed side street in Bunia.

"Everybody is saying and promising so much but I think after the elections they will not do it. I do not have any faith in any of these politicians."

Although a registered voter and in possession of a valid voter card, Bernard is adamant he will not exercise his new-found democratic right come the end of July.

"On the day of the election I am not going to vote. I do not believe in any of the candidates. I can vote, yes. I have my card, yes. But my vote cannot do anything."

Such skepticism is reminiscent of someone who has seen elections and all the trappings of politicking and mudslinging associated with campaigning many times before.

"People say Kabila is not Congolese and these others they are just small people from small parties, so who am I going to vote for?"

Everything is prepared; even the president is already known, he declares, even going so far as to suggest by foreign countries in the West.

He adds he does not know if the elections will pass peacefully or not. "We are still waiting. At least for those of us here in Bunia we praise the Lord because we are safe."

"Those in the countryside, they are really suffering, at any time the militia or FARDC can just come rape the women and girls and loot people's possessions."

Back at the Electoral Commission in the searing midday sun, as UN patrols rumble past, Bosco is assured in what Congo's new leader, whoever it will be, must do.

"I do not know who is going to be the next president, but he must be able to take care of the country and help people find jobs. End this insecurity and end these militias."

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