Events in central Africa are now threatening to develop into a major crisis which will test the Carter Administration's commitment to human rights. Some scholars say we may be on the brink of a war in Zaire which will make the Angolan conflict seem small. If the U.S. enters the scene as it did in Angola, it may jeopardize a western-engineered settlement in Rhodesia and Namibia and its effort to persuade Africa that it is for majority rule.

On March 8th, Katanganese "gendarmes" entered Zaire from Angola and captured a number of towns in southwestern Zaire. They were "coming home" rather than invading, since they are almost entirely Lunda people from Shaba district who had been living with their ethnic kinfolk in Angola since 1964-67, when they were forced to flee because of their opposition to the Mobutu government.

So far there seems to have been little actual combat. It seems rather curious that a force of some 40,000 or more men is unable to cope with a force which is variously estimated at 1,500 to 5,000. However, there are repeated reports that the Zaire infantry is deserting or not engaging in combat. While the Zaire air force is said to have made air raids on villages, there seems to be doubt whether these were actually carried out. Aviation gas and pilots are in short supply.

In view of his peril, Mobutu immediately called for and received shipments of military equipment from the U.S., France and Belgium. Secretary of State Vance, testifying on March 16 before the House International Relations Committee, stated that, after consulting with Congressional leaders, President Carter himself ordered the dispatch of two planeloads of supplies, including rations, medicines, fuel bladders, load-bearing equipment, water tablets, aircraft spare parts, helmets, parachutes, communications gear, etc. These materials did not require Congressional approval, since they represented a speed-up in delivery of $30 million of military aid already authorized for FY '77. Vance was at pains to point out that no agreement had been made for more aid, but he did not rule out the possibility that more would be sent. Belgium and France were reported to be sending arms and ammunition.

The Administration is clearly trying to stabilize the situation and prevent the spread of the conflict, by a mixture of reassuring statements and quiet diplomatic efforts. Both Carter and Vance were careful to state that they had no "hard evidence" of Cuban involvement although other officials made it clear that they assumed Angola was backing the rebels. Ambassador Young used his friendly relations with the Nigerians to urge them to mediate the dispute. (Mobutu approached the Nigerians about the situation even earlier, on March 11th.)

But reconciliation between Zaire and Angola may be difficult. A year ago, Presidents Mobutu and Neto agreed to normalize relations by, among other things, repatriating each other's internal enemies. Angola was to send back the 6,000 Katangan gendarmes and Zaire was to kick FNLA out of Zaire. Instead, relations between the countries got worse. Mobutu could draw encouragement from the fact that the U.S. not only did not recognize Angola, but continued to regard it as a threat to Zaire. Especially in the last two months, Angola has been contending that Zaire has violated the agreement by allowing FNLA, FLEC and MOLICA to operate from Zaire bases against Angolan villages. Two recent raids are alleged to have resulted in the massacre of over 70 civilians. Angola also alleged a western-backed plan to destabilize Angola by a mercenary-led invasion in September, 1977. Zaire, on the other hand, denied these allegations and contended that they were a smokescreen to mask the Katangan "invasion".

Angola and some of the other frontline states, including Tanzania and Zambia, appear to regard the struggle as basically an internal one. The Zambian Daily Mail recently called the western haste to aid Mobutu "obscene".

The U.S. regards the Mobutu government as a "friend" and a leading "moderate". The U.S. poured into Zaire from 1962 to 1975 $446.8 million in economic and military loans and grants. In 1976, 1977 and 1978 increasingly large sums have been spent and are projected to make Zaire "stable" by increasing its military power. This huge strategically-placed country has vast mineral resources and untapped water power which are a powerful magnet for future U.S. investments, which total $1 billion already.
If the Katangan gendarme force cuts the rail line to the north at Tenke or captures the mines of Shaba, Zaire's precarious ability to pay back its $500 billion debt to U.S. banks will be nil, since two-thirds of Zaire's foreign exchange is earned by exports of Shaba copper. Furthermore, it will be unlikely to get the $250 million in new financing projected under a financial reform plan worked out with its creditors. Zaire may well collapse economically, destroying what western countries and the IMF had hoped would be a model for avoiding default by other third world countries.

However the U.S. and its allies may not be able to rescue Mobutu by sending arms, equipment and supplies alone. The Congressional Presentation Document for Security Assistance for FY '76 states that Zaire's army had to be reassessed after its "poor performance in Angola." "There will be a protracted period during which Zaire will have to concentrate on training and infrastructure before it can absorb more than these limited amounts of military equipment."

Are the western powers prepared to rescue Mobutu by sending in mercenaries or covert military units, as they did in the 1960's? This is the question Rep. Clarence Long, chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, raised over and over with State Department witnesses on March 24th.

But the times have indeed changed. The Katangan rebels are not the old Moise Tshombe policemen revived. They are a small force which probably has been influenced politically by its recent alliance with the MPLA and its Cuban trainers. They are certainly seasoned and well-disciplined by comparison with Mobutu's army. They are now linked in a national liberation front with the Lumumba-ist party, MNC, headed by Antoine Gizenga, and with the Marxist-Leninist Popular Revolutionary Party, which operates in eastern Zaire's Kivu region. The front aims to topple Mobutu and establish a more progressive government. Its ability to achieve this aim may depend on the extent to which the Zaire army joins in the uprising.

Congressional reaction to Carter's quick decision reflected worry and irritation with traditional rationales, but also a reluctance to challenge the President prematurely. Rep. Don Bonker, who led opposition to funds for Zaire during the Angolan war, told Vance that the U.S. was still compensating Mobutu for losses incurred in Angola and that it was unwise to continue shoring up a regime which had a record of mismanagement, aggression and violation of fundamental human rights. But in an Op-Ed piece in the Washington Post March 20th he left open the question of an over-riding security interest: "I am not arguing that one can or cannot be demonstrated, but simply at this critical juncture, a case must be laid out clearly before Congress."

Senator Dick Clark, chairman of the Senate's African Affairs Subcommittee, also stressed the need for caution "until the nature of the crisis is clarified." "I have serious doubts about the effectiveness of aid in the crisis, in the light of the unstable situation in the country and the disorganization of the government's forces."

Any Congressional opposition to further special deliveries of military goods or the fiscal year '78 request for $32.5 million in military sales and training will come from an unwillingness to intervene in an African conflict and a concern for violations of human rights in Zaire. Even the State Department's human rights report on Zaire shows that "Zairian citizens ... would not feel free to criticize publicly the President or his government." And again: "From time to time, there are allegations of brutal treatment of political prisoners, extended incarceration without trial, and even of death of prisoners under interrogation." "Prolonged detention may occur."

If Carter greatly escalates U.S. involvement in Zaire, deciding that national security considerations are more important than human rights violations, Americans may well ask whether his basic decisions do not represent after all a protection of U.S. tangible interests in the fashion preferred by Henry Kissinger rather than a devotion to American ideals. Even the Washington Post commented in a surprisingly critical editorial on March 18th:

"But we do think that the administration has reacted rashly and reflexively to an old client's dubious appeal for emergency aid. Is Angola, in helping a dissident group launch forays into Zaire, doing anything that Zaire has not done recently, and may even still be doing, to Angola? ... At least, could not the Secretary of State have designed to spell out the considerations which seemed to him to make it necessary to fly to President Mobutu's aid? This is the Carter administration, isn't it?"