The United States, which has served as the patron of Zaire's dictator Mobutu Sese Seko for more than 25 years, is still hesitating to support pro-democracy forces in that country. By refusing to demand unequivocally that Mobutu give up power, the U.S. is promoting violence and political stalemate, that could plunge Zaire into even deeper poverty and chaos.

It is urgent that the U.S.:

- call unconditionally for Mobutu to abandon power and leave Zaire, and
- offer financial and other support to enable a democratically chosen government to alleviate the desperate economic situation left by Mobutu.

BACKGROUND

Mobutu Sese Seko, a military officer supported by the CIA in the first Congo crisis of the early 1960s, assumed power as President in a 1965 coup. He has ruled Zaire (then Congo) ever since. Mobutu is reputed to be one of the richest men in the world, but has bankrupted his country through corruption and mismanagement. He has succeeded in keeping power by repression and clever divide-and-rule tactics against opponents, and by maintaining support from a variety of Western powers, including Belgium, France and the U.S..

His close ties with the U.S. have been reflected in the use of Zaire for intervention in Angola, first in the conflict around independence in 1975, and more recently in support of guerrilla operations by Jonas Savimbi's UNITA.

In recent years domestic opposition has grown stronger, and even Zaire's Western allies have become disillusioned with Mobutu’s regime. Criticism from Belgium has been particularly strong since the May 1990 massacre of as many as 150 students in Lubumbashi by Mobutu's troops. France and the U.S. have been slower to respond, but even the International Monetary Fund and the U.S. cut off aid to Zaire earlier this year.

Opposition forces, most prominently the Sacred Union grouping most opposition parties, forced Mobutu to accept a national conference on democratization in August. But Mobutu packed the conference with his supporters and surrounded it with troops, thus blocking free deliberations.

In late September unpaid troops mutinied in Kinshasa, the capital of Zaire, Western countries began to evacuate their citizens, and Mobutu was eventually forced to accept a government headed by opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi as prime minister. But, with U.S. support, Mobutu retained control of the presidency and the defense ministry.

On October 18, only two days after Tshisekedi took office, he was dismissed by Mobutu, who said that Tshisekedi was illegal since he eliminated loyalty to Mobutu from the oath of office he took. Since then, demonstrators and soldiers have repeatedly clashed in Kinshasa and other places in Zaire.
Prime Minister Tshisekedi and the Zairian opposition in general has called upon the U.S. to put pressure on Mobutu to leave. But so far the State Department has refused, arguing instead for a new compromise prime minister to be chosen.

The U.S. and other Western countries are evacuating their nationals, and do not seem inclined to prop up Mobutu yet again. Yet the failure to take positive action to get him out means escalating chaos and violence in Zaire. As long as Mobutu is there, it is unlikely that anyone can bring the armed forces under control and begin to rebuild the country.

Zaire may no longer have the strategic significance it had in the Cold War period. But it is home for almost 35 million people and is larger than any other country in southern Africa except South Africa. Zaire's people have suffered bitterly from Western support of Mobutu. They deserve a new chance, not just abandonment to the mercies of a dictator fighting to survive.

What You Can Do:

U.S. support for Mobutu is shakier than ever before, and even small amounts of public pressure could make a difference.

Write or call:

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Washington, DC 20520

Representative Mervyn Dymally  202-225-3121
House Subcommittee on Africa
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Senator Paul Simon  202-224-3121
Senate Subcommittee on Africa
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