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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN ZAIRE

ISSUE

Respect for human rights in a developing country like Zaire depends largely on improvement of the harmonious unfolding of the democratic process. However, the economic situation is deplorable, and President Mobutu is clinging to power by force.

Since Mobutu's famous speech of April 24, 1990, announcing a new openness to democracy, the country has experienced a measure of free speech. The people, awakened to democracy, immediately began to entertain high hopes. By contrast, a marked deterioration has occurred on nearly all other points.

To say that the economic situation deteriorated in 1991-92 would be an understatement - it was catastrophic. More than 100,000 jobs were lost following the events of September 1991. The civil servants have not been paid for months, and the military are shamelessly pillaging the country's businesses because they too have gone unpaid. Zaire, which continues to be one of the world's poorest countries, has acquired the unenviable reputation of being able to feed the children in the capital only every other day.

BACKGROUND

The country has been experiencing a state of profound crisis since the summer of 1991, following Mobutu's promise to allow political multipartism. European expatriates took flight in September 1991 on account of rioting and the systematic pillaging by the army in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. The numerous opposition parties reacted by demanding a National Sovereign Conference (CNS) and free elections. Mgr. Monsengwo, who is a great conciliator, was elected Chairman of the CNS, then Head of the High Council of the Republic (HCR), which succeeded it. These bodies have temporarily replaced the National Assembly, which has been given leave until the next elections.

Realizing that the institutions emerging from the CNS were seeking a greater share of the political power, Mobutu has done everything in his power to obstruct the democratic process. He had the army encircle the National Assembly building, where the HCR was to meet, and did the same with certain government departments, the office of Prime Minister Tskisekedi and the Central Bank, to show that he had control over the latter and over the armed forces. He dismissed the ministers and replaced them temporarily with general secretaries. The outcome of the standoff between Mobutu and his Prime Minister remains uncertain.