

THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN ZAIRE

ISSUE

Respect for human rights in a developing country like Zaire depends in large part on the harmonious operation of the democratic process. Unfortunately, Zaire's economic situation is deplorable, and President Mobutu is clinging to power by force.

Since the famous speech delivered by Mobutu on April 24, 1990, in which he proclaimed a new era of democratic openness, the country has experienced a measure of free speech. Having had a taste of democracy, the people immediately began to entertain high hopes. By contrast, a marked deterioration has occurred in practically every other area.

The economic situation, already catastrophic, has gone from bad to worse. Civil servants still are not being paid, and the military have resorted to looting. The illicit introduction of 30 tons of bank notes by Mobutu's entourage suggests that he is not interested in giving the government the room it needs to set the public finances in order and get the economy back on track.

BACKGROUND

Ever since Mobutu, under pressure from public opinion internationally and at home, promised to introduce multipartism, Zaire has been caught in a profound political crisis. Serious human rights violations have occurred on a number of occasions, notably in the pillaging of October 1991 and January-February 1993. The ethnic manipulations in Kassai and Kivu have also caused much suffering. Pitiful mismanagement of public funds is also responsible for the misfortunes of the people. For example, excessive use of the banknote plate has automatically resulted in inflation, thus aggravating the already difficult living conditions. At the same time, large sums of money are disappearing from the regular monetary circuits and being diverted to other purposes.

Realizing that the institutions emerging from the National Sovereign Conference (NSC) would seek a larger share of the political power, Mobutu has done everything he can to obstruct the democratic process. In addition to deploying the armed forces to intimidate the opposition, he removed the Prime Minister installed through the NSC and set up one of his own choosing. The resultant duplication of institutions led to an impasse which lasted until the High Council/Transitional Parliament elected Prime Minister Kengo in June 1994.

Freedom of opinion has improved in recent years, but remains subject to reprisals. The electronic press is still controlled and muzzled by the State.

Zaire has a form of tribalism which rests on ethnic criteria. Tribal discrimination is especially virulent in the provinces of Shaba, Kasai and Kivu. The Constitution guarantees