Moulded by the US

Time seems to have almost run out for President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire. The ailing president has flown to Gabon for a meeting with President Omar Bongo and heads of state of neighbouring Congo, Togo, Equatorial Guinea, Chad and the Central African Republic. His departure from Zaire has stirred speculation that his Gabon visit could merely be a cover for his final departure from Kinshasa before it falls into the rebel hands.

In their determined advance on the capital, the Zairean rebels have meanwhile captured the strategic town of Kenge, 120 miles east of Kinshasa. Some 200 civilians and 100 Zairean government troops are believed to have been killed in heavy street battles for control of the town. The latest reports indicate that Kinshasa is bracing for the rebel assault. The rebels are in effective control of over two-thirds of the war-torn country.

The rebel advance on the capital has come in the wake of the first ever face-to-face contact, arranged some days ago by President Nelson Mandela, between the beleaguered president and rebel commander Laurent Kabila aboard a South African naval vessel. Viewed in perspective, instead of narrowing down the gap between their respective positions, the meeting appears only to have brought things to a head. At the meeting Mobutu is believed to have pledged not to contest the forthcoming election in Zaire and that he would hand over power to an elected president. Laurent Kabila, on the other hand, demanded that he step down immediately and hand over power to a coalition set-up which should organise a fair and impartial election in the country.

The crisis in Zaire has been brewing since October last year. Laurent Kabila, a former Marxist nationalist and warlord, managed to rally an assorted group of disenchanted opposition leaders under the umbrella of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (ADEL). Incidentally, Zaire's vast size (it is the third largest country in Africa and has a population of 40 million) and location (it borders nine countries in Central Africa) have made its existence trouble-ridden. Its heterogeneity with as many as 200 ethnic groups makes it a difficult country to govern.

To all this should be added Mr Mobutu's 32-year autocratic rule backed by Washington which viewed him as a bulwark against communism at the height of the cold war. There is a mounting body of evidence that Laurent Kabila is driven by forces from beyond Zaire's borders since the first shots were fired in October. Africa-watchers have tended to perceive Rwanda as the prime mover behind the rebellion. Uganda too is believed to have been in from the start, with Washington providing the final approval.

Rwanda's interest in Zaire is clear. For more than two years, one and a half million Hutu refugees were camped just outside its border with Zaire. That was destabilising enough to the attempt to rebuild the country after the anti-Tutsi genocide. But captured documents have proved that Hutu extremists in the camp — fed by Western governments and agencies — were finalising plans to re-invade Rwanda. It is further believed by the Western observers that Rwanda had planned an outright invasion of Zaire to clear the camps. But a new round of anti-Tutsi pogroms in eastern Zaire had provided both a source of rebels and a cover for the attack.

The Tutsi victims are believed to have been galvanised into the newly invented Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire. According to knowledgeable sources, Rwanda and Uganda provided the military leadership, training and weapons. Mr Kabila, it is further maintained, was plucked from obscurity to head the 'revolution'. Rwanda's initial intent was limited to removing the threat posed by the camps and to carving out a buffer zone inside Zaire.

As rebel successes grew, Zaire's other neighbours emerged into the light as Mobutu had made too many enemies over the years. It is maintained by the western observers that Tanzania had helped train the Alliance troops. And some rebels were even permitted to travel through Zambia. But, according to the western perception, it is Angola which has played a prominent role as it has been home to the Zaireans who fled into exile when Katanga's independence was crushed in the early 1960s. It is believed that the Katangans, backed by Angolan troops, have been trained, armed and sent across the border. There is also a perception that Angola's armed forces have had a score to settle with Mr Mobutu for hosting Jonas Svimbi's UNITA through two decades of civil war.

A brief history of the region would help put things in their proper perspective. It was King Leopold of Belgium's effort to secure the wealth of what is now Zaire that had led to the Berlin Conference of 1884 at which the colonial powers had divided Africa into spheres of influence and imposed most of the continent's present-day national borders. The centrality of Zaire during the cold war had led the West, fearing Soviet influence, to condone the establishment in Zaire and elsewhere in Central Africa of autocratic regimes in the 1960s. Zaire anchors that part of Africa which has the greatest potential for development.

Zaire's vast mineral wealth has been the mainstay of its economy, accounting for about 75 percent of the country's export earnings. The most notable of these minerals are: copper, diamonds (of which it is the world's leading producer), cobalt (65 percent of the world's reserves) zinc, manganese and uranium. Offshore petroleum production in Zaire began in 1975. Its vast mineral wealth has thus served as a temptation for the West over the centuries. Under Belgian rule Zaire (formerly the Congo) had become a rich field for European investment, especially in vast mining operations. This ruthless exploitation stirred nationalist sentiment which reached its peak in the 1950s and Belgium was forced to grant independence to the Congo (present day Zaire) in 1960.

However, the new Republic of Congo was soon torn by ethnic and personal rivalries. Within weeks the army mutinied and the ensuing civil war, which involved the UN forces, Belgian troops, and the US and Soviet support to the opposing factions, did not end until 1963 when Katanga agreed to rejoin the republic. However, by the late 1960s the country had begun to experience a degree of political stability. Col Joseph Mobutu (who later named himself Mobutu Sese Seko) seized power in 1960. The country's name was changed to the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1964 to Zaire

in 1971.

Unfortunately, during the cold war Zaire's potential was callously squandered. Government mismanagement, corruption and violation o human rights were condoned by the West because Zaire was an ally in its global battle against communism. Vast amounts in the name of development aid were funnelled into Zaire to bolster the regime. An as was only to be expected, the country gradually slid into a cesspool of deeper corruption and inefficiency.

Rebel leader Laurent Kabila now practically controls the rich eastern part of Zaire. Kinshasa has been cut off from resources and is isolated. A military showdown in these circumstances will certainly lead to heavy civilian casualties and destruction of the infrastructure. Laurent Kabila's demand that President Mobutu step down immediately to pave way for election under a neutral caretaker set-up makes eminent sense. The United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity should ensure that the country does not slide into absolute chaos as this will lead to destabilisation of the whole of Central Africa. High-level diplomatic initiatives should be mounted immediately to stem the rapid slide. A smooth transition to the new political dispensation in Zaire should be the goal of everybody involved in the tragic conflict.