

Kasaians of Luba origin

Profile

Kasaians mostly live in Kasai in south-central DRC but a few remain in Katanga, which during Mobutu's rule was called Shaba. Most of those who migrated to Katanga from the late nineteenth century, after the discovery of rich mineral deposits, were forced to return to Kasai in the 1990s.

Historical context

The Kasai region of south-central DRC attracted Christian missionaries at least twenty years before the southern province of Katanga. When copper was discovered in Katanga in the late nineteenth century mineworkers were recruited from outside the region, particularly from areas such as Kasai where education and acculturation to colonial practices were more advanced. Economic opportunities continued to attract migrants from Kasai to Katanga even after the discovery of diamonds in Kasai; many Kasaians adopted local languages and many have lived in Katanga for several generations. Most are of Luba origin, from Kasai Oriental. Estimates of their numbers before the expulsions range from 500,000 to 1,000,000 people, comprising over a third of the population of mining towns such as Likasi and Kolwezi, as well as of the regional capital Lubumbashi. Kasaians attracted resentment from Katangans as a result of their educational and economic advantages, but coexistence had generally been peaceful.

Violence against Kasaians in Katanga began soon after the election of Etienne Tshisekedi, himself a Kasaian of Luba origin, as prime minister in 1992. Highly inflammatory speeches denigrating Kasaians were made by leading pro-Mobutu politicians, including the governor of Shaba (as Katanga was known at the time). In a prolonged campaign of harassment and violence, around 6,000 people were killed and up to 400,000 were forced to flee to Kasai, overcrowding its cities and often facing unemployment or destitution.

Mobutu's departure in 1997 brought little relief for Katanga province or the Kasaian population there. Laurent Kabila, who came from the northern part of Katanga, established Mai-Mai militias in an effort to fend off Rwandan forces and their local allies, as well as target civilian Banyamulenge (Congolese Tutsi) who were suspected of being pro-Rwandan. Many of the militias were tied to Kabila's inner circle in Kinshasa, and were used to control southern Katanga and the revenue from the area's rich deposits of copper and cobalt.

In the scramble for control over natural resources, the Mai-Mai have targeted each other and come into conflict with the army. Kabila had difficulties making regular payments to his forces and his army became dependant on stealing local resources. Civilians in southern Katanga, especially Kasaians of Luba origin, have suffered immensely amid the violence, and many have been killed or displaced. Eruptions of violence continued after Laurent Kabila's assassination in January 2001 and throughout Joseph Kabila's transitional government.

Current issues

Since November 2004 around 150,000 Katangans, many of Kasai-Luba origin, have been displaced by fighting among Mai-Mai militias and the army.