



Africa Review

Article

Zaire: The Military Under Mobutu

Since coming to power in a military coup in 1965, President Mobutu has created a loyal, albeit largely ineffective, Army.
 Mobutu faces no immediate threat from either senior officers or the rank and file, and key units are composed of tribesmen from his Equateurian region. The Army, however, lacks both the cohesion and manpower necessary to protect adequately the country's borders from attacks by dissidents. The President almost certainly will continue to rely on infusions of foreign military equipment and advisers to keep the military functioning at the minimal levels. The spread of AIDS in the military will probably further erode its limited combat capabilities over the next several years.

Mobutu's Dominance

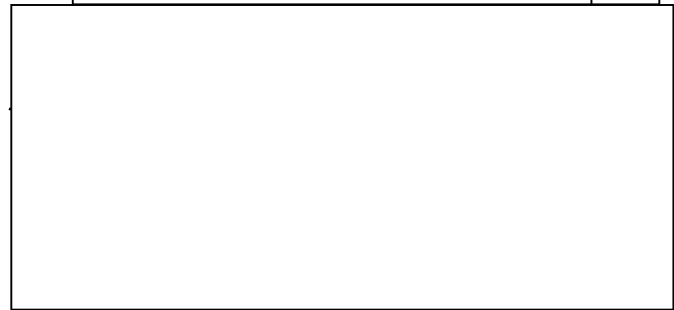
Mobutu has successfully kept the 70,000-man military out of the political arena.
 not only is Mobutu the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and Minister of Defense, but no officer holds a cabinet post, and regional unit commanders are subordinate to the local civilian authorities. political officers—probably loyal party members—assigned to each unit serve as Mobutu's "eyes and ears," and the President regularly shuffles senior military positions to prevent officers from developing an independent base of support.

The Officers Corps. Although officers occasionally have been arrested for "coup plotting," there is no evidence of organized dissent.
 the last confirmed coup plot occurred in 1978, when 62 officers—eight of whom were subsequently executed—planned to incite urban insurrection and topple Mobutu.

last year Lieutenant Colonel Mokonzi, chief of staff of the 12th brigade in the Kamanyola Division, was exiled to his home village for coup plotting, but the charge against him was based solely on rumor. Last summer, Army Chief of Staff Mukobo and four of his staff officers were discharged and exiled to their villages after they had received 100 rifles and ammunition from a visiting Belgian frigate:

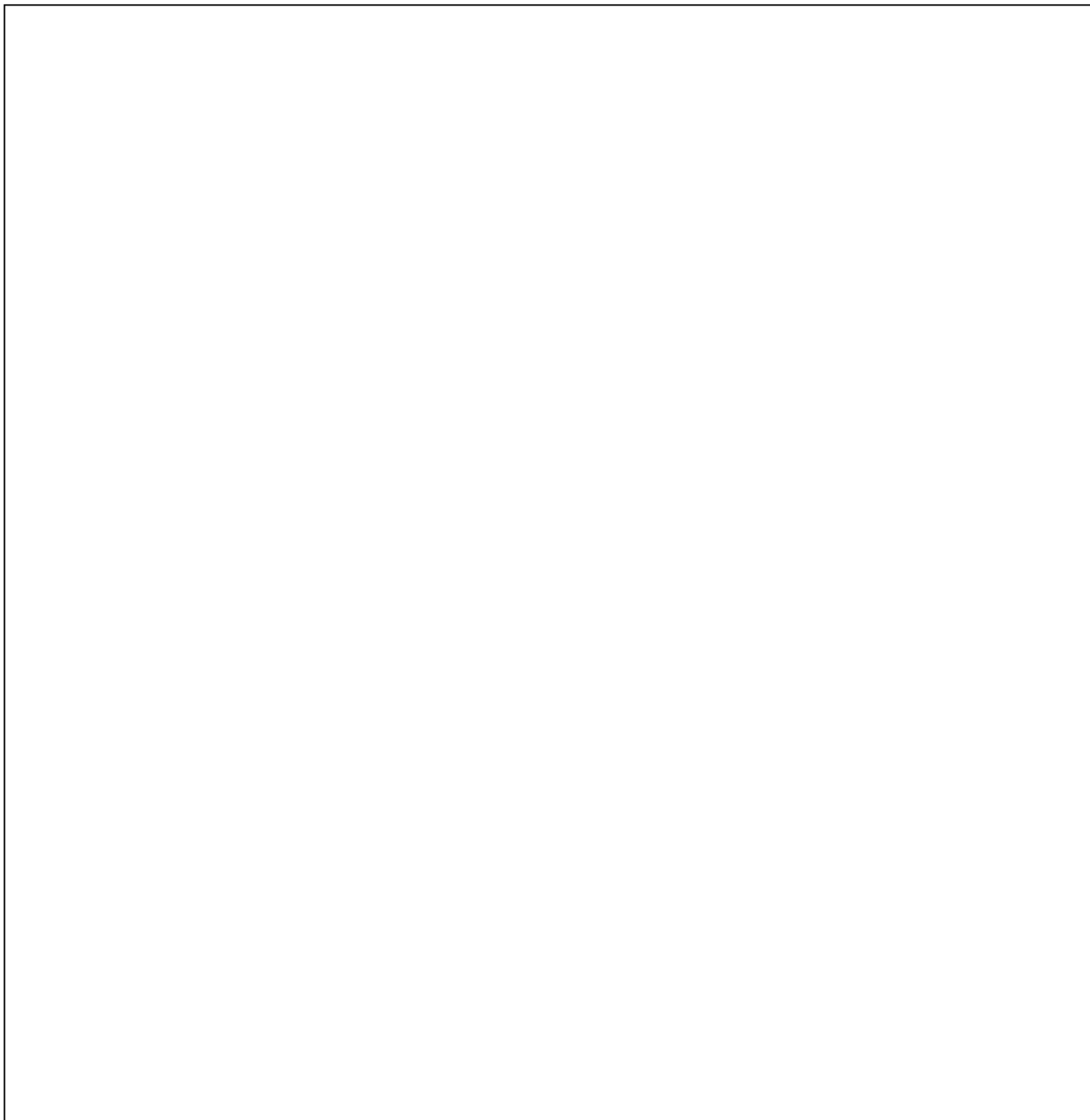


The Rank and File. The enlisted ranks are equally passive, with soldiers deserting from their units to demonstrate their dissent rather than turning to coup plotting. inadequate pay, poor working conditions, and long hours on duty have spawned a high desertion rate among enlisted men;



The Special Presidential Division. The one exception to the Zairean Army's generally dilapidated state may be the 6,000-man Special Presidential Division (DSP), but it too is beginning to suffer from problems generic to the other units.

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[redacted] the DSP, which is responsible for the President's safety, is well equipped and manned with personnel of above average competence. In addition, most of the soldiers come from the President's Equateur region, which is generally thought to ensure their loyalty to the regime. Nevertheless, [redacted]

[redacted] even the DSP is suffering from declining discipline and morale, partly because of Zaire's general economic deterioration. In addition, [redacted] the DSP experienced a rising rate of desertion in the first quarter of this year. [redacted]

A Logistic "Nightmare." [redacted]

[redacted] the military's logistic system is a "disaster" because of mismanagement, corruption, and disinterest. Ammunition is in short supply for most units, and even brigades in the key Shaba region have only enough stocks to last for one week of combat. [redacted] In addition, many units have poor communication links to the capital and outlying provinces. [redacted]

[redacted] because fuel is a major source of income for soldiers, military vehicles are normally drained of gasoline after the completion of their daily missions and the fuel is then resold on the black market. [redacted]

Logistic problems also inhibit the capacity of the Zairean military to deploy its troops quickly to vulnerable regions along the Angolan and Ugandan frontiers. Some regiments have no trucks, while others lack the spare parts to keep their few vehicles in operating condition. [redacted]

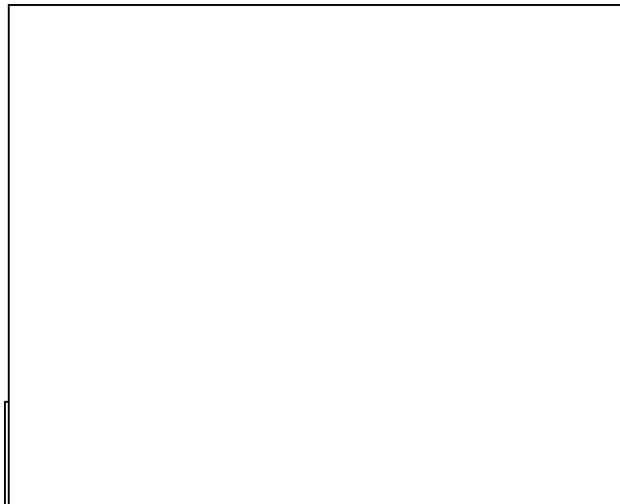
[redacted] the United States has given Zaire 635 two-and-a-half-ton trucks since 1970, but only about 150 remain operable due in large part to the difficult road conditions and poor vehicle maintenance. Although Zaire's Air Force—which has three operable C-130s—has a limited airlift capability, we would expect Zaire's shortage of fuel to hamper its capability to deploy large numbers of troops to remote regions infiltrated by dissidents. [redacted]

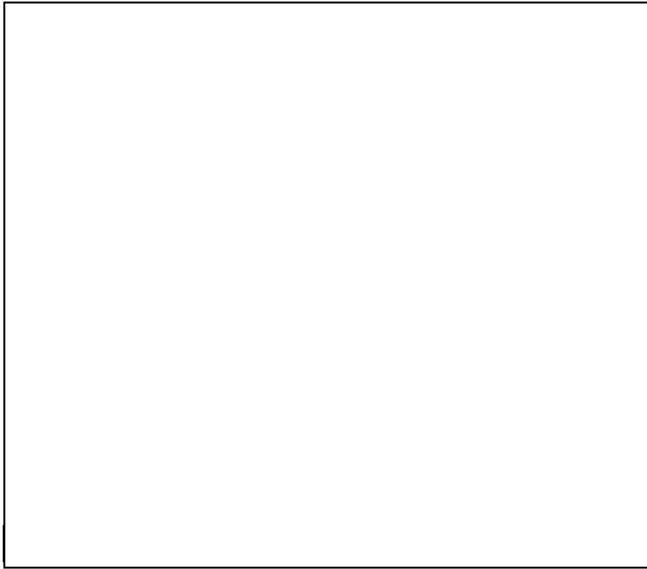
Foreign Presence and Assistance

Zaire's military is heavily dependent on both foreign advisers and equipment, without which it could barely function, [redacted]

Although Mobutu has used this potpourri of assistance to prevent dependence on a single foreign source, this strategy undermines the cohesion of the Army. [redacted]

[redacted] officers often form cliques based on their foreign training. In addition, the differing military tactics introduced by the variety of foreign advisers may make coordinated operations between some different battalions difficult. [redacted]





with AIDS—about 8 percent. The mandatory AIDS testing imposed by most Western countries for foreign military students may reduce the Army's Western contacts and reduce its pro-Western leanings. Given the fairly high desertion rate, and the fact that many soldiers return to their home villages after service, the military is likely to help spread AIDS in rural areas, in our view. [redacted]

Outlook

Mobutu has created a generally passive military that poses no immediate threat to his rule. This strategy, however, has resulted in a poorly disciplined force unable adequately to patrol Zaire's borders. Problems that almost certainly will continue to plague the Army include understrength units, and shortages of fuel, vehicles, ammunition, and communications equipment. Mobutu will rely heavily on the DSP to keep him in power, but if the unit remains beset by desertion and declining morale, its loyalty may also become suspect. [redacted]

China. The Chinese maintain a small presence in Zaire to assist a variety of Army units and the Navy. [redacted] most of the 43 Chinese advisers are assigned to the 41st Brigade at Kisingani, and the 1st Armored Brigade, located about 160 kilometers southwest of Kinshasa. [redacted] Chinese technicians at Boma provide all the maintenance for the country's five Shanghai-class frigates. [redacted] the Chinese assistance is well-received by Zairean officials. [redacted]

The Impact of AIDS

The spread of AIDS in Zaire is likely to undermine the military's limited cohesion and effectiveness over the next several years. [redacted] new recruits suffer from a high incidence rate because of their contact with the prostitutes in Kinshasa. [redacted] Zaire is ranked fourth among African countries in percentage of population infected

In our view, the military will certainly play a major, if not decisive, role in a post-Mobutu Zaire. Should Mobutu unexpectedly die or be assassinated, senior officers may step in, especially if civilian elite are beset by squabbling and intense power struggles. [redacted] General Eluki, for example, could probably put together the necessary political and military consensus if a vacuum develops after Mobutu's death. Even if a successor civilian regime is cohesive enough to assert itself, we believe the military would successfully demand a greater share of political power. [redacted]

