



## Tensions rise between Kinshasa and Brussels - Could the Chinese element be to blame?



Despite the start of the European summer, relations between Brussels and Kinshasa seem to be cooling. While these relations have been progressively worsening for a while, the current impasse recently hit a new low with the visit in May of 3 Belgian Ministers to the Democratic Republic of Congo for a 4 day mission.

After what has been described as a difficult visit between the Belgian Ministers of Defence, Development and Foreign Affairs with President Joseph Kabila, Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Karel De Gucht, opened the usual diplomatic evening cocktail with a very critical speech. Focussing on "good governance", the Minister pointed out the need for a campaign against corruption, transparency in public tenders, improvement of financial management and the fight against sexual violence in Eastern Congo. In front of Congolese diplomats and officials, he completed his lecture on "good governance" by saying: *"Good governance means contesting the privileges of high-ranking persons. One must expect fierce resistance from those who are sacrificing the well-being of the Congolese people for their own interest. Good governance can only be materialised with the full support of the Congolese government and this support must now be stated in words but also in acts."*

Back in Brussels, De Gucht continued this line of thought, talking about the "moral right" of Belgium to have a close look at politics in the DRC, given the fact that the Belgian development aid is reaching about € 200 million. Since then, relations between the 2 countries have been strained.

A week after De Gucht's speech, the backlash appeared to begin: First, the Congolese government decided to close down its consulate in Antwerp; secondly, they ordered the DRC Ambassador to fly home for "consultations"; thirdly, the Belgian consulates of Lubumbashi and Bukavu were requested to be closed (the latter having only been inaugurated in November 2007); and lastly, it was announced by Kinshasa that a general review of the Belgian-supported development projects would be held. While this is certainly not the first time tensions between the 2 have flared up, it holds significance as the first time since Joseph Kabila took office.

However, the apparent breakdown in diplomatic relations goes further than historical animosity. Since the end-2007 deals with China ensuring billions of dollars, the relationship between Brussels and Kinshasa has been deteriorating. Belgium has discovered that the DRC is busy turning towards China like so many other African countries. This unexpected change of heart has caused quiet retaliation from the two sides.

The first victim of this hidden war was Pierre Chevalier, Belgium's representative to the UN Security Council. A member of the liberal party, he had to resign after his link to one of the biggest mining companies in the DRC - Forrest Group - was leaked to the press. In return, on 13 May, a Belgian judge accused the Central Bank of the DRC of money laundering. This stems from the mismanagement of some US\$ 80 million on the part of the Central Bank by the diamond public enterprise, MIBA. At the time, MIBA was run by Jean-Charles Okoto, former Chairman of Joseph Kabila's party. For the time being and given its domestic problems, the Belgian government does not want to have an open diplomatic crisis with the DRC and tries to play down



the tension. Messengers were sent from both sides but, despite several attempts, the Belgian Prime Minister has not yet managed to speak to Joseph Kabila.

By criticising governance in the DRC, Karel De Gucht entered a very slippery battlefield. The long and sophisticated history of the Belgian financial interests in post-independence Congo is not an example of good governance and it can only lead to revelations such as the one that caused Pierre Chevalier's fall. But the Foreign Minister's choice is no coincidence: it must be understood in the context of Belgian domestic politics and the fight between the Dutch- and French-speaking population, with the latter having tight political and financial connections with the Congolese elite.



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