At least 17 dead amid opposition protests in Congo’s capital

September 19, 2016

The Washington Post

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/at-least-17-dead-amid-opposition-protests-in-congos-capital/2016/09/19/0b2a820c-7e94-11e6-8d13-d7c704ef9fd9_story.html?utm_term=.543220773b5a>

Street clashes between security forces and demonstrators opposed to President Joseph Kabila left at least 17 people dead in Congo’s capital on Monday in a dramatic sign of mounting tensions after officials sought to delay the upcoming election until next year.

Some view the election delay as a way for Kabila to prolong his rule beyond the end of his mandate in late December.

“Today is a warning. He must leave by December,” protester Salomon Kaba said.

Protesters threw stones and set tires and vehicles ablaze, according to witnesses. Interior Minister Évariste Boshab confirmed that three police officers were among the dead, including one who was burned alive.

Government spokesman Lambert Mende called the demonstrations a premeditated criminal act.

“This wasn’t a demonstration at all but an attempt to unleash civil war in the city of Kinshasa,” he said. “The authorities decided to put an end to the protest and disperse it.”

Eva Mwakasa, a member of the opposition coalition La Dynamique, said it was difficult to give a death toll as protesters had been dispersed by tear gas.

For months, observers have questioned whether Congo could hold the presidential vote as scheduled on Nov. 27. The country’s electoral commission had indicated that the voter list would not be formalized before next July.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Over the weekend, the commission made an official request to the constitutional court for a delay of the vote.

Kabila, who came to power after his father’s assassination in 2001, has yet to announce whether he will pursue another term in office, though the constitution prohibits it.

The violence comes amid growing fears that the delay could lead to prolonged unrest in Congo, a nation as vast in size as Western Europe. The mineral-rich but largely impoverished country suffered back-to-back civil wars until 2003, and previous instability has drawn in armies from neighboring countries.

While the ruling party has held talks as part of a national dialogue, many of the top opposition figures have not participated. In recent days, the ruling party has floated the idea of a unity government with opposition members until the next election, though the proposal would keep Kabila in charge during that period.

Demonstrations also have erupted outside the capital. Human Rights Watch said police fired live bullets Friday in the southeastern city of Lubumbashi. The group released a report Sunday that described arrests targeting members of the opposition in recent days.