

## **DR Congo adopts new constitution**

By Michel Smitall / MONUC

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**The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) adopted a new constitution on Saturday, February 18, 2006 which marks the start of the country's Third Republic. The constitution is a milestone in Congo's transition from war to a decentralized democratic state that paves the way for the first elections in more than 40 years. It takes immediate effect.**



The DRC entered a historic phase today with the adoption of its new constitution and national symbols.

"The constitution promulgated today inaugurates a new era for our country," President Joseph Kabila said at a ceremony in Kinshasa. He called on the nation to unite as it prepares for the historic elections scheduled for April. "I now invite all political actors, for the sake of our people to respect the verdict of the ballot box," he added.

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Thousands of people gathered in the gardens of the presidential palace, waving the country's new flag as the President signed into law the new constitution. The new national flag depicts a yellow star in the upper-left corner on a light-blue background with a diagonal red stripe edged in yellow.

DRC's constitution was accepted by 84 percent of the ballots cast in a referendum on December 18 and 19, 2005. It provides for a decentralized political system with provincial administrations responsible for local decision-making and controlling 40 percent of public funds.

It also lowers the minimum age for presidential candidates from 35 to 30 - allowing an election bid by the 34-year-old President Kabila.

The ceremony was attended by South African President Thabo Mbeki and Denis Sassou-Nguesso, President of the neighboring Republic of Congo and chairman of the African Union. Ketumile Masire, the former facilitator for the inter-Congolese dialogue, was also present, as well as Moustapha Niasse of Senegal, former UN special envoy. Louis Michel and Aldo Ajelo represented the European Union.

"This is a very important day in the life of the Congolese people," said William Swing, Special Representative of the Secretary General in the DR Congo. "The road is now open to conclude the transition period with the promulgation of the electoral law and the holding of the elections," the chief of MONUC added.

The new law replaces the interim constitution which laid the foundation for a transitional government that will govern the country until the June 30 election deadline. Elections were initially due by mid 2005.

