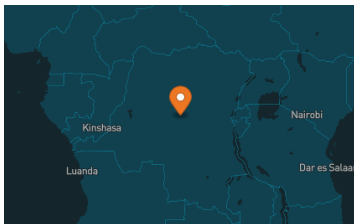


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Regional Powers Should Drive Diplomacy in DR Congo as M23 Surrounds Goma

Fighting has intensified in North Kivu, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, with M23 rebels now partially encircling the major city Goma. Regional leaders, particularly Kenya, should press hard for a halt to the insurgent advances and urge Kinshasa and Kigali to reduce tensions.



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Fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)'s eastern North Kivu province has worsened in recent weeks, displacing tens of thousands and bringing rebels to within 20km of the provincial capital Goma. Hostilities between March 23 (M23) insurgents and Congo's national army have also triggered a spike in tensions between the DRC and Rwanda, with the former accusing the latter of supporting the M23. Regional diplomacy aimed at de-escalating tensions between Kinshasa and Kigali, notably a Great Lakes summit snubbed by

Rwandan President Paul Kagame on 23 November, has so far yielded limited results: on 25 November, a ceasefire that was supposed to come into place was violated immediately, as the M23 fought pro-government groups. Deft diplomatic manoeuvring will be needed to overcome the distrust between the two countries. Kenya, which has good relations with both and has just started to deploy troops in Goma as part of an East African force, is well placed to coordinate de-escalatory steps. It should push Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi to dial down rhetoric criticising Rwanda, while pressing Kigali to use its likely considerable influence over the M23 to push for a ceasefire and a withdrawal from recently taken towns.

The M23's Expansion

Dormant since 2013, the M23 re-emerged in November 2021, to the surprise of many, and has steadily advanced to occupy much of North Kivu since then. It is active mostly in the Rutshuru territory, about 70km north of Goma, where it has attacked roads and villages. In June, it seized Bunagana town, a key trading post on the Ugandan border linking North Kivu to the DRC's neighbour.

The M23's assault in North Kivu bears striking resemblance to its last campaign a decade ago. The group was formed from existing rebel movements and former insurgents who had been integrated into the national army. It largely comprised – and still comprises –

Congolese who are Tutsi, an ethnic group present throughout the Great Lakes region. Its main aim was to push back on plans to break up army units composed of former rebels based in the east and deploy their members in other areas. That scheme threatened their many illicit activities in the eastern DRC. After taking over large areas of North Kivu, including, briefly, Goma in November 2012, the M23 was defeated by a combination of regional diplomacy, including remonstrations with its backers in Rwanda and Uganda, and military pressure from a UN contingent known as the Force Intervention Brigade, mandated explicitly to fight armed groups in the DRC's east. The brigade is still stationed in the provincial capital, although it has carried out few offensive operations in recent years. Most of the M23's members retreated to camps in Rwanda and Uganda.

Fighting between the M23 and the DRC's national army took a new turn on 12 November, displacing tens of thousands more Congolese.

The group now claims that it aims to pressure Kinshasa to abide by previous agreements, which include amnesties for fighters returning to the Congo, and more generally that it is defending Congolese Tutsi interests. It is also likely seeking reintegration into the national army, from where it perceives that it will be better placed to defend its political and commercial interests. The M23 is well armed and organised. It poses a formidable threat to the national army – and to the UN, which has not taken the fight to the insurgents as it did in 2012.

Fighting between the M23 and the DRC's national army took a new turn on 12 November, as the rebel group expanded its operations beyond Rutshuru, displacing tens of thousands more Congolese. It soon reached the Nyiragongo territory, closer to Goma. In the following days, the army fought the insurgents around Kibumba town, 27km from the provincial capital. But rather than advancing on Goma, the M23 pushed into the Masisi territory to the west, taking several towns like Tongo and Bambo. This manoeuvre has led many in Goma to fear that the M23 could encircle the city, which backs onto Lake Kivu to the south and the Rwandan border to the east, cutting off its supplies when it is already suffering steep food price rises. Some, including senior Congolese officials and their Kenyan counterparts, worry that the M23 may still attempt to take over Goma.

Regional Tensions

The latest upheaval in North Kivu has a significant regional dimension, with enmity between Kinshasa and Kigali at its centre. On coming to power in 2019, Tshisekedi attempted a rapprochement with Kigali, which many Congolese partly blame for years of bloodletting, but whose influence is needed to bring stability to the country's troubled east. As [Crisis Group has previously described](#), Tshisekedi's efforts at mending relations with Rwanda were stymied in 2021, when he drew closer to Uganda to seek its support in fighting the Allied

Democratic Forces (ADF), a murderous, mainly Ugandan militant group wreaking havoc in neighbouring Ituri province.

The move irked Kigali, which saw itself being deprived of influence in the eastern DRC, where it has significant economic interests and has long fought insurgents of the National Liberation Front of Rwanda (known by the French acronym, FDLR), a remnant of the militia responsible for the 1994 genocide. The FDLR predominantly comprises Hutus – the majority group in Rwanda – and is vehemently opposed to the Rwandan leadership headed by President Paul Kagame. Rwanda was doubly angered when Burundian troops also entered the DRC, with Kinshasa's tacit approval, to tackle insurgents who aim to topple the government in Bujumbura.

The M23's November advances led to heated exchanges. Kinshasa accuses Kigali of backing the M23, which it sees as part of a wider Rwandan attempt to control the eastern Congo's vast mineral resources. Kigali, in turn, accuses its neighbour of working with the FDLR. Both governments deny supporting rebels. But the evidence suggests otherwise: the Congolese army's collaboration with the FDLR has been **repeatedly demonstrated**, and Rwandan support for the M23 is equally **well documented**, both historically and during the present crisis. Many Congolese, including parliamentarians, also see Uganda's hand behind the M23, and some diplomats representing

UN Security Council members **appear to** share their concern. The UN reports that detail cooperation between the insurgents and Kigali do not mention a Ugandan role, however, when similar reports did so in 2012. Nor has Tshisekedi criticised Kampala in the same terms – though possibly partly because he is hoping Ugandan troops can flush out ADF insurgents.

Several diplomatic initiatives aim to defuse tensions among the Great Lakes countries.

Several diplomatic initiatives aim to defuse tensions among the Great Lakes countries. What looks like the most viable track, despite its lack of success so far, is under the auspices of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). Angola, now joined by Kenya, is leading the ICGLR effort. In July, it brokered the **Luanda roadmap agreement** between Tshisekedi and Kagame, which appears to tacitly acknowledge that Kigali and Kinshasa have influence over the M23 and the FDLR, respectively, committing both sides to rein in their proxies. The roadmap also lays out a range of confidence-building measures. Yet while the talks were welcome, the atmosphere remained frosty, and in late October, Tshisekedi expelled the Rwandan ambassador to Kinshasa in protest of what he perceived as Kigali's continued support for the M23. A subsequent meeting of foreign ministers in Luanda on 5 November **seemingly did little to quell tensions**.

East African Intervention

Regional tensions likely underpinned Tshisekedi's decision that the DRC join the East African Community (EAC) earlier in 2022. That paved the way for the establishment of a force, made up of Kenyan, Ugandan, Burundian and South Sudanese soldiers, to help the Congolese army battle the various armed groups in the country's east. Like his predecessor Joseph Kabila, who forged close ties with Southern African countries, Tshisekedi is seeking support from farther afield to buttress his position in negotiations with neighbouring Rwanda. When discussing what shape the force would take, Kinshasa firmly rejected contingents from Rwanda, though did accept Rwandan personnel in the operational headquarters.

The new EAC force faces challenges, but its deployment could open up opportunities. Uganda and Burundi are folding in the units they had already dispatched to the DRC with Tshisekedi's permission, while the South Sudanese are expected to make a small deployment. Soldiers from all these countries are operating near their own national frontiers. In contrast, Kenyan troops have the unenviable task of confronting the M23 in North Kivu, far from Kenyan territory. The Congolese public and army command clearly expect the Kenyans to take the fight to the M23, which would be tactically complex. The Kenyans see the threat of such a move, an intent clearly signalled in the 23 November meeting communiqué,

as critical to pressuring the M23 and reminding it of the successful military operations that led to its defeat some years ago. But the Kenyans have also repeatedly underlined that they would prefer to avoid fighting if they can, and if diplomatic pressure, presumably on Rwanda, can bring about a ceasefire, in which case their deployment might be limited to Goma as well as nearby roads and displacement camps. Given the steep challenges on the ground, Crisis Group has [previously argued](#) that the EAC force should be seen primarily as a means of creating space for dialogue.

Alongside the military deployment, the EAC has initiated talks between armed groups and Congolese officials, the first and second rounds of which were held in April and May, with a third taking place in Nairobi from 28 November. Headed by former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, the talks are in principle open to all Congolese armed groups in the eastern DRC, excluding foreigners such as the ADF, who are likely too extreme in their views to join talks in any case. In exchanges with Crisis Group, Congolese officials have talked up progress made so far, notably in better understanding the diverse armed groups' motivations. But only eighteen of the dozens of armed groups in eastern Congo – and not the most potent ones – turned up in Nairobi in April. Most importantly, the M23 was expelled from the April talks due to its continued offensive. A third round of talks including community leaders from areas

affected by armed group activity opened on 28 November. But the M23 was not invited.

Diplomatic Drive

Over recent weeks, mediators have worked hard, seemingly improving the coordination between the Kenyan track – which brings together the Congolese government and armed groups – and the Angolan track involving regional diplomats. Notably, from 4 to 15 November, Kenyatta visited Bujumbura, Kinshasa and Goma and spoke by telephone to Kagame and UN Secretary-General António Guterres. Angolan President João Lourenço was in Kigali on 11 November, while Kenya's new president, William Ruto, flew to Kinshasa for meetings with Tshisekedi on 20 November. In a **striking communiqué** two days earlier, Kenyatta reported points of agreement with Kagame, including that Kigali would “assist the [EAC talks] facilitator [Kenyatta] to urge the M23 to cease fire and withdraw from captured territory”.

Following this diplomacy, Lourenço convened a summit in Luanda on 23 November, but it seems to have been a missed opportunity. President Kagame, who did not respond to Kenyatta's communiqué, skipped the summit, sending his foreign minister, Vincent Biruta, instead. The **final communiqué** underlines the need for the M23 to withdraw to previous positions, and the imperative of tackling “negative and terrorist forces in [the] eastern DRC”, terms President Tshisekedi

has previously used to describe the M23.

The [Luanda Summit] communiqué lays out a tight timetable for other insurgent groups to lay down their arms.

The communiqué lays out a tight timetable for other insurgent groups to lay down their arms but makes scant mention of the FDLR. The focus remains on the M23, against which the new EAC regional force will act “in case of non-compliance”.

Nairobi and Kinshasa may see such sabre rattling as necessary to help bring the M23 to heel, but it is unlikely in itself to change facts on the ground without deeper resolution of regional differences, including at least acknowledging Rwanda’s concerns about the FDLR. Tshisekedi and Kagame have only met once since the summit in July, in the margins of the UN General Assembly in September, and the Luanda communiqué, while adding welcome urgency, adds little new to repeated demands to insurgents to lay down arms and those with influence over them to help. Already, the M23 has reacted by saying it is not bound by the agreement and **repeating demands to negotiate directly with Kinshasa**. While the group reiterated that it is open in principle to a ceasefire, it restarted hostilities in Rutshuru territory, fighting one of several Congolese armed groups that has recently begun opposing it. The

Congolese public and politicians from all sides are increasingly mobilised against the M23 and its perceived Rwandan backers.

Steps to De-escalation

The limited progress achieved so far by regional diplomacy is hardly surprising, given the high level of distrust between Kinshasa and Kigali, but progress toward a settlement is still within reach. Regional powers need to follow up the Luanda summit with pressure on both capitals to avert further violence in North Kivu, which would spell a worsening humanitarian disaster throughout the region. Kenya, which has grabbed the spotlight with its deployment to North Kivu, is well placed to lead diplomatic efforts. It enjoys an open door in Kinshasa, due not least to Kenyan forces' role in protecting Goma today, but also to Nairobi's history of cordiality with Tshisekedi, whom Kenyatta strongly backed in his 2018 presidential bid. Further, Kenya has good relations with all countries in the region, including Rwanda. As it has no record of supporting armed groups in the eastern DRC, others see it as a neutral arbiter. Nairobi also has growing commercial interests in the Great Lakes region: it has repeatedly stated that its objectives are to push for stability and reduce regional tensions in order to increase trade.

Kenya should continue to throw its weight behind the ICGLR process and try to broker reciprocal de-escalatory steps in the hope of

achieving a ceasefire around Goma and pushing the M23 to start withdrawing from its newly occupied positions. Kenyan emissaries could use their sway with President Tshisekedi to urge him to tone down some of his inflammatory rhetoric aimed at Kigali. In addition, they might encourage him to continue his recent conciliatory meetings with North Kivu's Tutsi and Kinyarwanda-speaking minorities, who are under pressure, as some Congolese in the east see them as supportive of the M23. They might also usefully raise the FDLR issue, urging the Congolese president to clamp down on collaboration between it and the national army.

Kenya should continue urging Rwanda to rein in the M23.

In parallel, Kenya should continue urging Rwanda to rein in the M23. Despite the denials, Rwandan support likely remains key to the M23's advance, as Kigali holds considerable influence over its leadership. Kenya should make clear to Kigali that failure to compromise could damage its position within the EAC, a crucial commercial platform for the landlocked country, and possibly lead to diplomatic blowback from its key Western partners, the U.S., the UK and France. If the M23 adheres to a ceasefire and withdraws from recently taken positions, Kinshasa should consider softening opposition to the group eventually rejoining the Nairobi talks, the best available avenue for addressing its grievances. It will be important for regional diplomats to emphasise the need for such reciprocal

undertakings to break the cycles of recrimination that underpin violence in the region.

The simmering challenge created by the M23's relaunch in 2021 has now become a full-fledged security and humanitarian crisis. The UN has counted more than 180,000 freshly displaced people in the last month, many having to move out of and back into displacement camps as the fighting ebbs and flows. But the possible ramifications of the current violence go beyond North Kivu and risk pulling several regional countries into prolonged proxy killings. Twelve months away from critical elections in the DRC, it is vital to advance on the diplomatic track to halt the M23's advance, which at present is stirring up other armed groups and leading to fighting that, even beyond the suffering it entails, could make the forthcoming electoral registration near impossible and undercut the vote's credibility.