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East Africa's DR Congo Force: The Case for Caution

East African leaders have agreed to assemble troops to combat armed groups in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The Congolese authorities have announced the first troop deployment, but obstacles remain. Crisis Group expert Nelleke van de Walle explains the plan and its risks.

[Nelleke van de Walle](#)

Project Director, Great Lakes

What is happening?

The seven member states of the East African Community (EAC) have agreed to deploy a regional force to the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). [On 15 August](#), a Burundian contingent was the first to enter the DRC under EAC auspices. There is no firm timetable for the force's full deployment.

The DRC joined the EAC, a regional economic bloc, in late March. Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi used the occasion of the DRC's accession to ask his counterparts for help in tackling the dozens of armed groups that have fought each other and the authorities in the eastern DRC for years. Shortly afterward, the bloc's seven leaders agreed to [establish a joint force](#) composed of regional troops to stem the violence. Concurrently, they launched a first round of Kenyan-mediated talks with some Congolese armed group leaders in Nairobi in April.

The eastern DRC is experiencing an alarming uptick of armed group violence, including increased attacks on civilians and camps for the displaced. In July, [the UN High](#) Commissioner for Refugees reported that recent skirmishes in North Kivu province between the Congolese army and the March 23 Movement (M23), an armed group defeated by UN and Congolese forces in 2013, displaced more than 160,000 people. Moreover, because of the redeployment of both government and UN troops to areas where the M23 is most active, a security vacuum has emerged in Ituri province and parts of North Kivu. Other armed groups have also intensified attacks against civilians in these parts.

On 20 June, [the EAC's heads of state](#) called for an immediate ceasefire in the eastern DRC and decided to move ahead with the joint force. At the meeting, General Robert Kibochi, Kenya's chief of defence forces and chair of the EAC's military staff, presented a draft concept of operations detailing the joint force's objectives and rules of engagement, and the resources to be made available to its commander. The draft battle plan says the region is to assemble between 6,500 and 12,000 soldiers with a mandate to "contain, defeat and eradicate negative forces" in the eastern DRC. Led by a Kenyan commander and headquartered in Goma, North Kivu's capital and commercial hub, the combat force would operate in four Congolese provinces (Haut-Uélé, Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu) with a six-month renewable mandate, and subject to a strategic review to be conducted by the parties every two months. Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda are all to provide troops, which will fight jointly with Congolese forces.

Though a new initiative, the joint force's units would mostly reinforce troops who have already been deployed to the DRC in recent months, with each contributor pursuing a distinct mission. The Ugandan soldiers who are part of the joint force are to aid their comrades in fighting the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a Ugandan rebel coalition whose biggest faction has sworn allegiance to the Islamic State in North Kivu and Ituri. The Kenyan troops would go after other rebels in North Kivu, where the country already has soldiers in the UN force (although the two contingents will have distinct missions). The Tanzanian and Burundian troops plan to operate in South Kivu, effectively formalising the presence of the Burundian army, which has been battling the RED-Tabara militia in the area with the DRC's tacit approval since December. Lastly, a small contingent of South Sudanese are to fight what is left of the Lord Resistance's Army in Haut-Uélé.

East African countries have worried about insecurity in the eastern DRC for years, but prior discussions about intervention by a regional force have never led to an actual deployment. Even with Burundi's 15 August deployment, it is not clear how soon (if at all) the DRC's other neighbours will

send troops into the country. The plan requires each country to pay for its own soldiers, but some governments may struggle to bear the costs. A senior Kenyan official told Crisis Group that the EAC might seek additional money from regional and international organisations, including the African Union (AU) and the UN. But acquiring outside funding will be very hard. UN support for extra boots on Congolese soil is unlikely, given that the UN already has an expensive 16,000-strong peacekeeping mission in the country. The AU cannot afford to provide sustained financing. European Union (EU) funding under the European Peace Facility might be an option, with the EU supporting either the EAC directly or the troop-contributing countries. The EU has little appetite to pay for troop stipends, for reasons Crisis Group has previously [discussed](#), but it could provide funds for such purposes as equipment, logistics, communications and transport.

Beyond funding, there are other significant gaps and potential snarls in the proposed plan. One question that requires clarification is how EAC soldiers, who will operate in close proximity to UN troops, will work with the latter. The EAC's mission plan mentions only that the two forces should "cooperate", without specifying how they should do so. Furthermore, Kenya's President-elect William Ruto might be less keen to deploy a regional force than his predecessor, Uhuru Kenyatta, whom some observers believed to be particularly interested in securing Kenya's economic interests in the eastern DRC. Ruto, who appears to be closer to Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni than to Congolese President Tshisekedi – Museveni was an enthusiastic backer of his presidential bid – may also think twice about participating in a risky and costly operation.

Complicating matters further, Tshisekedi will have to navigate widespread distrust of the new force among Congolese, many of whom deeply resent what they see as a long history of foreign meddling in the resource-rich east. In June, thousands marched in the capital Kinshasa to protest the regional force's proposed deployment. The following month, frustration with the UN's inability to tamp down fighting in the east boiled over into [violent riots](#) in Goma that left at least 36 people dead, including four UN peacekeepers, with locals looting UN offices and supply bases in the city. Tempers are likely to fray further if and when more East African soldiers arrive.

What is Rwanda's place in the regional force?

Rwanda has long played a controversial role in the eastern DRC, which it considers a strategic backyard tightly linked to its own security. The region is also a source of gold and other minerals of keen interest to a variety of Rwandan actors. The country has meddled in Congolese politics for years and backed successive rebellions, some of which inflicted huge suffering on the Congolese population. About a decade ago, together with Uganda, Rwanda backed the Tutsi-led M23, which led the last major rebellion on Congolese soil. Kigali provided the insurgents with enough money and weapons to capture parts of the east, with the group briefly taking Goma before UN and Congolese forces defeated it. [Residents have painful memories](#) of those times and Rwanda's participation in any new outside intervention could create a significant, even violent, backlash.

Tensions between Tshisekedi and Rwandan President Paul Kagame have ratcheted up since November 2021, when the former gave Uganda permission to deploy troops to North Kivu and Ituri. Ugandan President Museveni said the intervention was necessary to quash the ADF, which he holds responsible for a spate of suicide bombings in the Ugandan capital Kampala. The following month, Tshisekedi quietly allowed Burundian troops to cross into South Kivu to combat RED-Tabara, a Tutsi-led rebel group that opposes the Hutu-dominated government in Burundi. These interventions have irked Kagame, who likely fears losing influence over and access to the region. Rwanda has also long asserted it perceives a threat from within the DRC, principally from the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), a remnant of the Hutu militia responsible for the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In [a belligerent speech](#) in February, Kagame made clear that he was ready to send soldiers across the border to fight the FDLR, whether Tshisekedi agreed or not.

The return of the M23 has further soured relations between Tshisekedi and Kagame. After the militia's defeat in 2013, one faction fled to Uganda, while another cohort settled in Rwanda. In 2017, the M23's military leader, Sultani Makenga, led an estimated 200 fighters back into the DRC from Uganda. Mostly dormant until November 2021, the group has recently stepped up its attacks upon the Congolese army, forcing thousands of civilians to flee the violence. From the outset, Tshisekedi has believed that Kagame is once again lending support to the M23. He has therefore insisted in talks about the regional force that Rwanda be excluded. Following the EAC meeting on the force's deployment, [he said](#): "I demanded and obtained that Rwanda not participate, because of its support to the terrorist group M23".

But there are costs to that approach. Completely excluding Rwanda from the regional force could rile Kagame further, potentially motivating him to send troops unilaterally or to back another proxy in the eastern DRC. The EAC's proposed battle plan thus seemingly pursues a middle ground by placing Rwanda's forces on standby at the Congolese border. Additionally, Rwandan troops will reportedly play a role in intelligence gathering for the regional force. A regional military expert told Crisis Group that Rwanda is to supply liaison officers to the force's sectoral headquarters.

Why did the M23 re-emerge, and why is this so troubling to the DRC?

The M23's re-emergence has puzzled many observers. As noted, the rebels were largely inactive until November 2021, with most of the demobilised fighters waiting in Uganda and Rwanda for repatriation to the DRC. Under a 2013 peace deal between the M23 and Congolese authorities, Kinshasa was to give amnesty to rank-and-file insurgents to facilitate their return home. But Tshisekedi never acted on this commitment after taking office in 2019 and has reportedly shunned M23 delegates seeking talks. With its renewed attacks on the Congolese army, the insurgency appears to be piling pressure on Tshisekedi to abide by the agreement. In June, a [UN expert panel reported](#) that Makenga wants to force negotiations by closing in on and potentially seizing Goma, though some in the group deny that this is their intention.

A confidential UN report leaked in August offered evidence that Rwanda has indeed helped reinvigorate the M23, as Tshisekedi suspected. Independent analysts Crisis Group spoke to have also made this case, pointing to M23 assaults near Ugandan roadworks in the eastern DRC and near the Kibumba post on the Congolese-Rwandan border as indicating that the rebels are acting on behalf of Rwandan interests. [Rwanda responded](#) to the UN allegation by saying it distracted from "the real issues", in particular the threat posed by the FDLR, arguing that: "Until the problem of the FDLR, which operates in close collaboration with the DRC army, is taken seriously and addressed, security in the Great Lakes region cannot be achieved". In July, Tshisekedi told the [Financial Times](#) that he was ready to go to war over Rwanda's alleged support for the M23, saying: "If Rwanda's provocation continues, we will not sit and do nothing about it. We are not weak". This may well have been posturing prior to negotiations with Kagame, however, given the Rwandan military's well-known strength.

There are indications that Uganda, too, may be backing factions within the insurgency, including reports that the Ugandan army stood by when the M23 took the strategic town of Bunagana, on the border between the DRC and Uganda in June. Following the town's fall, several Congolese politicians accused Uganda of supporting the M23, but Tshisekedi has not blamed Museveni, possibly because he still needs the Ugandan army in the fight against the ADF. In the past, [both Rwanda and Uganda](#) backed the group and for years ex-M23 rebels operated freely in Kampala, with Rwandan intelligence officials believing that Uganda dispatched some on its own errands.

The revitalised M23 rebellion is a matter of particular concern to the DRC in part because of the group's superior firepower, which has allowed it to make quick and significant gains. The source of its armaments is not fully clear. The UN report suggests the M23 uses lethal military equipment also known to be used by armies in the region. Individuals connected to the M23 say they acquired their weapons by looting Congolese army depots. In March and April, M23 fighters attacked Congolese soldiers near Rutshuru town in North Kivu, raided a Congolese military camp and allegedly downed a UN helicopter. These attacks drove Congolese authorities to exclude the M23's Makenga branch from peace talks with rebel groups that kicked off in Nairobi in April. The same month, Tshisekedi designated the entire group as a terrorist organisation, barring it from future talks.

The M23 has since stepped up its operations, attacking roads and villages in Rutshuru territory and seizing Bunagana on 13 June. The head of the UN mission in the DRC, Bintou Keita, raised the alarm later that month, telling the UN Security Council that the M23 behaves more like a conventional army than an armed group and that UN peacekeepers lack the capacity to stem the insurgency.

What are the primary benefits and risks of deploying an EAC force?

To the extent that outside assistance is required to subdue the M23 and other insurgencies in the eastern DRC, an EAC joint force offers certain advantages over ongoing bilateral interventions. The multilateral force structure – which includes the DRC itself – may help blunt perceptions among Congolese that outsiders are intervening in the country to secure particular foreign interests.

But there are significant risks in the EAC going ahead with a combat mission. First, armed interventions in the region do not have a strong record of enduring success, and enlisting countries with strategic and economic interests in the region could escalate an already dangerous situation. As noted, several of the DRC's neighbours have repeatedly and deliberately undermined stability in its east by bolstering proxy fighters and tapping its huge natural resources. Some – for example, Burundi and Uganda – may well continue to push their own agendas, even when under joint force command. Analysts worry that the Kenyan force commander in Goma headquarters will have limited oversight of contingents stationed in remote areas in the east. For instance, the Burundian contingent that entered the DRC on 15 August has been placed under Congolese rather than Kenyan command and seems to mostly pursue Burundian interests in South Kivu.

Secondly, civilians could once again bear the brunt of the armed violence. Armed groups in the DRC have often become more brutal toward villagers when facing military pressure. For instance, the Congolese offensive against the ADF in North Kivu led to a surge in abuses of civilians in early 2020.

Further, the EAC has never before deployed a peacekeeping or enforcement operation, much less sought to put in place safeguards for the protection of the civilian population. This raises considerable concerns about potential human rights violations by the troops themselves.

Despite these risks, Burundi's troop deployment indicates that the EAC countries are inclined to push forward. What is the best way to mitigate risks and help the mission succeed?

First, if the EAC goes ahead with full deployment, coordination with the UN peacekeeping force MONUSCO will be crucial to giving both the best odds of success. In addressing the media after her Security Council speech in June, UN mission chief Keita insisted that the roles and responsibilities of each force must be clearly defined. While MONUSCO is charged with protecting civilians, the East African force will specifically target rebels. Given that security forces often struggle to distinguish between suspected insurgents and local residents, it will be especially important for the regional force to coordinate closely with MONUSCO in order not to hamper its efforts to protect civilians.

Secondly, strong safeguards will be needed to deter risks of serious abuses against civilians. Other African regional forces, such as the G5 Sahel, have experimented with special cells that monitor and report on troop conduct during operations, especially military manoeuvres affecting civilians. The EAC might look to install similar mechanisms. Also, the EAC is reportedly seeking the endorsement of the AU Peace and Security Council to provide the force with political cover. Such an endorsement should be contingent on the force agreeing to be bound by the AU's human rights due diligence policies, including protocols for protecting civilians during peace operations. If the EAC receives AU endorsement, the AU should monitor the human rights situation closely. The EAC should also seek, and the AU should provide, technical advice on good practices for protecting civilians in this type of operation.

Thirdly, particularly given the very mixed record of previous military operations in bringing security to the eastern DRC, Tshisekedi should concurrently pursue dialogue with armed groups. Of the more than 120 militias active in the east, only eighteen groups participated in the hastily cobbled together and inconclusive first round of negotiations in Nairobi in April. Some of the most violent groups were absent and outfits regarded as foreign, such as the ADF and FDLR, were also left out of the discussions.

The Congolese authorities have been preparing for a second round of dialogue, engaging with communities affected by violence and talking to over 50 armed groups, but no date has yet been set. The DRC's neighbours should continue to encourage Tshisekedi in this direction and share their thinking about a framework, timeline and armed group participation for the next iteration of such talks. While it likely will not be possible to include the full array of groups, a more thought-through approach about which of them are to be included, and for what purpose, would be useful in advance of the next round. The [EAC's 22 July decision](#) to appoint Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta as facilitator of the peace talks in the DRC could help get the process back on track, even though Kenyatta opposed William Ruto, who subsequently was declared the winner of the Kenyan election.

Fourthly, EAC countries should urgently define how the regional force will contribute to President Tshisekedi's new demobilisation strategy. Launched in April this year, the DRC's national strategy focuses on returning former fighters to their communities rather than integrating them in the army, as previous demobilisation programs did. It entrusts provincial coordinators with its implementation instead of the authorities in Kinshasa. The initiative has yet to fully kick off, but providing armed groups with an alternative and an incentive to leave the bush is likely to be crucial to any durable solution.

In theory, the demobilisation effort is linked to the Nairobi diplomatic and military tracks. According to the draft concept of operations, the joint force is mandated to support Tshisekedi's demobilisation efforts. There appears to be an expectation that armed groups must either commit to demobilisation through the Nairobi political track or become targets for the regional force, but the concept does not offer detail about how this would play out in practice. Further thinking by the DRC and its partners about how the elements of this effort would fit together is needed, both in the run-up to and at the next round of Nairobi talks.

Finally, EAC countries should not hesitate to end operations if they fail to achieve their stated objectives, and especially if they find they are worsening rather than improve the security situation in eastern DRC. To the extent they lend assistance, organisations like the AU and EU should stay carefully attuned to reports from the field and be prepared to curtail their support should the intervention go awry. The UN Security Council should be very cautious about appearing to endorse the mission, at least until it has a track record demonstrating that it is doing more good than harm. Civilians in the eastern DRC have suffered repeated bouts of armed violence for nearly three decades. While efforts to address their plight are laudable in principle, they need to be workable in practice to merit continuation and support.

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien
T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583
F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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F.A.Q.
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