

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	293
Land:	DR Congo
Kilde:	IRIN.
Titel:	Briefing: M23, one year on.
Udgivet:	3. april 2013
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	7. maj 2013



humanitarian news and analysis

a service of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Briefing: M23, one year on



Photo: ICC-CPI

Ntaganda in the dock (file photo)

NAIROBI, 3 April 2013 (IRIN) - The M23 rebellion, the latest of a string of armed insurgencies in the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) North Kivu Province, has been active for one year now, during which hundreds of thousands have fled their homes and many have lost their lives.

The Mouvement du 23-Mars, or March 23 Movement, came into existence in April 2012, when hundreds of mainly ethnic Tutsi soldiers of FARDC, the national army, mutinied over poor living conditions and poor pay. Most of the mutineers had been members of the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP),

another armed group that in 2009 signed a deal with the government, which the dissidents felt Kinshasa had not fully implemented. M23 is named after the date the agreement was signed.

In November 2012, M23 captured Goma, the provincial capital, but withdrew and subsequently entered into peace talks with the government. Neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda were accused of backing M23 by a UN Security Council Group of Experts report, charges both countries strongly deny.

In this briefing, IRIN outlines the group's impact on the province over the past year, its current position and avenues for peace in eastern DRC.

What is the humanitarian situation in North Kivu?

Although clashes between M23 and FARDC have subsided, "North Kivu remains highly insecure due to the proliferation of weapons, sporadic fighting between armed groups and the army, and inter-community tensions," according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

OCHA notes that since the beginning of the M23 rebellion, more than half a million people have been driven from their homes in North Kivu. The figure accounts for more than half of the 914,000 displaced people in the province. Tens of thousands more fled to refugee camps in Rwanda and Uganda.

According to Amnesty International, M23 has been responsible for human rights abuses "including violations of the duty to care for the civilian population when launching attacks, forced recruitment of children who were either trained to take part in hostilities or forced to work to build military positions, unlawful killings, and acts of sexual violence". The organization also blamed FARDC for widespread abuses against civilians.

Where are M23's leaders?

The movement's leadership now looks significantly different than it did in April 2012.

In February 2013, a rift was reported in M23's leadership, with one of the founders, Bosco Ntaganda, and M23's political leader, Jean-Marie Runiga, on one side and M23's military chief, Sultani Makenga, on the other. The two factions clashed in North Kivu, and Makenga sacked Runiga, who was the group's representative at the peace talks taking place with the DRC government in the Ugandan capital, Kampala. Following more fighting in March, Ntaganda's faction surrendered. Both he and

Runiga, along with several senior commanders and close to 700 fighters, fled to Rwanda.

On 18 March, Ntaganda surrendered himself to the US Embassy in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, and asked to be transferred to the International Criminal Court for trial over alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity. He made his first appearance in court on 26 March. According to a paper by the Rift Valley Institute, Ntaganda had fallen out with fellow commanders early in the rebellion and had been effectively relegated to the sidelines.

Experts have lauded Ntaganda's arrest as a positive step in the fight against impunity in DRC, but warn that it does not mean an end to violence in the region.

Runiga has been placed under house arrest in Rwanda; the Rwandan government has disarmed the M23 troops who surrendered and moved them to a refugee camp more than 50km from the DRC-Rwanda border.

Various reports indicate that Makenga is now consolidating his fighters, thought to number about 1,500, and M23-held territory in North Kivu, but he may also be preparing for further negotiations with President Joseph Kabila's government. According to Congo expert Jason Stearns, "The internal M23 split may have provided the break they [DRC representatives] needed to make the deal acceptable for the rebels."



Photo:

Kate Holt/IRIN

Hundreds of thousands have fled violence in North Kivu over the past year (file photo)

Any deal is likely to involve the integration of Makenga's fighters into FARDC, with lower cadre fighters automatically integrated and higher ranking officers considered for integration on a case-by-case basis. However, analysts say the re-integration method has not worked in the past and must be rethought.

"M23 integration in FARDC is feasible but is not suitable. The policy of repeated integration of armed groups in FARDC is [contributing] to the fragmentation and militarization of FARDC," Marc-Andre Lagrange, DRC senior analyst for the International Crisis Group, told IRIN via email. "Since that approach has proven, with M23, to be a failure, the DRC government with MONUSCO and UNSC should look for another option."

According to a recent article in the newsletter Africa Confidential: "Experts broadly agree that some kind of agreement between Kinshasa and M23 is in the offing and will be signed soon, but reliable sources in North Kivu diverge on what the outcome will be. Some feel that Makenga will reintegrate

his troops into the FARDC, while others suggest that Makenga and [new] M23 political leader Bertrand Bisimwa can stay independent of the army while not being seen as a 'negative force'."

What is the fate of the peace talks?

The Kampala peace talks between M23 and the DRC government began in December 2012, under the auspices of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). The talks have made little progress and have been put on hold due to the rebel group's internal problems. Bisimwa has urged Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni to revive the talks.

On 24 February, a UN-brokered peace agreement aimed at ending conflict in eastern DRC was signed in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, by 11 African countries - Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, DRC, the Republic of Congo, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Dubbed the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the DRC, the deal's goals include the reformation of the DRC's army and an end to regional interference in the country. Among the decisions reached was the formation of a neutral intervention force aimed at fighting "negative forces" in eastern DRC - referring not only to M23 but other armed groups as well.

While the deal was lauded as a breakthrough by African countries, analysts are more sceptical, criticizing the agreement as being long on rhetoric and short on detail and solid action plans. A Foreign Policy Association blog post noted that since the 1990s, a number of similar regional agreements had failed to bring peace to DRC. It pointed out that the some key players were not mentioned or involved - including armed groups like Raia Mutomboki (Swahili for "angry citizens"), Mai Mai Cheka and the Hutu-dominated FDLR, whose presence in eastern DRC is perceived as a threat by Rwanda.

"The primary aggressors present in the country for the last 10 years, the militia groups that patrol the eastern provinces, were not even included in the discussion," said the author, Daniel Donovan. "By excluding these groups, they hold no commitment to such an agreement, which begs the question: How does this move signify a guarantee for peace?"

What is next for the region?

On 28 March, the UN Security Council authorized an offensive "intervention brigade" to "address imminent threats to peace and security" as part of the UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO).



Photo:

UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

The risk of violence remains

"The objectives of the new force - which will be based in North Kivu Province in eastern DRC and total 3,069 peacekeepers - are to neutralize armed groups, reduce the threat they posed to State authority and civilian security, and make space for stabilization activities," according to the UN News Centre. It also aims to support the Addis accord.

Following the announcement, the DRC government said it supported the intervention brigade and warned M23 rebels to disband. M23's Bisimwa has rejected the UN's decision to send the force, but said the group would neither fight nor flee the UN forces.

The International Federation of Human Rights has warned of a potential "escalation in military confrontations and increased risk of retaliatory attacks by armed groups against civilians" as a result of the force's entry into the fray, and urged MONUSCO to "mitigate against the increased risks that communities will face".

Experts say reforms in eastern DRC must go beyond military solutions. "The intervention brigade... should not be seen as the only solution but one element of a comprehensive solution," said ICG's Lagrange.

"After last year's fall of Goma and rise of the Mai Mai [rebel] threat, there is a serious need for a new approach against the armed groups. Such an approach should include the use of military force; a targeted policy of arrest on armed groups' leaders; a DDR [disarmament, demobilization and reintegration] offer focusing on civilian reintegration; the investigation and neutralization of the logistical networks of the armed groups; and development work in the communities that generate armed groups," he told IRIN.

"Groups like M23 are not a cause but a symptom of what's going wrong in the DRC," he added. "The Congolese government must commit to implement the security sector reforms, especially the reforms concerning the FARDC. It must also abandon its policy of peace prevailing over justice."

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