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Averting Proxy Wars in the Eastern DR Congo and Great Lakes

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What's new? Tensions are mounting in Africa's Great Lakes region among Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, all of which allegedly back insurgents based in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). At the same time, Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi is considering inviting these countries into the DRC to fight groups they respectively oppose.

Why does it matter? Given their growing animosity, these three countries, if invited into the DRC, could escalate support to allied militias while targeting enemies. The DRC's neighbours have historically used militias operating there against one another. A new proxy struggle could further destabilise the DRC and even provoke a full-blown regional security crisis.

What should be done? Instead of involving neighbours in military operations, Tshisekedi should redouble his diplomatic efforts to ease regional frictions, building on a recent joint DRC-Angolan initiative and drawing on the UN, U.S., UK and France for support.

I. Overview

Intensifying hostility among states in the Great Lakes threatens a return to the regional wars that tore that region apart in previous decades. Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame, accuses Burundi and Uganda of backing Rwandan rebels active in the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) North and South Kivu provinces and threatens to retaliate for those groups' attacks on his country. In turn, Burundi and Uganda assert that Rwanda supports Burundian and Ugandan rebels in the DRC. At the same time, the DRC's new president, Félix Tshisekedi, has floated plans to invite Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda to conduct joint military operations with DRC troops against insurgents sheltering in his country, a risky policy that could fuel proxy conflicts. Instead, Tshisekedi should prioritise the diplomatic track he has also launched, together with Angolan President João Lourenço, to calm tensions among his neighbours. The UN and Western governments, particularly those of the U.S., UK and France should throw their weight behind his efforts.

Tensions between Rwanda and its two neighbours, Burundi and Uganda, have escalated over the past two years. In November 2019, Kagame openly threatened to retaliate against his neighbours after an October 2019 raid in Rwanda by a North Kivu-based militia that he alleges is supported by Burundi and Uganda. For its part, Burundi claims that Rwanda backs Burundian rebels, based in South Kivu, that it asserts are behind recent attacks in Burundi. The Burundian and Rwandan governments have deployed troops to their mutual border. Kagame's longstanding rivalry with his Ugandan counterpart, Yoweri Museveni, has also taken a turn for the worse, with the latter accusing the former of backing DRC-based insurgents against Kampala. Both leaders have purged their security forces of officials perceived as too closely tied to the other, Rwanda has closed the main Rwanda-Uganda border crossing and Uganda has deployed troops to the DRC border. Mounting distrust among the DRC's neighbours carries grave risks for the DRC, given how their rivalries have historically played out in that country.

Tshisekedi, in office for barely a year, has put a welcome premium on diplomacy to ease tensions. Together with Lourenço, he facilitated discussions in July 2019 between the Rwandan and Ugandan presidents in Luanda. Tshisekedi has also worked to improve DRC's relations with Rwanda. At the same time, however, he has pursued a plan under which Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda would conduct military operations, under the DRC army's authority, against insurgencies sheltering in his country. This policy risks fuelling proxy conflicts in the DRC. Instead, the Congolese president should reinvigorate his diplomatic track, bringing in Burundi as well as Rwanda and Uganda. He should invite the UN's special envoy for the Great Lakes to oversee tripartite talks aimed at easing hostilities. The UN envoy should encourage Burundian, Rwandan and Ugandan officials to share evidence of their rivals' support for insurgents in the DRC as a first step toward a roadmap for the withdrawal of that backing. The U.S., UK and France should use their long-time influence in the Great Lakes to press for de-escalation.

II. President Kagame Rattles the Sabre as Regional Tensions Mount

On 14 November 2019, Rwandan President Paul Kagame gave a blistering speech in Kigali, insinuating that Rwanda's neighbours were sponsoring cross-border attacks. Speaking at a swearing-in ceremony for ministers and military officials, and visibly agitated, Kagame addressed Rwandan members of parliament in both English and his native Kinyarwanda. The country has been stable, he said, since his military take-over ended the 1994 genocide, but its security is once again in peril, this time from outside its borders. The president did not name those at fault, but his message was clear: Rwanda's neighbours were undermining the country's security and he was prepared to retaliate if need be. "The noises being made, from neighbouring countries ... there is not much that I can do about it", he said. "But anything crossing our border and coming here to destabilise us ... we have proven that we can deal with it. We will put you back where you belong. There is no question about it".¹

¹ "Swearing in of new government officials and RDF leaders", video, YouTube, 14 November 2019.

Kagame's speech came shortly after an attack on Rwanda launched from the eastern DRC. On 4 October, DRC-based fighters killed fourteen people in Kinigi village, a hub for mountain gorilla tourism in Rwanda's Musanze district. Rwandan officials and regional intelligence sources attribute the strike to the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), a remnant of the Rwandan Hutu militia that massacred much of the Tutsi minority and many moderate Hutu during the genocide.² Mounting evidence points to an alliance between the FDLR and the Rwanda National Congress (RNC) rebels.³ The RNC, also based in the DRC, is led by Tutsi defectors from Kagame's government, allegedly including Kayumba Nyamwasa, who once was one of Kagame's most trusted generals but now is exiled in South Africa.⁴

Kagame's speech was a reaction to the Kinigi attack and escalating tensions between Rwanda and two neighbours, Burundi and Uganda. Kigali suspects both of sponsoring Rwandan rebels, including the FDLR and RNC, in the eastern DRC. Rwandan officials say they have evidence of recent Ugandan support to the FDLR, whose fighters are concentrated in the DRC's North Kivu province.⁵ They accuse Uganda and Burundi of backing the RNC. Since 2017, RNC fighters have been based in strongholds on the remote plateau of South Kivu province, where they have allied with Congolese Banyamulenge Tutsi militiamen hostile to the Congolese army and Rwanda. Rwandan and DRC officials, as well as local sources, say some RNC fighters have moved from those areas to join up with FDLR units in Rutshuru territory in North Kivu, an area close to the Rwandan and Ugandan borders from which the attacks on Kinigi appear to have emanated.⁶ Rwandan authorities believe that Burundian intelligence officials and the Imbonerakure, the Burundian ruling-party youth militia, are embedded with RNC forces.⁷

As Rwanda faces a mounting threat on its western flank, it is also concerned by recent attacks on its southern border with Burundi. Rwandan and DRC intelligence officials report that Burundi hosts FDLR splinter elements from South Kivu, which it has deployed to its border with Rwanda.⁸ In December 2018, assailants coming from Burundi launched an attack in the Nyungwe forest in south-western Rwanda, another tourist attraction and a popular weekend destination for Kigali residents. The at-

² Crisis Group interview, intelligence source from the Great Lakes, October 2019. See also "Assailants: FDLR was behind Musanze attack", *The New Times*, 7 October 2019. According to this report in *The New Times*, a publication widely seen as close to the government, a group of assailants arrested for alleged involvement in the attack confessed to having joined the FDLR.

³ "Final Report of the Group of Experts on the DRC", S/2019/479, 7 June 2019; Crisis Group researcher's interview in a previous capacity, senior captured FDLR officers, Kinshasa, January 2019.

⁴ Nyamwasa denied links to any armed activity. RNC cadres, however, refer to him as their leader. Crisis Group researcher's interviews in a previous capacity, Nyamwasa and South Africa-based RNC source, July 2018. See also "Rwanda charges 25 men tied to rebel outfit with treason, other crimes", Reuters, 2 October 2019.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Rwandan official, Kigali, June 2019; Nairobi, September 2019.

⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Rwandan and DRC intelligence sources, October 2019. In the same month, Crisis Group received corroborating information from sources in the eastern DRC.

⁷ Crisis Group researcher's interview in another capacity, senior Rwandan intelligence officer, Gisenyi, August 2018.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Rwandan official, September 2019; DRC intelligence source, October 2019.

tackers killed two Rwandan civilians and injured another eight.⁹ The Rwandan army has since saturated Nyungwe, aiming to reinforce its positions and reassure Rwandans and foreign diplomats alike that the forest is safe to visit.¹⁰ Following the attacks, Kagame resurrected an internal security ministry that he disbanded two years ago, appointing a former chief of defence as its head.¹¹

Authorities in Kigali point to the April 2019 arrest of Rwandan rebel Callixte Nsabimana to bolster their accusations of outside interference. Nsabimana, arrested by the Rwanda Investigation Bureau, a crime-fighting body, is a former RNC member who later became spokesperson of the National Liberation Forces, the armed wing of another Rwandan opposition group, the Mouvement rwandais pour le Changement démocratique (MRCD), which partly comprises FDLR splinter elements. During his trial, he pleaded guilty to ordering the Nyungwe attack and admitted receiving support from Burundi and Uganda.¹² The MRCD, however, suggested in a press release that Rwandan intelligence obtained Nsabimana's confession through coercion.¹³

UN reports partially support Kigali's claims of Burundian and Ugandan ties to Kagame's armed rivals. In December 2018, the UN Group of Experts on the DRC, which reports to the Security Council, concluded that the P5, a group of Rwandan opposition factions including the RNC, were working with rebels in the DRC with the aim of toppling Kagame's government. The experts reported that the P5 received weapons and other support from Bujumbura, a claim Burundian authorities denied.¹⁴ In the same month, two prominent FDLR members, the group's spokesperson Ignace Nkaka, known as La Forge, and its deputy intelligence officer Jean-Pierre Nsekanabo, were arrested at Bunangana, North Kivu, on the DRC-Uganda border. Both men were extradited to Kigali via Kinshasa. Interviewed by officials of the UN mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) in the Congolese capital before their extradition, they said they had met RNC members and a Ugandan minister in Kampala.¹⁵ A Ugandan official admitted to Crisis Group that the minister may have met La Forge and Nsekanabo, but in a private capacity.¹⁶

⁹ See, for instance, "Kagame blames neighbours as two are killed in attack", *The East African*, 16 December 2018.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, diplomat and intelligence source from a European country, Kigali, June 2019.

¹¹ "Gen Kazura replaces Gen Nyamvumba as Kagame shakes up top military brass", *The New Times*, 5 November 2019; "Police placed under Ministry of Internal Security", *Taarifa Rwanda*, 18 November 2019.

¹² "Procès-Verbal d'interrogatoire Nsabimana Callixte alias Sankara (traduction du kinyarwanda au français)", Office rwandais d'Investigation, 10 May 2019. According to the record, Sankara was vice president of the RNC Youth in South Africa, information and communication commissioner and journalist for the RNC radio. He left the RNC in October 2017.

¹³ "The appearance of Major Callixte Nsabimana", MRCD, press release, 23 May 2019.

¹⁴ "Midterm Report of the Group of Experts on the DRC", S/2018/1133, 18 December 2018.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former UN officials involved in interviewing Laforge and Nsekanabo, December 2019.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Ugandan official, Doha, December 2019. La Forge and Nsekanabo allegedly met with Philemon Mateke, the Ugandan minister of state for foreign affairs and regional cooperation.

For their part, Burundian officials accuse Kigali of supporting the South Kivu-based Burundian rebel group, RED-Tabara, a claim that Rwanda rejects.¹⁷ Founded in 2011, RED-Tabara is reportedly led by Alexis Sinduhije, a Tutsi opponent of the Hutu-dominated Burundian government whom the U.S. has sanctioned since 2015 for instigating “armed rebellion”.¹⁸ On 22 October – two and a half weeks after the Kinigi attacks – RED-Tabara clashed with security forces in Musigati, Burundi, leaving at least a dozen dead on each side of the border; RED-Tabara acknowledged that it attacked first.¹⁹ On 16 November, assailants launched another assault on a Burundian military position. At least eight Burundian soldiers died in the firefight ten kilometres from the Rwandan border in the Burundian commune of Mabayi, Cibitoke province, and dozens more are missing.²⁰ RED-Tabara has neither confirmed nor denied responsibility. On 6 December, Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza accused Rwanda of staging the “cowardly” attack, a claim repudiated by Rwandan officials.²¹

These attacks come as political tensions heat up in Burundi ahead of elections scheduled for May 2020. As Nkurunziza increasingly depends on the Imbonerakure to repress political opponents, Rwanda points to the youth militia’s growing presence in the eastern DRC, including within RNC ranks.²² One Burundian official stated that if indeed Imbonerakure units have been deployed in South Kivu, then that would be a defensive move, given Rwanda’s alleged backing of the attempted coup against Nkurunziza in 2015 and the subsequent flight of some putschists into South Kivu.²³ The official noted that Nkurunziza is determined to forestall any attempt by Burundian rebels to draw on Rwandan support and attack the country in the run-up to

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Burundian official, November 2019; Burundian official, January 2020.

¹⁸ “Treasury sanctions four Burundian individuals”, U.S. Department of the Treasury, 18 December 2015. Alexis Sinduhije has never officially claimed to be head of RED-Tabara or any other rebel group, but Burundian rebel testimonies suggest that he is in fact the movement’s political leader. A UN Group of Experts report states that combatants, while disagreeing about the group’s exact name, “all agreed that they were fighting for Sinduhije”. “Final Report of UN Group of Experts on the DRC”, S/2016/466, 23 May 2016. On 27 September 2019, an arrested RED-Tabara fighter, Dismas Ndayisaba, identified Sinduhije as RED-Tabara’s leader at a press conference. “La justice burundaise se serait-elle réveillée d’une profond sommeil?”, Radio Publique Africaine, 28 September 2018.

¹⁹ Tweet by RED-Tabara, @Red_Tabara, resistance movement, 5:53pm, 22 October 2019. On 24 October, RED-Tabara tweeted that it would only communicate via its official Twitter account, stating that “facts attributed to RED that are not confirmed by its official channel concern only its authors”.

²⁰ Burundi is divided into eighteen provinces, the largest local administrative unit, which are subdivided into communes, each of which is composed of several collines. From 3-10 December, the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) deployed a verification mission to investigate the Mabayi attack, conducting fieldwork in Goma in the DRC; Gisenyi and Kigali in Rwanda; and Bugarama, Bujumbura, Cibitoke, Marura and Nemba in Burundi.

²¹ On 6 December 2019, President Nkurunziza stated: “Burundi has repeatedly been the victim of armed aggression since 2015. Attacks have come mainly from Rwanda and the DRC. The attackers have been sponsored, trained and militarily equipped by Rwanda, which unfortunately has disrupted the security of some countries in the sub-region in the recent past”. “Discours du Président Pierre Nkurunziza à l’ouverture de la 10ème Session de l’Assemblée de la CIRGL”, Mashariki TV, 6 December 2019.

²² “Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi”, UN Human Rights Council, 6 August 2019.

²³ Crisis Group interview, senior Burundian official, January 2020. In the wake of the May 2015 coup attempt in Burundi, the country’s foreign minister, Alain Nyamitwe, accused Rwanda of backing the insurrection. See “Burundi’s Nyamitwe accuses Rwanda of training rebels”, BBC, 1 October 2015.

elections.²⁴ Burundi has also reinforced military deployments in Cibitoke following the November attack.²⁵

III. Rwanda's Dangerous Rivalry with Uganda

The rivalry between Kagame and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has long been among the gravest contributors to instability in the Great Lakes region. Animosity between the two men has sharpened dramatically in the last two years.²⁶

Competition between Rwanda and Uganda traditionally has played out mostly in the DRC, where both have sought to win influence and control turf. During the 1998-2003 inter-Congolese war, the two countries backed competing rebel factions in the eastern DRC and deployed their own forces into the country, with Rwandan and Ugandan troops battling for the city of Kisangani in 2000. After the war, rebel leaders supported by Kigali or Kampala won positions in Joseph Kabila's transitional government, as their respective fighters were formally integrated into the national army.²⁷ Informally, however, rebel leaders retained some foreign ties and their command of former fighters within and outside the army.

Rwanda and Uganda have both backed rebellions in the DRC in the past twelve years. The first, in 2008, was led by the Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP), whose leader, Laurent Nkunda, was a Congolese Tutsi warlord who had been integrated into the Congolese army. UN investigators subsequently revealed Kigali's backing for Nkunda's forces, prompting Rwanda to withdraw its support and arrest Nkunda, who had retreated into Rwandan territory when his rebellion ended, largely due to the withdrawal of Rwanda's support in the face of international pressure.²⁸ Kabila, then the Congolese president, again integrated many rebels into the army; elite army units that Kabila subsequently deployed to the hardest-hit conflict zones in the country often comprised former CNDP fighters.²⁹ In 2012, some ex-CNDP units that had integrated into the army broke away, forming the M23 rebel group. This time, Rwanda and Uganda both backed the rebels.³⁰ When Congolese and UN forces defeated the M23 in 2013, followers of one M23 leader, Bosco Nta-

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Burundian official, January 2020.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Burundian official, January 2019. See also "Cibitoke : mutation des militaires affectés aux postes frontaliers avec le Rwanda", SOS Médias Burundi, 13 November 2019. The report details deployments prior to the attack, though Crisis Group has received information that more deployments took place afterward.

²⁶ Nicholas Norbrook, Parselelo Kantai and Patrick Smith, "How Kagame and Museveni became the best of frenemies", *The Africa Report*, 4 October 2019.

²⁷ "The National Army and Armed Groups in the Eastern Congo: Untangling the Gordian Knot of Insecurity", Rift Valley Institute – Usalama Project, 2013.

²⁸ "Final Report of the Group of Experts on the DRC", S/2008/773, 12 December 2008; "Interim Report of the Group of Experts on the DRC", S/2012/348, 21 June 2012; and "Addendum to the Interim Report", S/2012/348/Add.1, 27 June 2012.

²⁹ See "Final Report of the UN Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", S/2009/603, 9 November 2009, which details the CNDP units' integration into the national army and their deployment in the Kivu provinces.

³⁰ "Final Report of the UN Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", S/2012/843, 15 November 2012.

ganda, fled to and surrendered in Rwanda, while many of those still loyal in spirit to the arrested Nkunda surrendered to Uganda.

Over the past two years, former M23 fighters from both factions have returned to the DRC, fuelling animosity between Rwanda and Uganda. In the run-up to the DRC's 2018 elections, fighters began infiltrating back and embedding themselves in local conflicts in the eastern DRC.³¹ Those hosted by Uganda accused their former comrades who had been in Rwanda of being Kigali's puppets – and vice versa.³² UN officials point out that Uganda has allowed the majority of the cohort of more than 1,300 former Congolese M23 rebels who had surrendered to Kampala to leave a military camp near the Ugandan town of Bihanga where they were housed.³³ Some have turned up in hotspots in eastern Congo over the last two years. Although Kigali was once the M23's main backer, because this faction surrendered to Uganda, Rwandan intelligence officials believe that Kampala is now dispatching them on its own errands.³⁴

Moreover, representatives of Congolese insurgent groups, including ex-M23 cadres, operate freely in Kampala and meet regularly with Ugandan military officials, even as Uganda categorically denies supporting rebels in the DRC or plotting to destabilise either that country or Rwanda.³⁵ These representatives travel back and forth to North Kivu and the troubled Ituri province in the eastern DRC.³⁶ Ugandan officials say they are aware of the presence of armed group representatives and ex-M23 fighters in Uganda, but can only take action against those for whom they have evidence of involvement in plots to destabilise the region.³⁷ Rwandan officials argue that Ugandan officials simply turn a blind eye to armed groups' activities and that the RNC itself recruits freely in Uganda.³⁸

For their part, Ugandan officials accuse Rwanda of supporting the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a Ugandan rebel movement active in the eastern DRC.³⁹ No independent body has verified the charge, but the accusations in themselves add to tensions. Uganda has beefed up border patrols and deployed the Mountain Brigade, a special army unit, to the Rwenzori mountains at the DRC-Uganda border, looking out over DRC territory that has been at the epicentre of ADF activity over the last few years.⁴⁰

Kigali and Kampala have both taken other steps that have contributed to escalating friction. Presidents Kagame and Museveni have purged their security services of

³¹ République Démocratique du Congo, Province de l'Ituri, Comité provincial de sécurité, "Compte rendu de l'interrogatoire des 4 éléments M23 et 1 civil, arrêtés à Kadilo/territoire Mahagi en date du 1 Avr 2018"; Crisis Group interviews, armed group member and MONUSCO official, August and October 2019.

³² Crisis Group researcher's interviews in a previous capacity, ex-M23 cadres, June–September 2018.

³³ In a previous capacity, a Crisis Group researcher visited the Bihanga camp during the course of 2018 and documented that hundreds of ex-M23 fighters were no longer present.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Rwandan intelligence source, September 2019. Crisis Group researcher's interviews in a previous capacity, several ex-M23 fighters in both Uganda and Rwanda, June 2018.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, members of Congolese armed group, August 2019; diplomats, Kampala, July 2019.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Kampala.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Ugandan official, December 2019.

³⁸ Crisis Group researcher's interview in a previous capacity, Rwandan official, Gisenyi, August 2018.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Ugandan official, December 2019.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior Ugandan official, December 2019.

officials seen as too closely linked to the other country.⁴¹ Ugandan authorities even arrested the country's former chief of police, Kale Kayihura, in June 2018, accusing him of working with other police officers and Rwandan agents between 2012 and 2016 to kidnap Rwandan dissidents in Uganda and deport them to Rwanda.⁴² Acrimony between the two countries reached a high in February 2019, when Kigali closed a commercially important border crossing amid mutual accusations of spying.⁴³ In May and November, Rwandan security forces killed a small number of Ugandans and Rwandans accused of smuggling, drawing the ire of Ugandan officials who believe that the shootings were hostile acts between nations.⁴⁴ Uganda has rounded up Rwandan nationals for detention.⁴⁵

Lastly, Uganda's role in Burundi has become a point of contention. Rwandan officials criticise Museveni for his failure as East African Community mediator of the inter-Burundian dialogue.⁴⁶ They believe that Museveni has preferred to avoid stepping in forcefully to help resolve the crisis in the interest of preserving his relations with President Nkurunziza, whom he needs as an ally against Rwanda.⁴⁷

IV. Improving Rwandan-DRC Relations

If Rwanda's relations with Burundi and Uganda are ever more strained, its ties to the DRC, which in the past have alternated between discord and détente, have warmed, particularly since President Tshisekedi took office. But improved Rwanda-DRC relations could carry risks for the DRC's new president, potentially creating bad blood between him and Kampala.

Since the M23 rebellion ended in 2013, Kinshasa and Kigali have attempted to maintain cordial relations. During his tenure, former president Kabila made sure that his security services cooperated and shared intelligence with Kigali.⁴⁸ Rwandan officials sought to reciprocate, stating in private that they would collaborate with DRC authorities to neutralise armed groups by covert means.⁴⁹ The UN investigators' unearthing in 2008 and 2012 of evidence showing Kigali's support for the CNDP and M23 provided further incentive for Rwanda to demonstrate that it is co-

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Kampala, July and August 2019. See also "Sibling rivalry turns ugly", *Africa Confidential*, 22 March 2019.

⁴² "Uganda/Rwanda: Forcible Return Raises Grave Concerns", Human Rights Watch, 4 November 2013; "Ugandan officials charged with abducting Rwanda refugees", *The East African*, 9 January 2019.

⁴³ "Why a closed border has Uganda, Rwanda at loggerheads", Bloomberg, 8 March 2019.

⁴⁴ "Uganda, Rwanda in row over border killings", *The East African*, 26 May 2019; "Two Ugandan businessmen shot dead in Rwanda", *Daily Monitor*, 10 November 2019. Crisis Group telephone interview, Ugandan official, December 2019.

⁴⁵ "Uganda arrests close to 200 Rwandans", *The New Times*, 26 November 2019.

⁴⁶ For background, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°278, *Running Out of Options in Burundi*, 20 June 2019.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Rwandan official, September 2019.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, DRC intelligence sources, October 2019.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group researcher's interview in a previous capacity, Rwandan official, August 2018.

operating. Rwandan officials still smart from the international outcry that ensued and want to avoid further accusations of backing rebellions in eastern DRC.⁵⁰

Under President Tshisekedi, Kinshasa has if anything tightened its embrace of Rwanda. Kinshasa has shown a newfound appetite to take on the FDLR and some of its splinter groups, which in the past the DRC's army has often supported as proxies against Kigali. For example, DRC military officials say that increased intelligence sharing has resulted in successful operations against an FDLR splinter group in South Kivu in late 2019, with hundreds of its fighters and dependents surrendering and repatriating peacefully to Rwanda in December.⁵¹

Kinshasa's closer ties to Kigali have reportedly even entailed the DRC suppressing intelligence that suggests Kigali's continued involvement in that country.⁵² In private, some DRC officials say Rwandan security forces were involved in the killings of the FDLR's commander, Sylvestre Mudacumura, in September, and a prominent FDLR splinter leader, Juvenal Musabimana, in November.⁵³ Both died in murky surprise attacks in Rutshuru territory of North Kivu. But the DRC's military authorities, when announcing the deaths, asserted that Rwanda had played no role.⁵⁴

The DRC authorities' recent withdrawal of arrest warrants for the former M23 faction exiled in Rwanda further illustrates Tshisekedi's closer relations with Kagame. In a letter to the DRC's military prosecutor, the coordinator of the DRC government's national oversight mechanism of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF), a 2013 regional peace agreement signed by the DRC and other African governments, stated that ex-M23 combatants should be allowed to return to the DRC, amnestied and reintegrated into the Congolese army and bureaucracy, although the order has yet to take effect.⁵⁵ This M23 cohort's leader, Bosco Ntaganda, was tried and convicted of war crimes at the International Criminal Court in early November.⁵⁶ The faction includes perpetrators of some of the worst atrocities that occurred during the 2012-2013 rebellion. (The status of the larger M23 cohort that surrendered to

⁵⁰ Crisis Group researcher's interview in another capacity, senior Rwandan intelligence official, December 2017.

⁵¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, DRC military source, January 2020. See also "400 more anti-Rwanda militia fighters captured in DR Congo", *The New Times*, 19 December 2019.

⁵² Crisis Group telephone interviews, DRC intelligence officers, October 2019.

⁵³ Ibid. Regional diplomats and observers say it is likely that the Rwandan intelligence service acquired crucial information about Muducumura's whereabouts by interrogating La Forge. Muducumura allegedly wore a USB stick containing encrypted FDLR files around his neck. If Rwanda obtained that information, that could explain why it was able to target other rebel leaders after killing Muducumura. Musabimana was killed on 10 November. On 3 December, the Congolese army reported the arrest in Goma of FDLR leader Nshimiyimana Asifiwe Manudi; and on 4 December, an FDLR colonel, Gaspard Africa, was killed in Rutshuru territory.

⁵⁴ Tweets by Forces Armées RDC, @FARDC_, 2:55pm, 18 September 2019 and 10:06am, 10 November 2019.

⁵⁵ Letter from Claude Ibalanky Ekolomba to the DRC's military prosecutor, "Retrait des mandats d'arrêt contre les ex-combattants du Mouvement du 23 mars (ex-M23)", 20 November 2019. See also "Angry reactions as DRC president rescinds arrest warrants against M23 rebel leaders", *The Chronicles*, 23 November 2019.

⁵⁶ "Bosco Ntaganda sentenced to 30 years' imprisonment", International Criminal Court, press release, 7 November 2019.

Uganda and now moves freely in and out of the military camp in that country remains unclear, though some also reportedly hope to receive amnesty and join the army.⁵⁷

The DRC-Rwanda cooperation is welcome but could provoke Kampala and Bujumbura to step up support for proxies in the DRC if they perceive Kinshasa's alliance with Kigali as threatening their own security. Absent steps to de-escalate tensions between Rwanda and Uganda, the DRC's cooperation with Rwanda could backfire, most likely in the form of violent competition between Rwanda and Uganda on Congolese turf. That, in turn, could provoke a popular backlash whipped up by Congolese politicians who often stir anti-Rwandan and anti-Tutsi sentiment during periods where Rwanda has supported armed insurgencies in the country's east.⁵⁸ Defections could also increase from within the DRC's army with some commanders or factions persuaded by Rwanda's rivals to take up arms against the government.⁵⁹

V. Prioritising Dialogue over Military Operations

President Tshisekedi initially sought to use his improved relations with Rwanda to calm regional tensions. Recognising the danger posed by the Rwanda-Uganda rivalry, he invited Presidents Kagame and Museveni together to Luanda for meetings in July 2019 co-hosted by his Angolan counterpart. The meetings resulted in a memorandum of understanding, signed on 21 August in Luanda, in which both parties promised to refrain from "actions conducive to destabilisation or subversion in the territory of the other party and neighbouring countries".⁶⁰ In December, however, Rwandan and Ugandan officials failed to reach agreement on how to implement the Luanda memorandum and talks collapsed in acrimony. The disagreement partly owes to Rwandan accusations of continued Ugandan support to proxies, but another challenge is that the parties cannot reach agreement on any given mechanism by which to substantiate allegations of links to armed groups.⁶¹

Meanwhile, Tshisekedi had begun exploring military options. Reportedly, the Congolese president's emphasis on such options came mostly at the behest of Presi-

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, ex-M23 cadre, November and December 2019.

⁵⁸ See "Congolese riot over UN 'failure'", BBC, 3 June 2004. Thousands of Congolese attacked UN bases in 2004 after Laurent Nkunda captured the eastern town of Bukavu. Kabila was cited as saying that "it is clearly an attack on our country by Rwandan troops". Rioting also took place in 2008 during the CNDP rebellion. See "DR Congo: More fighting in North Kivu, violence during demonstration in Katanga", Reliefweb, 16 October 2008. See also "Fighting in Congo rekindles ethnic hatreds", *The New York Times*, 10 January 2008.

⁵⁹ On 9 January 2020, the Congolese army confirmed the defection of Colonel Michel Rukunda, alias Makanika, second in command in the Walikale sector. Before his integration into the army in 2011, Makanika was part of the Republican Federalist Forces, a Banyamulenge rebel group hostile to Kinshasa and Kigali. Tweet by Forces Armées RDC, @FARDC_, 12:04am, 9 January 2020.

⁶⁰ "Memorandum of Understanding of Luanda between the Republic of Uganda and the Republic of Rwanda", 21 August 2019. This document was signed by Presidents Kagame and Museveni, as well as the facilitators, Presidents Lourenço and Tshisekedi.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Ugandan official, December 2019. The official stated that the talks collapsed due to Kigali's resistance to create a verification mechanism to substantiate or debunk allegations. Rwanda's state media reported the talks deadlocked due to Rwanda's insistence that Uganda continued to support proxy armed groups and conduct arbitrary arrests and illegal detention of Rwandan citizens. See "Rwanda, Uganda talks deadlocked", *The New Times*, 14 December 2019.

dent Kagame, who is increasingly impatient with threats emanating from DRC.⁶² In June, the intelligence chiefs of the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania (an ally of Burundi) met in Kinshasa to discuss the neutralisation of insurgents in the DRC's east. In the following months, military commanders from these countries, joined by officials from the UN's mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) and the U.S. army, attempted to develop battle plans.⁶³ In October, DRC army commanders outlined an arrangement by which neighbouring countries' forces would launch offensives, overseen by the DRC army, against militias on Congolese territory.⁶⁴ But Congolese, Burundian, Rwandan and Ugandan commanders failed to advance the proposal at their last meeting, in October 2019, mostly due to Uganda's reluctance to allow Rwanda to track the FDLR near the Ugandan border. More talks are expected in early 2020.⁶⁵

President Tshisekedi's push for the three neighbours to send troops to root out rebels from the DRC is a high-stakes gambit. It opens the door to military operations without concurrent political de-escalation, heightening risks that neighbours use armed intervention in the DRC to reinforce their own proxies at the expense of their rivals'. It could even erode the Congolese army's internal cohesion, particularly given the delicate potential reintegration plans for former M23 rebels, who are susceptible to Rwandan or Ugandan manipulation.

Rather than pursuing military operations, President Tshisekedi should push for further talks aimed at reducing tensions among his eastern neighbours. He should build on the Angola forum to host, with President Lourenço, fresh talks between Rwanda and Uganda, while seeking similar talks between Rwanda and Burundi.

Separately, the UN and the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), an intergovernmental body comprising states in the region which is one of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework's guarantors, should collect and investigate evidence of support to armed groups in the DRC. Xia Huang, the UN special envoy to the Great Lakes, who has been instrumental in convening the Burundian, Rwandan and Ugandan intelligence chiefs, should push the DRC's neighbours to give evidence they have of such support by other governments. Xia should request that they share that evidence with the UN Group of Experts on the DRC, which is mandated by the Security Council to investigate allegations and publish verified evidence, and with the Expanded Joint Verification Mechanism (EJVM) of the ICGLR. The EJVM is mandated under the PSCF's terms to investigate allegations brought by any regional state.

Amassing evidence of support to proxies in the region and ideally establishing a shared understanding of that support would provide a stronger basis for the PSCF's guarantors – comprising the UN, African Union and the regional bloc, the Southern African Development Community, in addition to the ICGLR – to push Great Lakes governments to stop fuelling conflict in the DRC. Admittedly, the challenges of verifying regional governments' support to rebels in that country are great. The UN expert

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, diplomat, Kinshasa, October 2019; European diplomat, New York, October 2019.

⁶³ Representatives of the U.S. Africa Command attended the meeting.

⁶⁴ "Document État-Major Intégré", signed by Célestin Mbala Munsense, Army General, EMG Chief of the FARDC, October 2019.

⁶⁵ "Foreign Troops Enter DRC: Why the Goma Meeting Failed", Kivu Security Tracker, 18 November 2019.

group is minimally staffed and would struggle to explore each and every allegation. The EJVM, which includes security personnel from Great Lakes and other countries on the continent, is also hamstrung by limited personnel and the internal politics of its membership. Burundian, Rwandan and Ugandan representatives on the body all likely would face pressure from their respective governments to dilute findings that would reflect badly on their capitals. The UN Security Council would need to maintain pressure on all parties to cooperate with both the expert group's and the EJVM's investigations.⁶⁶

The U.S., UK and France can help. All three are UN Security Council permanent members that historically have been invested in the Great Lakes region. While they all have appointed envoys for the Great Lakes, they could use them to greater effect by tasking them to work together to support regional dialogue.⁶⁷ The envoys should also ensure that investigations and verifications remain on track and that political pressure is applied on Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda to roll back any support to armed groups they are found to be backing. A collective effort at regional diplomacy based around dialogue and appropriate verification of allegations would also relieve pressure on MONUSCO, which has struggled for years to find a military solution to the problem of rebels from the Great Lakes states sheltering in the eastern DRC.⁶⁸

VI. Conclusion

The Great Lakes region is increasingly on edge. Distrust is rife among Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, all of which have connections to insurgents in the eastern DRC. President Tshisekedi's emphasis on regional peacemaking deserves applause and his cooperation with Rwanda has delivered dividends in tackling Rwandan rebels. But these efforts should proceed alongside diplomacy aimed at stemming the Kigali-Kampala rivalry. More broadly, Tshisekedi should rethink his idea of inviting the three neighbours to participate in military operations in the DRC. Instead, he should seek an agreement that entails, first, the DRC's eastern neighbours pledging not to back armed groups in the DRC and, secondly, a verification mechanism for investigating allegations of such involvement. This political track should build on the Luanda initiative. Special Envoy Xia's recent diplomacy means that the UN is well placed to back all this, in line with Secretary-General António Guterres's pledges to emphasise preventive diplomacy. By upping their diplomatic involvement, the U.S., UK and France can also play useful roles.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior UN officials and EJVM staff member, January 2020. Officials reiterate that both the UN's expert group and the EJVM have mandates for such investigations and would be ready to take on such a role.

⁶⁷ J. Peter Pham is U.S. special envoy to the Great Lakes, though also works as Director for the Africa Centre at the Atlantic Council. The UK's envoy to the Great Lakes Sophia Willitts-King is dual-hatted, also working as the Head of the Central and Southern Africa Department at the UK Foreign Office. France's envoy is currently Sophie Makame, former Ambassador to Uganda.

⁶⁸ See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°148, *A New Approach for the UN to Stabilise the DR Congo*, 4 December 2019.

Without such efforts, there is a real risk that growing tension will fuel a wider regional security crisis. Were Burundian, Rwandan and Ugandan forces given a green light for operations in the DRC, the danger would be all the graver, raising the spectre of an interlocking proxy war wherein each Great Lakes country is backing its rivals' enemies.

Nairobi/Brussels, 23 January 2020

Appendix A: Map of the Great Lakes Region



1. FDLR

The *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* is a remnant of the Rwanda Hutu militia that massacred much of the Tutsi minority and many moderate Hutu during the 1994 genocide. The rebel movement, active since 2000, is mostly based in North Kivu. Since the killing of its leader Sylvestre Mudacumura in September 2019, the FDLR is led by Pacifique Ntawunguka.

2. RNC

Since 2017, the *Rwanda National Congress* rebels have been based in the remote plateau of the South Kivu province. The RNC is led by Tutsi defectors from the government of Paul Kagame, allegedly including Kayumba Nyamwasa, who was once one of the Rwandan president's trusted generals. Some RNC fighters appear to have joined FDLR units in North Kivu. Rwandan authorities accuse Burundi and Uganda of backing the RNC.

3. RED-Tabara

The *RED-Tabara* movement was founded in 2011. The movement is reportedly led by Alexis Sinduhije, a Tutsi opponent of the Hutu-dominated Burundian government. Its combatants are active in the South Kivu province, but have also moved from the DRC into Burundi. The Burundian government believes that Rwanda supports RED-Tabara.

4. ADF

The *Allied Democratic Forces* originated in Uganda and have been active in the eastern DRC since the 1990s. Since 2014, the group has been responsible for the killings of thousands of Congolese in the Beni area of North Kivu. In December 2019, the U.S. imposed sanctions on the ADF's leader Musa Baluku and five other group members. Ugandan officials claim that Rwanda supports the ADF.

Appendix B: Chronology of Major Conflicts in Africa's Great Lakes, 1998-2020

1998-2003	In the Second Congo War, Rwanda and Uganda back competing rebel factions in the eastern DR Congo. In June 2000, the two countries' armies clash in Kisangani.
2008	Led by Congolese Tutsi warlord Laurent Nkunda and backed by Rwanda, Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP) rebels take up arms against President Joseph Kabila.
2012-2013	Former CNDP members form the M23 rebel movement and turn against the DRC government, taking control of Goma, North Kivu's capital, in November 2012. M23 receives support from both Rwanda and Uganda.
2018	
16 December	The DRC's army arrests two leaders of Rwanda's rebel Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR) on the DRC-Uganda border. They claim to have met with Rwanda National Congress insurgents and a government minister in the Ugandan capital, Kampala.
2019	
28 February	Rwanda closes the main border crossing into Uganda, disrupting trade between the two countries and increasing regional tensions.
June-October	Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi starts exploring military options for fighting the remaining rebels in the eastern DRC. Officials of Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania meet on several occasions, but fail to come to an agreement.
July-August	Together with Angolan President João Lourenço, Tshisekedi facilitates talks between Rwanda and Uganda, resulting in a memorandum of understanding signed on 21 August.
September	On 18 September, the DRC's army announces that it has killed FDLR commander Sylvestre Mudacumura in North Kivu.
4 October	DRC-based fighters kill fourteen people in Kinigi, Rwanda, which Kigali blames on Burundi and Uganda.
22 October	In Musigati, Burundi, RED-Tabara rebels clash with security forces, killing at least a dozen people. Burundi accuses Rwanda of supporting RED-Tabara.
14 November	Rwandan President Paul Kagame delivers a speech stating that Rwanda's neighbours undermine the country's security and threatens to retaliate.
November	The Burundian military is attacked in Mabayi, Cibitoke province, on 16-17 November. The Burundian government blames the Rwandan army. Rwanda denies the allegations.
December	At Burundi's request, the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region deploys a verification mission to investigate the Mabayi attack.



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