

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	817
Land:	Den Demokratiske Republik Congo
Kilde:	The New Humanitarian (TNH)
Titel:	Shaky M23 ceasefire stokes fears of further conflict in eastern DR Congo
Udgivet:	31. maj 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	24. august 2023

Shaky M23 ceasefire stokes fears of further conflict in eastern DR Congo

‘We have belligerents who are not acting in good faith.’



Rebels from the M23 armed group have pulled back from some of the areas they occupied in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo as part of a regional ceasefire initiative supposed to halt a conflict that has displaced nearly a million people.

But while fighting has eased in recent months, [the rebels remain active](#) and the government is reluctant to negotiate with them, a position that risks entrenching the conflict, even as it stirs regional tension and diverts [focus](#) from other insurgencies.

Congolese analysts and residents who spoke to The New Humanitarian said they fear a new round of fighting may soon break out. Tensions rose earlier this week as [the army accused](#) the M23 of preparing an attack on Goma, the largest city in the east.

“The ceasefire risks failing because we have belligerents who are not [acting] in good faith,” said Stewart Muhindo, a researcher and activist affiliated with LUCHA, a leading civil society group in DRC.

The M23 is led by Congolese Tutsis and is [part of a lineage of rebel groups](#) backed by neighbouring Rwanda. Support for these groups began in the 1990s as Rwanda hunted down Hutu militias that fled to DRC following the genocide against Rwandan Tutsis.

The M23 was thought defeated after its last major insurgency a decade ago. But [it rose up again in late 2021](#), capturing a large expanse of territory in the east, and causing relations between DRC and Rwanda to hit rock bottom.

Rebel leaders say they are fighting because the government broke a 2013 peace accord with the group, and because local Tutsis are at risk. Yet Rwanda is widely thought to be pulling the strings, reviving the group to push its own agenda.

Western states [have let the conflict escalate](#). Many slashed aid to Rwanda for its role in the 2012-2013 M23 crisis, but are now avoiding taking direct action given the country’s role in peacekeeping missions, and in taking Europe’s unwanted asylum seekers.

“It is an open secret that it is Rwanda that is behind the conflict,” said Rose Tuombeane, a human rights activist from the Dynamic of Women for Good Governance. “Everyone knows it, but the international community turns a deaf ear.”

A contested withdrawal: ‘We fear a resumption of hostility’

Two regional initiatives are trying to stop the violence: an Angolan mediation effort between Congolese and Rwandan leaders, and an intervention by the East African Community (EAC) bloc, which deployed a military force to DRC last year.

Lawrence Kanyuka, the spokesperson of the M23, told The New Humanitarian that his group has been withdrawing from occupied positions and handing over territory to the EAC force as stipulated by the latest ceasefire.

“Despite the weeks of calm, the rebels are there.”

Yet several residents in affected areas described the withdrawals as incomplete, echoing recent statements by Congolese officials who say the M23 [remains at large](#) and is preparing for a new round of fighting.

In the eastern territories of Masisi and Rutshuru, residents said the rebels announced they were withdrawing from different areas only to remain in place in civilian clothes, or to reinforce positions in other strategic areas.

“Despite the weeks of calm, the rebels are there,” said a human rights activist in Kiwanja, one of the towns that the EAC force – which includes troops from Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan – has [deployed to](#).

Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi has [threatened to boot out](#) the EAC force if it doesn't take a more proactive stance against the M23. But the EAC prefers political solutions and is reluctant to fight the rebels given that Rwanda is a member state.

Jean-Jacques Wondo Omanyundu, a security analyst, criticised the EAC for maintaining a “passive posture despite frequent ceasefire violations by M23 fighters and their refusal to confine themselves to specific areas”.

The EAC force [was unpopular from the outset](#) among Congolese. Many are mindful of past military interventions that have seen neighbouring countries sponsor militias, hoover up mineral wealth, and engage in widespread abuses.

Still, Kinshasa has not given up on military initiatives. It has contracted eastern European mercenaries, [formed partnerships with armed groups](#) that oppose the M23, and procured attack drones from foreign states.

Tshisekedi has also recently engaged in discussions with the Southern African Development Community. The regional bloc, which includes Angola, Mozambique, South Africa, and Tanzania, has [promised to deploy](#) its own force to eastern DRC.

The politics of dialogue

For now, [the conflict appears stalemated](#), with Kinshasa ruling out direct talks with the M23. The group is domestically unpopular because of its links to Rwanda, which has provided weapons and even sent troops to support combat efforts.

The M23 was designated a terrorist movement last year by DRC's national assembly, and any attempt to negotiate with it would “be perceived as a defeat by Congolese public opinion, especially in an election year”, said Omanyundu.

The M23 may serve political purposes for Kinshasa, given the upcoming presidential polls. Analysts say officials are using the group as a scapegoat to divert attention away from [other security crises that have displaced](#) some 5.7 million people.



Arlette Bashizi/TNH

A crowd forms at a displacement camp for Congolese displaced by the M23 conflict. Nearly a million people have been uprooted by the fighting since late 2021.

Hoping to avoid negotiations, Kinshasa has suggested the M23 joins a disarmament and [demobilisation scheme](#). But Kanyuka, the M23 spokesperson, said the initiative is “only one of the steps” needed for a peace process.

Faced with the poor performance of the Congolese army, Muhindo of Lucha said negotiations with the M23 are inevitable once the election cycle is over. Yet Muhindo said such negotiations could send out a message that rebellion is rewarded.

“To think that to be invited to the negotiating table you have to take up arms, kill people, cause the displacement of populations, is to encourage evil,” Muhindo told The New Humanitarian.

International double standards

Omanyundu, the security analyst, said the conflict could be de-escalated with effective international diplomacy that includes “concrete sanctions” against Rwanda, which officially denies being behind the M23.

International action [was credited](#) with forcing Kigali to withdraw support to the rebels a decade ago. Yet analysts say foreign donors currently care more about their [bilateral interests](#) than ending the conflict.

The EU, for example, is funding the deployment of [Rwandan troops in northern Mozambique](#), where jihadists have shuttered a huge gas project run by the French multinational, Total.

Meanwhile, the UK has been channelling funds to Kigali as part of a much-criticised plan – currently being challenged in the country’s courts – to relocate asylum seekers who arrive at Britain’s shores without a visa or permission to enter.

The lack of pressure on Rwanda contrasts starkly to Western intervention against Russia, [analysts have pointed out](#). Both countries are violating the territorial sovereignty of neighbouring states but have not faced comparable pushback.

“We must force Rwanda to withdraw,” said Tuombeane, the human rights activist. She said negotiations would not “guarantee peace” so long as Rwanda continues to back the M23.

Removing Rwanda’s ‘pretext’

Rwanda’s main reason for supporting the rebels is to reassert its political and economic influence in eastern DRC. Kigali sees the area as its backyard and has worried in recent years about regional rivals gaining the upper hand there.

Still, Rwanda’s security concerns also play into the crisis. Chief among them is the lingering presence of the FDLR, a DRC-based Rwandan Hutu militia that evolved out of the groups responsible for the 1994 genocide against Tutsis.

Kigali [has criticised](#) the Congolese army for collaborating with the FDLR, though alliances between the often adversarial forces [have repeatedly been struck in response](#) to the threat of a Rwandan-backed insurgency.

The FDLR is now a shadow of its former self – down from thousands of fighters to a few hundred – but remaining militiamen should still be “tracked down once and for all”, said Jean-Mobert Senga, a researcher at Amnesty International.

Senga said removing the lingering threat that the FDLR poses to Rwanda will help get rid of a “pretext” that Kigali often uses to justify its destabilising interventions in eastern DRC.

‘The crisis is far from over’

For its part, the M23 has put forward various demands. These include: amnesty for its fighters; the protection of Congolese Tutsis; and the return of members of the community who are living as refugees in neighbouring countries.

Congolese Tutsis have suffered a long history of discrimination and abuse, [though analysts say](#) recent attacks against them represent a xenophobic reaction to the M23 rebellion rather than a proximate trigger of the insurgency.

Kanyuka, the M23 spokesperson, warned that the conflict will continue if “root causes” are not addressed. “As long as [the president] refuses to listen to us and persists in his warlike way, the crisis is far from over,” Kanyuka said.

Residents in conflict-hit areas told The New Humanitarian they’re bracing for more fighting. “We fear a resumption of hostility,” said the Kiwanja human rights activist, who asked not to be named for risk of reprisals. “The inhabitants no longer visit their fields.”

Edited by Philip Kleinfeld.