

Congo army helicopters pound M23 rebels near Goma
By Chrispin Mvano
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MUTAHO, Democratic Republic of Congo (Reuters) – Congolese government forces supported by helicopters attacked M23 rebel positions near the eastern city of Goma on Tuesday in a third day of heavy fighting that has forced hundreds of villagers to flee their homes and raised tensions with Rwanda.

In a letter to the U.N. Security Council obtained by Reuters on Tuesday, Congo accused Rwandan specialist units of aiding M23 in the fighting. In a statement, U.N. peacekeepers in Congo denied claims by Kigali that they shelled Rwandan territory on Monday.

The U.N. mission, known as MONUSCO, said its peacekeepers “have not been involved in the fighting around Goma and, as a result, are not involved in any alleged shelling of Rwandan territory. The mission adds that it does not have a presence in Rwanda and is not in position to verify any shelling.”

In a separate letter to the Security Council made public on Monday, Rwanda accused a new U.N. Intervention Brigade of discussing collaboration with Hutu rebels, known as the FDLR, linked to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The intervention brigade is mandated to fight and disarm rebel groups in eastern Congo.

The 3,000-member U.N. Intervention Brigade, made up of South African, Tanzania and Malawian troops, has conducted patrols but not yet engaged in combat.

The United Nations has warned it would block any attack on Goma, a city of 1 million people bordering Rwanda, which was briefly captured by rebels in November.

A Reuters reporter in Mutaho, some 7 km (four miles) northeast of Goma, saw three army helicopters bombard rebel positions in the town of Kibati, 4 km further north on Tuesday.

“The situation is now calm,” army spokesman Colonel Olivier Hamuli told Reuters in Mutaho. “They attacked us at 4 o’clock this morning but we replied. ... Our aim is to wipe out the M23.”

Rebels and Congolese government troops traded mortar fire on Monday close to the northern and western outskirts of Goma. The United Nations said that a shell fell on Tuesday 100 metres (yards) from Goma airport, with no victims reported.

Rwanda supported an allegation in the latest report by the U.N. Group of Experts that units of the Congolese army (FARDC) have been cooperating with the FDLR. [ID:nL2N0F41CW]

But Ignace Gata Mavita, Congo’s U.N. ambassador, said that if it had not been for the instability created by M23, then joint military efforts by U.N. peacekeepers and the Congolese army would have been successful in wiping out the FDLR in Congo.

“The FARDC do not collaborate with FDLR and do not supply them with weapons of ammunition,” he wrote to the council.

“Congo, whose civilian population are the only victims in the region who suffer the torments of repeated FDLR attacks, has no interest in seeing its army collaborate in any way with these destructive Rwandan forces.”

PEACE TALKS STALLED

Millions of people have died from violence, disease and hunger since the 1990s as foreign-backed rebel groups have fought for control of eastern Congo's rich deposits of gold, diamonds, copper, cobalt and uranium, destabilising the Great Lakes region at the heart of Africa.

Moustapha Soumare, U.N. humanitarian coordinator in Congo, warned that a return to fighting so close to inhabited areas placed thousands of civilians at risk.

Kinshasa has claimed that Rwanda was directly backing the Tutsi-led M23 rebels. A U.N. report said the group recruits in Rwanda with the aid of sympathetic military officers.

Colonel Hamuli showed Reuters two dead M23 fighters and two prisoners who he said had come from Uganda and Rwanda. One of the prisoners said he came from the Ugandan town of Rubaya, but it was not possible to verify this.

Both Rwanda and Uganda, which have in the past backed insurgents in Congo, deny any support for M23.

The 17,000-strong U.N. force in Congo, the world's largest peacekeeping mission, has been deployed for more than a decade but has failed to stem a conflict involving dozens of armed groups and complicated by national and ethnic rivalries.

The arrival of the Intervention Brigade has raised peace hopes. The World Bank is offering \$1 billion to regional governments to promote development if they respect a U.N.-brokered February deal not to back rebels in Congo.

Peace talks between the Congolese government and M23 in Kampala, the capital of neighbouring Uganda, have stalled.

"We have to go back to the negotiating table in Kampala. The solution has to be a political not a military one," M23 spokesman Amani Kabasha told Reuters.

Congolese government spokesman Lambert Mende in Kinshasa said 180 rebels had been killed in the fighting but the government was still open to peace negotiations. Both sides in the conflict routinely exaggerate death tolls.

The Red Cross estimates that 66,000 Congolese have refugees fled into Uganda since Thursday after attacks by the ADF, an Islamist group which Kampala says is allied to elements of Somalia's al Shabaab movement, an al Qaeda-linked group.

(Additional reporting by Bienvenu-Marie Bakumanya in Kinshasa, Stephanie Ulmer-Nebehay in Geneva and Michelle Nichols in New York; Writing by Daniel Flynn; Editing by Michael Roddy)