

Briefing: Crisis in North Kivu
By IRIN
10 July 2012

On the move, again: Some 220,000 people have been freshly displaced in eastern DRC GOMA, 10 July 2012 (IRIN) - Some 220,000 people have been freshly displaced in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since a group of former rebels integrated into the national army (FARDC) mutinied and began capturing towns and territory in North Kivu Province, often in the face of minimal resistance.

With the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in eastern DRC topping two million for the first time since 2009 and amid fears that the rebels are closing in on the regional capital, Goma, humanitarian needs are growing dramatically, especially for shelter, water and sanitation, health, food and non-food items.

There are significant regional dimensions: around 20,000 people, including 600 FARDC soldiers, have sought refuge in Rwanda and Uganda - where officials said they were overwhelmed by the influx - while Kigali stands accused of backing the mutineers, a charge it vehemently denies.

What's behind the current fighting?

For many decades, the interwoven issues of citizenship (who is a real Congolese?) land rights and ethnicity, coupled with the absence of effective state authority and the presence of rich mineral deposits, have driven instability and armed conflict in the eastern DRC, whose Tutsi inhabitants have been particularly caught up in the tension between "indigenous" and "settler" populations. Much of the fighting during the 1996-1997 and 1998-2003 Congo wars took place in the east.

After Tutsi rebels (RPF) overthrew the Hutu government in Rwanda during the 1994 state-sponsored genocide, hundreds of thousands of Hutus, including many who carried out the killings in Rwanda, crossed the border into eastern DRC. Some of these militia formed the core of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a group which exists to this day, and which twice led Kigali to send troops into DRC to back Congolese Tutsi armed groups.

The roots of the Tutsi-led M23, the name used by today's mutineers, are intertwined with this back story. Its leader, Bosco Ntaganda, fought with the RPF during the 1994 fall of Kigali, and served as deputy leader, then leader of the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), a group established in 2006 with the professed intent of protecting North Kivu's Tutsis from the FDLR. (Like the CNDP boss he ousted, Laurent Nkunda, Ntaganda is wanted by the International Criminal Court, ICC, on war crimes charges. Kinshasa has declined to act on the ICC's arrest warrant, saying Ntaganda was key to restoring stability in North Kivu)

In April 2012, Ntaganda and some of his followers defected from the ranks of the FARDC, accusing the government of failing to live up to the terms of a deal that led to the CNDP's transformation into a political party and the integration of its forces into the army and police. This deal was struck on 23 March 2009, hence the name M23. The group cited administrative reforms and the return of Tutsi refugees from Rwanda as the unfulfilled terms of the 2009 accord.

What progress has M23 made since April?

In May, the defectors announced that they were operating under the new leadership of Col Sultani Makenga. M23 took advantage of a ceasefire by the FARDC to move from the former CNDP stronghold of Masisi District east to Runyoni, a strategic peak in the Virunga national park, where the borders of

Uganda, Rwanda and DRC meet. The rebels made initial gains in May before being pushed back by FARDC, but as allegations emerged that Rwanda may be supporting the rebels in June, they displayed a new show of strength.

On 6 July, M23 took control of Bunagana, the strategic mining town in Rutshuru District on the Ugandan border. They then advanced to take four more towns in the district, according to rebel leader Col Makenga. "We will withdraw and leave them to MONUSCO [UN Stabilization Mission in DRC] and national police," he told AFP. Notably, the rebels said they would not hand the towns back to FARDC. "We are not there to take the towns but to get our voices heard," he added.

Aid workers fill bags of fortified cereal for new arrivals to the Mugunga camp in eastern DRC

How has overall security in North Kivu been affected?

As FARDC committed resources to fighting M23, the security situation in other parts of the Kivu provinces degenerated rapidly. Elements of the various militia collectively known as Mai Mai increased their military activities, including, in North Kivu's Masisi Territory, Mai Mai Kifuafua, which has formed an alliance with Raia Mutomboki, another Mai Mai group. Police blamed this coalition for the massacre of more than 200 people in a dozen attacks over a few days in mid-May. Witnesses said the attackers announced they wanted to kill anyone who spoke Kinyarwanda, the language spoken in Rwanda.

To the north, the head of another Mai Mai group with alleged ties to M23, Gen Kakule Sikula Lafontaine, led an assault on an army base in North Kivu's Lubero Territory in early June.

In Walikale territory to the west, as FARDC soldiers were redeployed elsewhere, FDLR moved in. Some towns have seen peaceful transfers of power from FARDC to other armed groups. In Pinga, for example, FARDC was replaced by the Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS), a Mai Mai group based in Masisi that purports to protect the Hunde ethnic group against the threat purportedly posed by Kinyarwanda speakers. FARDC's eventual return to such settlements is likely to provoke further conflict.

What is Rwanda's role in M23?

None at all, according to the government in Kigali. However, at the beginning of June, Human Rights Watch released a report alleging that Rwanda had recruited, trained and armed members of M23. Later that month, an addendum to a report by the UN Group of Experts on the DRC went further, saying Rwanda had assisted directly in the creation of the movement by transporting soldiers and equipment through Rwanda. It also stated that the Rwandan national army made incursions into DRC to reinforce M23, and violated arms embargos and travel restrictions by supporting UN-sanctioned individuals, including Ntaganda. The addendum said M23 fighters included demobilized and repatriated FDLR members as well as Congolese refugees living in Rwanda.

The document named Rwandan Defence Minister James Kaberebe as having been "in constant contact with M23". It levelled similar charges against Chief of Defence Staff Lt Charles Kayonga, and Kagame's military adviser, Gen Jacques Nziza.

The document also presented evidence of Rwanda's alleged support of at least six other groups in the region. It said Rwanda had widened its activities in eastern DRC from supporting armed groups in a bid to assassinate FDLR leaders, to backing various army mutinies, in South as well as North Kivu, in the wake of elections held in 2011.

Rwandan President Kagame called the allegations "fictitious", while Foreign Minister Louise Mushikiwabo said in a statement that Rwanda intends to provide evidence that the Group of Experts' claims are false, and that DRC should take responsibility for failing to contain the mutiny. "It is demonstrably against Rwanda's interests to do anything that would risk destabilizing the region. We have worked vigorously with our Congolese counterparts to try and head off the rebellion," she said.

What is the humanitarian impact of the rebellion?

DRC offers a good example of "conflict fatigue". Humanitarian agencies, most based in Goma, are being stretched to their limits. The UN estimates that 220,000 people have been displaced in eastern DRC since December because of clashes and massacres of civilians. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is currently supporting 90,000 IDPs in 31 camps. In early July, UN peacekeepers abandoned their position at Bunagana, on the Ugandan border, following a new wave of fighting, which saw one Indian peacekeeper killed as the rebels took control of the town.

Civilian protection and humanitarian access are problematic because of conflict in both North and South Kivu, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Aid agencies lack the capacity to meet the basic needs of IDPs.

The fighting is pitting the M23 mutineers against the Congolese army

On the frontlines in the fighting between M23 and FARDC, civilians are stranded; others are perpetually on the move. The government is reluctant to endorse new IDP camps, the number of which has reduced by over a third since 2009. Many of the displaced are living in poor conditions in makeshift camps using existing public infrastructure. In Masisi Territory Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported a sharp rise in trauma wounds caused by machetes, spears and bullets, and said such cases accounted for 25 percent of all surgical admissions in Masisi hospital in the month of May, up from just 2 percent in April.

Meanwhile, across the country a cholera outbreak has so far affected eight of the DRC's 11 provinces. Rwanguba general hospital near Rutshuru in North Kivu, has admitted more than 530 cases since the end of May.

What now?

Already, key members of the international community, including the USA have begun to formally express their concerns in writing to Kigali.

Despite claims that M23 is advancing on the North Kivu provincial capital Goma, the rebel army is still said to be 40km north of the city and recent statements suggest that having demonstrated their strength, they want to negotiate with the government rather than proceed with the military campaign. Witnesses say the news of rebel gains has panicked residents and thrown the city into turmoil. Congolese motorbike taxi drivers, described as "anti-Tutsi mobs" according to sources based in Goma, took to the streets alongside groups of youth on 9 July to protest against the insecurity.

Rwandan students have reportedly evacuated Goma, fearing reprisals for their national links to the rebel army.

In a statement, MONUSCO, the UN peacekeeping mission in DRC, expressed concern about the rebel advances, and also reported unconfirmed allegations of human rights violations in M23-controlled areas, and an attack on the prison at Rutshuru, which led to the release of detainees.

MONUSCO is also deploying attack helicopters. "In close coordination with the FARDC, [MONUSCO's] armed helicopters have been used for civilian protection purposes, with the aim of impeding the M23 advance. In addition, the Mission is redeploying its assets to ensure it is present in key forward bases in the area," said a UN press release.