

Congo Agrees to Peace Deal With Rebels

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Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

Rebel soldiers loyal to Laurent Nkunda, a Congolese Tutsi general who is battling the government, in a village known as a Nkunda stronghold in the eastern North Kivu Province last month.

DAKAR, Senegal — [Congo's](#) government reached an agreement on Monday with a renegade general to end an insurgency that has forced more than 400,000 people from their homes in the country's volatile east in the past year and threatened to undermine the new democratically elected government, according to Congolese officials and Western diplomats involved in the negotiations.

Under the terms of the agreement, which was completed Monday and is expected to be signed Tuesday after nearly two weeks of difficult negotiations in the eastern city of Goma, the government and the rebel troops will withdraw from some of their positions and [United Nations](#) peacekeeping forces will establish a buffer zone.

A commission of Congolese officials and experts from the United States, the [European Union](#) and the [African Union](#) will oversee the integration of the rebel troops into the national army and the enforcement of a permanent cease-fire.

The rebels will also be granted amnesty on insurrection charges, which would have carried the death penalty, but they could still face charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The agreement will also apply to other militias operating in eastern Congo.

The conflict between the Congolese government and a rebel army led by Laurent Nkunda, a Congolese Tutsi general, was part of the deadly legacy of the Rwandan genocide, which ensnared Congo in a vast regional conflict that began in 1996 and has limped on to the present despite a peace agreement formally ending the war in Congo in 2003.

According to some estimates, the Congo war and its aftermath have killed more than four million people, mostly because of disease and hunger, more than any other conflict since World War II.

“The agreement has really been forged in the face of immense suffering of the people of eastern Congo,” said Anneke Van Woudenberg, a senior researcher for [Human Rights Watch](#), who was in Goma to observe the negotiations. “What needs to happen is all sides adhere to what they have signed so we see an end to the suffering.”

General Nkunda had refused to surrender his command and integrate his troops into the national army, as other armed groups had done, contending that Congolese Tutsi faced a unique threat at the hands of the Rwandan Hutu extremists who carried out the Rwandan genocide, in which 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu were slaughtered in 1994.

Many of the perpetrators in that conflict fled into Congo, then known as Zaire, in 1994, and an untold number remain there.

Battles between General Nkunda’s troops, government-allied militias and the Rwandan Hutu fighters have spawned chaos in eastern Congo over the past year, just as the country struggled to right itself after its first democratic elections in more than four decades. The battles have also heightened ethnic tensions in a region that has been torn by fighting among its many ethnic groups.

The agreement follows a pact signed late last year in Nairobi, Kenya, between the Congolese and Rwandan governments to disarm and repatriate the Rwandan Hutu militias. Diplomats hope that taken together the two deals will help solve some of the most intractable issues at the heart of Congo’s seemingly interminable conflict.

“The two agreements together really provided the processes we needed to unlock this,” said one Western diplomat close to the negotiations, who was not authorized to speak for attribution. “Now we just need the capacity to follow through.”

The future of General Nkunda, one of the thorniest issues in eastern Congo, was left out of the negotiations. Earlier efforts to persuade him to go into temporary exile failed, and diplomats involved in the negotiations said his status was put aside to avoid saddling the talks with yet another problem.

[Joseph Kabila](#), Congo’s president, was under enormous pressure to defeat General Nkunda militarily. Many Congolese blame General Nkunda for the horrors that have plagued North Kivu, the last remaining war zone in a country that has suffered through more than a decade of regional conflict.

But a military assault on General Nkunda’s positions in December ended in a humiliating defeat for the Congolese Army, which was forced to flee positions it had taken from the general’s men just days earlier, leaving a trail of empty water bottles, sardine cans and ammunition cartons.

Mr. Kabila and General Nkunda were also under intense pressure to reach agreement from Western allies, who have spent billions of dollars on aid, peacekeeping and organizing an election in Congo, with the United States in particular playing a crucial role.

Timothy R. Shortley, senior adviser for conflict resolution to Assistant Secretary Jendayi E. Frazer of the State Department, spent nearly two weeks ferrying between government officials in Goma and General Nkunda’s jungle hide-out to press both sides to make a deal, according to negotiators and observers.

While diplomats, analysts and human rights advocates hailed the agreement as a historic step in a region torn by violence, many of the most difficult questions remain unresolved, like the status of Mr. Nkunda, the precise arrangements for ensuring the cease-fire and integrating the different forces into the national army, and the potentially explosive return of thousands of Congolese Tutsi living as refugees in Rwanda.