

Uganda vows to withdraw peacekeepers over UN's Congo claims

The Guardian, Reuters in Kampala
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Security minister says troops will pull out of regional hotspots, after UN accused Uganda of supporting Congolese rebels

Uganda has said it will withdraw its forces from military operations in regional hotspots including Somalia in response to UN allegations that it is supporting Congolese rebels.

The security minister, Wilson Mukasa, described the decision as "irreversible" and said another cabinet minister was travelling to New York to explain Uganda's position.

In a report leaked last month, a UN panel of experts accused Uganda and Rwanda of supporting the so-called M23 rebel group commanded by Bosco Ntaganda, a warlord indicted by the international criminal court.

"What we've said and what we are proposing to the UN ... is that we are going to withdraw from our engagements in Somalia, Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of Congo to concentrate on our own security here in Uganda," Mukasa said in Kampala.

Ugandan troops account for more than a third of the more than 17,600 UN-mandated Amisom peacekeepers battling al-Qaida-linked Islamist rebels in Somalia.

Felix Kulayigye, spokesman for the Uganda people's defence forces, said: "I am not aware of any order to withdraw from Somalia but the UPDF is under civilian authority so if an executive decision has been taken to withdraw, that's fine. We'll not stay an extra day in Somalia when we get that order."

The Amisom force has been key to propping up a string of interim governments in Somalia and driving al-Shabaab militants from urban strongholds including the capital, Mogadishu, and the southern port of Kismayu. A sudden and sharp reduction in the force's numbers, especially in Mogadishu, would risk unravelling the steady security gains that allowed the first presidential elections in more than four decades to be held in the capital in September.

Ugandan troops backed by US special forces are also leading the hunt for the fugitive Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony in Central African Republic (CAR), with some stationed in South Sudan. "Uganda benefits financially for its Amisom contribution, and a troop presence in Somalia, CAR and South Sudan gives the military an enhanced footprint across the region.

Hamza Mohamed, a London-based Somalia analyst, said: "It's just politics and playing to the gallery. They won't pull out. Things will be quietly settled behind closed doors with perhaps future reports not being so critical."

The confidential 44-page report by the UN security council's group of experts, a body that monitors compliance with the UN sanctions and Congo arms embargo, said M23 had expanded the territory under its control, stepped up recruitment of child soldiers and summarily executed recruits and prisoners.

The report said Rwandan officials co-ordinated the creation of the rebel movement as well as its major military operations, while Uganda's more subtle support of M23 allowed the rebel group's political branch to operate from within Kampala. Uganda and Rwanda have repeatedly denied the accusations.