



In brief: déjà vu in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

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On 20 November, forces belonging to the March 23 (M23) armed group seized Goma, the main city in eastern DRC. They did so without much of a fight; the army retreated and the UN peace keeping force MONUSCO – the world’s largest – looked on. M23 has now threatened to advance on the east’s second city, Bukavu and then onto Kinshasa. Tens of thousands have fled the fighting. The UN Security Council passed a [resolution](#) condemning the M23’s take-over and calling for it to withdraw immediately.

The DRC Government has been dealt a heavy blow. Joseph Kabila knows that his father, Laurent, seized power in 1997 after marching across the country from the east, with the (ultimately short-lived) support of Rwanda and Uganda. Joseph Kabila only narrowly averted the loss of Goma in 2009 to M23’s predecessor, the Conseil National de Défense du Peuple (CNDP). However, the peace deal reached on 23 March 2009, which involved the incorporation of CNDP leaders and forces into the Congolese army eventually [collapsed](#), prompting some of them to mutiny and form the M23 in April 2012.

Who is the M23 and what does it want? A recent [analysis](#) by the Rift Valley Institute argues:

The M23 is latest in a series of armed groups to emerge in the Kivus region in recent years and should be seen in this historical context. It stands at the nexus of local and regional forces, propelled by a powerful mixture of elite interests, state weakness, and local conflicts [...] The main force driving the rebellion is the belief, held in Kigali as well as among Tutsi businessmen and military commanders in North Kivu, that the dysfunctional Congolese government will not be able to protect their varied interests—their security, investments, and political power. In order to safeguard these assets, they have backed armed groups: the CNDP between 2004 and 2009 and, since April 2012, the M23. Virulent ethnic divides have exacerbated this mistrust. The Tutsi community, out of which these armed groups have emerged, occupies a precarious position in North Kivu, between privilege and discrimination. Its leaders are some of the wealthiest landowners and entrepreneurs in the region, but there is also no doubting the prevalence and vitriolic intensity of anti-Tutsi sentiment in the Congo.

A final source of insecurity is the Congolese state itself. Its inability to enforce the rule of law, coupled with insufficient military strength to suppress armed rivals, encourages a belief that the only way of ensuring a modicum of security—protecting both property and individual freedoms—is through armed force. The weakness of state institutions is perhaps the most intractable part of the current conundrum.

Until the events of the past week, most experts have argued that M23 lacks the military capacity and political constituency of the CNDP and [might struggle to hold onto any](#)

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[additional territory seized](#). However, there are now reports that, as it advances, it is gaining significant numbers of new recruits, with soldiers and police switching sides. For civilians caught in the middle, the worst of all worlds would be a protracted period of fighting in which different armed groups advance and retreat. While key M23 leaders are the focus of concern for the International Criminal Court, none of the protagonists in the east have clean hands.

Despite repeated denials on the part of the governments of Rwanda and Uganda, there is now virtually complete consensus across the international community that they – and/or elements within their ranks – are providing military and political support to M23. This does not mean that the M23 is simply a cipher for those governments, as many in Kinshasa often assert. Both have long records of direct and indirect involvement in the region. Most accept this has been driven by a combination of the presence there of armed groups hostile to them – including Hutu militia defending some of those who were responsible for the Rwandan genocide – and (perhaps more important now) commercial interests.

A report by a UN panel of experts has finally broken Western reluctance to accept publicly that Rwanda and Uganda have gone well beyond self-defence in their policies towards eastern DRC. Leaked in October, the [final version](#) of the report was published on 22 November. Western governments have been reviewing and cutting their aid to Rwanda and Uganda for some time but in recent days the momentum has accelerated. The UK is no exception, [suspending aid to Uganda](#) on 16 November, although this was officially in response to rampant corruption; following the UN report, it is widely expected to do the [same regarding Rwanda](#) next month. But the awkward reality remains that there is no way forward in eastern DRC without their involvement. Both also contribute to UN peacekeeping missions elsewhere in Africa. Uganda has threatened to withdraw its troops from Somalia.

MONUSCO, the UN peacekeeping force, has been condemned by many for ‘standing by’ and allowing M23 to take Goma. It has a mandate to protect civilians. The problem is that it is always open to interpretation how this can best be done. The force has in recent years been criticised for engaging in armed operations closely in tandem with the Congolese army. M23 and its supporters certainly view it as a party to the conflict. However, it appears for now to have reverted to a more neutral stance. This may be because it has calculated that fighting M23 in heavily populated areas could itself lead to significant civilian casualties. It may also be because it has reached the conclusion that the Congolese army is not a [viable partner](#), although it is beginning to regroup and fight back now.

Where does this leave Joseph Kabila and his government in Kinshasa? Both were returned in [elections last year](#) which received considerable domestic and international criticism. Western leverage over his government has reduced in recent years as China has increased its investment and influence. But if he feels vulnerable enough, he might become more amenable, at least until he has survived the immediate crisis. Government officials are hinting that they are prepared to address the concerns behind the M23 rebellion. The intergovernmental International Conference on the Great Lakes Region could be one diplomatic forum through which the situation might be somewhat re-stabilized. Uganda is currently its chair. There are also calls for a joint UN/African Union envoy to be established.

Further reading

[UN Group of Experts report on the Democratic Republic of Congo](#), FCO and DFID press release, 22 November 2012; [Minister for Africa comments after meeting with Rwanda’s President Paul Kagame](#), FCO press release, 22 November 2012

For deeper background, see: SN/IA/5012, [The Democratic Republic of Congo: An Update](#) (December 2009); RP 06/51, [The African Great Lakes: An End to Conflict?](#) (October 2006)