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A long history of conflict

Since the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took power in Rwanda in 1994, **relations with Zaire/DR Congo have overall been conflictual**. Rwanda twice invaded its huge but weak neighbour, in 1996 and 1998, each time hiding behind a Congolese rebel proxy. After officially withdrawing its troops in 2003, it continued its presence in a covert way by supporting armed groups in Eastern DRC, first the CNDP and later the M23. In 2013, strong international pressure forced Kigali to cease its support for the M23, which was defeated by a Force International Brigade deployed alongside the UN peacekeeping mission MONUSCO. The Rwandan presence was accompanied all along by **grave human rights abuse and the illegal exploitation of Congolese natural resources**. The DRC's political class, civil society, and the population generally remained very suspicious of Rwanda's intentions.

The (brief) thaw

However, **relations improved after Félix Tshisekedi became Congo's president** in 2019. In mid-2021, he and Rwandan president Paul Kagame **signed bilateral agreements** on investments, taxation, and the joint exploitation of gold. The two leaders also discussed security issues that are always a delicate regional balancing act. Indeed, in November 2021 Tshisekedi invited the Ugandan army onto Congolese territory to combat the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), originally a Ugandan rebel movement that has been operating on the Congolese side of the border for many years. In light of the bad Rwandan-Ugandan relations at the time, Kigali resented the presence of Ugandan troops in what it considered its backyard. The UN Group of Experts on the DRC found that the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) was present in North Kivu as late as in October 2020, an accusation denied by Kigali. A year later, **an RDF incursion led to an exchange of fire with the Congolese army FARDC**, but both sides played down the incident. A few weeks later, assailants allegedly coming from Rwanda and believed to belong to the old M23 staged attacks in Rutshuru territory. Again, the RDF denied any involvement and it even accused Uganda of being behind the attack.

A renewed fight

Wishing to maintain cordial relations with Congo's neighbours, **Tshisekedi at first avoided escalating the situation**. However, **on 8 February 2022, Kagame seemed to threaten to invade the DRC** during a speech in the Rwandan parliament: "All our eyes are on Congo. We are focused there because of the armed groups based there that threaten us. (...) When someone crosses a red line, we don't ask anybody for permission to intervene. (...) To whoever wants war from us, we give it to him". Tshisekedi reacted two weeks later by suggesting, without naming Rwanda, that a neighbour offered a rear base to armed groups. He concluded that "in any case it is unrealistic and unproductive, even suicidal, for a country of our sub-region to believe that a dividend can be gained from manufacturing conflicts or tensions with its neighbours".

The threat became concrete on 28 March, when elements of the M23 attacked Congolese army positions on several strategic hills in Rutshuru territory. The spokesperson of the North Kivu governor immediately **accused the RDF of supporting the attackers**, a claim relayed the next day by the Congolese Foreign Minister when he summoned the Rwandan ambassador in Kinshasa. Kigali "categorically refuted the baseless accusations" and asked to have them verified by the Extended Joint Verification Mechanism (EJVM) of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). Paradoxically, on 29 March, the day after the attack, the DRC joined the East African Community (EAC). **The conflict thus became one between member states, like the ones that had opposed Rwanda to Uganda and Burundi** in the recent past.

The situation continued to escalate in May. On the 23rd, **Rwanda accused the Congolese army of shelling Rwandan territory**, injuring several civilians, and damaging property. On 26 May, Congolese Foreign Minister Christophe Lutundula claimed that the RDF attacked Rumangabo military camp, an important FARDC base close to the North Kivu provincial capital Goma. On the 27th, the Rwandan government spokesperson accused the FARDC of collaborating with the old Rwandan rebel movement Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) which has remained active in the DRC since the 1990s. The next day, **the Congolese government reiterated its accusation of Rwandan support for the M23** and suspended the operations of the Rwandan carrier RwandAir. On 10 June, both countries traded accusations of cross-border shelling. According to the FARDC, a school was hit and two pupils were killed. **The situation further** escalated when on 12 June the Congolese government formally summoned Rwanda to cease its support for the M23 and abstain from all acts jeopardising regional peace and stability.

Is there a way out?

While a full-blown war between the DRC and Rwanda is unlikely, these developments cause continental concern. On 30 May, Senegalese President Macky Sall, chair of the African Union, spoke to both Tshisekedi and Kagame, while Angolan President João Lourenço started mediation efforts in his capacity as head of the ICGLR. For their part, human rights organisations expressed **concern about the fate of civilians** as a result of the fighting and warned against hate speech and stigmatisation of Congolese Tutsi communities, often presented as Rwandan allies.

This renewed conflict occurs in a dangerous place and at a dangerous moment. **The Congolese state remains weak**, particularly in the East where dozens of armed groups, both Congolese and from neighbouring countries, operate, in addition to the Congolese and foreign state armies. Regional states fight out their conflicts on the DRC's territory or through Congolese proxies and engage in **constantly shifting alliances**.

The **threat of further regional destabilisation** is particularly acute for the EAC, as three of its seven members are actively involved in ongoing conflicts. The one between Rwanda and Uganda has paralysed the organisation for years, and the DRC is now also involved just after its accession. Although in late April a regional summit to deal with armed groups in the DRC took place in Nairobi, this addressed a symptom, not the two essential conflict factors, namely **state weakness in the DRC** and **neighbouring countries' military involvement** across borders. It is the responsibility of **Kenya and Tanzania**, two historical EAC leaders not involved in the current conflicts, to **take strong initiatives**. These could be bolstered by an asset these two countries share, namely their controlling access to the Indian Ocean, a vital trade route for the parties in conflict.

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