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Back to the future in the Great Lakes: Who's backing the M23?

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In May 2013, the M23 surrendered to a multinational onslaught in eastern Congo-Kinshasa. Is history repeating itself?



The Congolese National Armed Forces (FARDC) reinforce their positions around Goma, 21 May, 2013. History is repeating itself a decade later, as a new regional force attempts to push back a resurgent M23. Conflict in the Great Lakes region has a long history and is stirred by many factors: state weakness in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), mainly expressed by incomplete territorial control and the presence of many

domestic and foreign armed groups; Rwanda's extraterritorial military operations; ambiguous bilateral relations between Uganda and Rwanda; transborder economic interests in a largely informal and criminalized environment; and ethnic loyalties across national borders.

Ever since the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took power in 1994, relations with the DRC have overall been conflictual. Rwanda twice invaded its huge but weak neighbor, in 1996 and 1998, each time hiding behind a Congolese rebel proxy. After officially withdrawing its troops in 2003, it continued operating in a covert way by supporting armed groups in Eastern DRC, first the CNDP (National Congress for the Defense of the People) 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 Congolese army (FARDC) and the UN peacekeeping mission. The Rwandan presence was accompanied by grave human rights abuses and the illegal exploitation of Congolese natural resources. Bilateral relations improved after Félix Tshisekedi became DRC's president in 2019. However, the Rwanda Defense Force (RDF) remained present in North Kivu, an accusation denied by Kigali. The M23 became active again with Rwandan support in November 2021. Rwanda risked a replay of 2013 because Tshisekedi invited the Ugandan army onto Congolese territory to combat the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), originally a Ugandan rebel movement which has been operating on the Congolese side of the border for many years. Rwanda was not consulted, and resented the presence of Ugandan troops in what it considers its backyard. In March 2022, elements of the M23 attacked Congolese army positions (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/28/m23-rebels-attack-military-positions-in-eastern-dr-congo>).

M23 rebels' growing role in DRC

The situation continued to escalate when on 12 June, the Congolese government formally summoned Rwanda to cease its support for the M23 and abstain from all acts jeopardizing regional peace and stability. On 13 June, the M23 took control of Bunagana, an important trading center on the DRC-Uganda border. Congolese accusations against Rwanda were vindicated by the UN Group of Experts on the DRC. In a public report published on 14 June, it found that Rwanda and Uganda had provided rear bases and other support to the M23. The Group was much more explicit in a leaked July confidential update. It had gathered "of military operations by the RDF on Congolese territory and of support by the RDF to M23 operations. It also expressed concern about the increase of hate speech, hostility and violence against Rwandophone populations in eastern DRC (https://filipreynjtjens.jimdofree.com/app/download/18127532596/DRC-RDF+and+M23-GOE_Report_-_July_2022_-_clean.pdf?t=1669479117).

In his address to the UN General Assembly in September, Tshisekedi again accused Rwanda of "direct military aggression" and "occupation" of DRC territory. The expulsion of the Rwandan ambassador to the DRC on 30 October 2022 signaled a new low in bilateral relations. In the meantime, regional leaders attempted to bring a situation under control that threatened regional peace and security and was an embarrassment for the East African Community (EAC) of which both the DRC and Rwanda are members (paradoxically, the DRC joined the organization the day after the M23/Rwanda attack in March). Two regional peace initiatives were launched, one led by Angolan president João Lourenço on behalf of the African Union (UA), the other by former Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta on behalf of the EAC. Kenya has since taken the lead, both politically and militarily. Politically, Kenyatta has actively taken up his role as mediator for the EAC by practicing a good deal of shuttle diplomacy. Militarily, the deployment of an EAC regional force (EACRF) led by Kenya started in November (<https://www.voanews.com/a/east-africa-regional-force-to-counter-m23-rebels-advance-/6838885.html>).

Reality thwarts talk of peace

These political and military developments took place as Rwanda was increasingly pushed onto the defensive internationally. The massacre of more than a hundred civilians by the M23 in Kishishe at the end of November was met with worldwide condemnation of the rebel group and Rwandan support for it. Rwanda continued to deny any involvement, even after in December the UN Group of Experts again documented the direct intervention (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/757/86/PDF/N2275786.pdf?OpenElement>) of the RDF on the territory of the DRC in detail. The report only confirmed what was widely known, and condemnation of Rwanda's active involvement was almost unanimous: the US, the EU and France openly came out against Kigali. The UK's silence was striking, and probably linked to London's wish not to impede the implementation of the controversial migration deal with Rwanda (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/18/vanity-project-braverman-under-fire-for-taking-only-rightwing-press-to-rwanda>).

The 2022 Bertelsmann Transformation Index (<https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/COD#pos22>) (BTI) underscored how international partners should push for stability in the region as a whole in order to stabilize the DRC. "Democratic practices in the DRC can only be promoted if the democratization of the Great Lakes region progresses. International partners should exert pressure on neighboring countries to allow for electoral transitions and to interrupt the eternal trend in power consolidation," BTI experts wrote. "Failure to promote a culture of peaceful transfers of power in the region will make it difficult to stem the insecurity and armed groups that prevail in the DRC."

However, Kenyatta's high hopes that the 6 December 2022 round of peace talks would usher in a new beginning for peace (<https://www.voanews.com/a/drc-peace-talks-end-amid-hopes-of-opening-dialogue-with-m23-/6864791.html>) in DRC proved short-lived. Successive ceasefire agreements failed to hold, and M23 offensives continue up to the present day. The deployment of the EACRF, the diplomatic efforts of regional leaders, and the international pressure on Rwanda have not curtailed the fighting, with dramatic humanitarian consequences. Angola's announcement on 11 March that it will deploy troops to the region "to support the army and regional forces" may further complicate the situation and internationalize the conflict even more.

The evolution might nevertheless emulate the experience of 2012-2013, when the combination of international pressure on Rwanda and the deployment of an international force succeeded in putting an end to the M23 rebellion. Ten years ago, this combination of political and military means however failed to produce a lasting solution to the problem, and it remains to be seen whether that lesson will be learned this time. Extreme state weakness in the DRC compounds the violent problems that have characterised the great lakes region for the last thirty years. After decades of decay, putting Humpty Dumpty together again will be a colossal task. Without state reconstruction, development in the DRC and the beginnings of peace in the region will remain illusory.
