

CRISIS WORSENS IN EAST CONGO

By André BURSTIN
ESISC Research Associate

On Monday October 1st, Tutsi rebels from the March 23 movement (M23) threatened to march on the city of Goma, in order to “save the population” from the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC). Vianney Kazarama, spokesman for the rebel group, pointed out the incapacity – or the lack of will – of DR Congo’s President Joseph Kabila to control its own troops. Indeed, at least 10 people have been killed during the last days of September in a series of anonymous shootings and bombings. Since then, the rebels and the regular armed forces are blaming each other for these killings. Civilian authorities even pointed the finger on members of the military close to the M23, which is itself made of army defectors.

This is the second time in less than 3 months that the M23 is using such warnings toward the capital of North Kivu. In July, it had already threatened to seize the city in order to defend ethnic Tutsi civilians accused of supporting Rwanda. Colonel Felix Bass, military spokesman for the “United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo” (MONUSCO) downplayed the risks, ensuring that the FARDC and the international peacekeepers would protect the city from the rebels. These new threats are however indicative of the failure of the UN mission and of the central government to restore stability reigning in the eastern province of North Kivu, where rebels and loyalist troops are fighting since last April.

Ongoing humanitarian crisis

In August, the British NGO Oxfam warned the world of the “catastrophic” humanitarian crisis provoked by the ongoing civil war in eastern Congo. According to Oxfam, nearly 500,000 people have been driven out and forced out from their homes since the new chapter of the conflict started in April. Moreover, an increasing number of killings, rapes and other sexual violence, serious physical abuses, lootings, forced evictions and recruitment of child soldiers have been reported by local witnesses. Finally, it has to be mentioned that the poor sanitary conditions and the absence of a functioning state authority in the province have increased dramatically the risk of epidemic diseases, mainly cholera. Due to the seriousness of these exactions, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant against M23 leader Jean Bosco “Terminator” Ntaganda, on numerous charges including crimes against humanity, murder, ethnic persecution, rape and sexual slavery.

The situation has got even worse today, while no negotiated solution is in sight despite a formal agreement on a “neutral force” to be deployed to fight the M23. Since the agreement was concluded in the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) in July, Rwanda and Uganda objected the involvement of non-regional states in this force. Many questions also remain unanswered regarding the financing of the force and the military

contributions. In the meantime, M23 fighters continued to advance across North Kivu, seizing the city of Rutshuru, only 70 kilometres north of Goma, on July 8. Since then, local and international humanitarian organizations have raised countless accusations of atrocities against the M23, which keeps on pretending it is protecting Tutsi populations from road robbers and Hutu rebels from the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR).

Alleged involvement of Rwanda

This has to remind us that each of the crises that have shaken eastern Congo since the middle 1990s has brought a series of proven or likely accusations regarding Rwandese involvement. Once more, the government in Kinshasa, followed by many international observers and NGOs such as Human Right Watch, has accused Kigali of supporting the rebels. The group is indeed made of members of the pro-Rwandese National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) who had been integrated in the regular forces after the March 23 2009 peace agreement but later defected. Kigali, which still holds CNDPs leader General Laurent Nkunda, has however denied any responsibility in the present crisis in North Kivu, and has been spared from international sanctions despite several requests addressed to the U.N. by Kinshasa.

The deterioration of the situation on the ground has prompted U.N. secretary general Ban Ki Moon to convene a high-level meeting on the sidelines of the 67th session of the U.N. General Assembly on September 27. The mini-summit culminated dramatically when Rwandese President Paul Kagame walked out from the room during the speech of Belgian minister of Foreign Affairs Didier Reynders, alleging an “urgent meeting”. The latter had mentioned allegations concerning Rwanda’s role in supporting North Kivu’s insurgency. Paul Kagame later denied any tension, but the meeting ended in a new failure as Rwanda urged the international community to first address “big regional issues”, without specifying which ones.

A crisis with no foreseeable outcome

On Sunday August 19, the rebels announced the formation of a political cabinet of 25 members responsible for administering the territories under their control. Commenting the decisions, “Colonel” Karamara stated that that the M23 was aiming to become a “political-military movement”. Most of the local observers immediately suspected the group of seeking to gain time due to the growing international attention on eastern Congo. Indeed, the rebels may attempt to get benefit from the time spent in international meetings and summits to strengthen its positions and get ready for a long fight against the FARDC and the MONUSCO troops.

Although it has always argued that its primary goal was to overthrow President Joseph Kabila, the M23 is just another name in the list of the rebel groups that have undermined east Congo stability, fighting for its natural resources during the last 15 years. Furthermore, other rebel groups such as the FDLR or the various “Mai-Mai” militias are still active in both north and south Kivu, perpetuating ethnic conflicts that have arisen from the Rwandese Genocide in 1994. In this context, there will be no solution to the crisis without a reversal of the Rwandese position. The prospect of such an outcome however appears extremely remote due to Rwanda’s repeated denials and DR Congo’s chronic inability to restore the rule of law within its own borders.