

## **Paralysis Over Deepening Goma Crisis**

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UN says catastrophe unfolding as regional and world leaders struggle to come up with a solution. The international community's paralysis over the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Goma in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC, has left the limited peacekeeping contingent in the region admitting that they are unable to avert a catastrophe.

Despite reports that war crimes are being committed against civilians, the rest of the world seems at a loss as to how to act – prompting warnings that there could be a repeat of the tragedy which unfolded in neighbouring Rwanda in 1994.

Far from being cowed, the rebel leader most blamed for the crisis – renegade general Laurent Nkunda – is now threatening to take over the entire country if the government of President Joseph Kabila refuses to negotiate with him.

While it is doubtful that his militia could topple the authorities in Kinshasa – which lies some 1,600 kilometres to the west of Goma – his words nonetheless reflect his growing confidence, amid the feeble resistance to his insurgency.

Kabila has reportedly refused talks, saying negotiating with a rebel leader would be "unconstitutional".

Fighting escalated around North Kivu's regional capital of Goma in recent months, between the Congolese army, FARDC, and Nkunda's militia, the ethnic Tutsi National Congress for the Defence of the People, CNDP.

Nkunda's fighters claim to be protecting ethnic Congolese Tutsis from various pro-government mai-mai groups and the Hutu Interahamwe militias responsible for the 1994 Rwandan genocide. These Hutu fighters, who fled across the border and renamed themselves the Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda, FDLR, have clashed with Nkunda's forces.

According to estimates, 253,000 civilians have been displaced by fighting in the east of the country since September, and UN officials say atrocities are being committed.

The UN peacekeeping mission, MONUC, is struggling to assist the troubled FARDC in keeping warring factions apart. The national force is made up of ragtag rebel groups, whose often unpaid or underpaid soldiers routinely resort to looting.

Although MONUC has 17,000 troops in DRC and is mandated to protect civilians using "all means deemed necessary", the bulk of the contingent is stationed elsewhere in the Kivus, with only a few hundred at present in Goma itself.

The situation in the region is so grave that the authorities have reportedly invited Angolan military advisors into the fray, recalling DRC's bloody civil war from 1998 to 2002, which drew in not only Angola, but also

neighbouring Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Namibia.

While MONUC has denied that there are Angolan soldiers in the region, their reported presence could well provoke an invasion by Rwanda, thrusting the region into a full-scale war and a humanitarian crisis far beyond what is presently being witnessed.

Meanwhile, preparing to step in is the Southern African Development Community, SADC, a group of 15 southern African nations that recently formed its own peace-keeping force for deployment in the region. The SADC has said it “will not stand by and witness incessant and destructive acts of violence by any armed groups against innocent people of DRC”.

While observers welcome this regional initiative to send troops to DRC, many say that this will not happen quickly enough to help the beleaguered civilian population.

Some are calling for MONUC troops stationed in other parts of the DRC to be redeployed to Goma, while others argue that such a move would leave vulnerable civilians in those areas without protection, and are instead urging the European Union to send a force.

MONUC spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Jean-Paul Dietrich acknowledged that the peacekeepers are severely overstretched.

“We are stretched to the last man, and it seems we cannot face an escalation of the situation,” he said.

Before the situation in North Kivu deteriorated, MONUC appealed for 3,000 more soldiers. However, even if the troops are sanctioned by the UN Security Council later this month, they won’t set foot on Congolese soil for another three to six months.

“We need people now, the catastrophe is happening now. Not just in a few months,” said Dietrich.

The spokesman said the UN mission would welcome additional foreign forces assigned to help with peacekeeping, such as those proposed by SADC.

“We are happy about any initiative to help out and ease the humanitarian catastrophe and engage in military support,” he said.

The spokesman stressed that while a political settlement was needed to end the fighting in the long-term, extra forces are urgently needed to come in to help secure humanitarian corridors.

NGOs and human rights groups are also calling for more troops to be sent to Goma.

Amnesty International’s deputy director for Africa Tawanda Hondora – along with representatives of other groups – has called for the immediate redeployment of existing MONUC troops into Goma from the

surrounding area.

“Anything that is not done immediately is too late,” she said.

However, there are fears that redeploying those mission troops which are currently stationed in other parts of the country could leave thousands of internally displaced refugees vulnerable to attack from various militia groups.

Protecting the IDPs is a priority, so troops have not been redeployed into Goma, said Dietrich.

“We have to take care of the IDPs all around the North Kivu province,” he said. “We will not relocate too many troops leaving the IDPs on their own.”

Anneke Van Woudenberg from Human Rights Watch also dismissed calls for MONUC troops from other parts of the DRC to be redeployed to Goma, saying that this could leave people in other areas vulnerable.

Instead, she called on the international community to expand MONUC’s ranks.

“It is not viable for world leaders to hide behind the figure of 17,000 current peacekeepers and think this is enough. MONUC is stretched thin on the ground, unable to protect civilians, and needs additional support,” said Van Woudenberg.

She noted that the SADC initiative to send troops to the area could take time to set up, and called on the international community to send peacekeepers as a matter of urgency.

“We know in many circumstances that it takes SADC time to move troops into location. MONUC needs urgent help and for peacekeepers to be moved into position now,” she said.

Van Woudenberg called on the EU to send troops to the region until further MONUC troops could be deployed.

“An EU force could go in under a UN mandate to provide short-term support for the creation of a humanitarian corridor and provide protection for civilians,” she said.

“This needs to be urgently considered by EU leaders. They need to consider providing capacity to MONUC as a stopgap until more MONUC troops can be deployed.”

Observers say that to restore stability to the region, an increased MONUC presence is needed across the vast north-eastern DRC border area with Rwanda, Uganda, and south Sudan.

“The whole border region needs to be reinforced,” said Mirna Adjami from the International Center for Transitional Justice in DRC.

Dietrich hinted that another way of possibly defusing the current crisis is by trying to arrest Nkunda.

“We know where he is, we know where his base is. Making arrests is not directly under our mandate, but it is connected to our mandate to support local authorities in bringing stability to this country,” he said.

“This is not the priority at the moment, but we should support the government in this as much as we can.”

The International Criminal Court, ICC, in The Hague has already issued an indictment for Nkunda’s deputy, Bosco Ntaganda, in August 2006, for violence in the Ituri region when he was a commander under rebel leader Thomas Lubanga. Lubanga is currently awaiting trial in ICC custody.

ICC prosecutors say they are “closely monitoring converging information about attacks against civilian populations, forced displacement of populations, murders, rapes, pillaging and looting, reported to be taking place in the recent armed confrontations in the province of North Kivu”.

Although detaining Nukunda might bring some relief on the ground, Hondora stressed that, for lasting peace in the region, a political resolution must be found.

“It requires engagement with the government of Rwanda to reach a political solution between itself and the FDLR,” he said.

Under the 2007 Nairobi agreement between DRC and Rwanda, the Kinshasa authorities are tasked with repatriating FDLR fighters by force if necessary. But there has been little progress on this score, as the Hutu militias fear they will be imprisoned or killed for their role in the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

“Failure to resolve this [question] is the reason why the FDLR are in eastern DRC, and gives Nkunda the pretext that he is protecting the Tutsi population,” continued Hondora.

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