

DR Congo's Goma: Avoiding a New Regional War

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The east Congolese city of Goma and its key airport have reportedly fallen after heavy fighting to the M23 rebel group. Regional and international actors must now prevent this turning into a new regional war.

The past week has shown history repeating itself in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), with the same tragic consequences for civilians in the region ([see Crisis Group briefing from 4 October for background](#)).

On 15 November 2012, the M23 rebel movement, with – according to the DRC – the backing of Rwanda's armed forces, broke the 25 July de facto ceasefire observed with the Congolese army (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo, FARDC) and launched an offensive against Goma, the capital of North Kivu province.

Unable, despite numerous attempts, to extend its control over the resource-rich Masisi territory, constrained by Uganda's closure of its Bunangana border with the DRC and frustrated by the decision of the UN Security Council to place its main leader, Sultani Makenga, on the UN sanctions list, the M23 had finally decided to make real its threat to attack the city. On 18 November, following three days of fighting, the movement broke the FARDC's resistance and tried to force the government of President Joseph Kabila to negotiate.

On 19 November, after several fruitless attempts at talks and an ultimatum from the M23 to the government, fighting broke out inside Goma, a city under the defence of the FARDC and UN peacekeepers (MONUSCO). The M23's ultimatum had demanded the FARDC's withdrawal from, and the demilitarisation of, Goma and its airport; the reopening of the Bunangana border post; and an inclusive negotiation process to bring in the unarmed Congolese political opposition, civil society and the diaspora. By making this demand, the M23 aimed to reduce the crisis to a domestic affair, thereby preventing Kinshasa from internationalising it in order to negotiate a solution at the regional level through the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) with those neighbouring countries that allegedly support the M23 rebellion.

While negotiations were on the verge of starting in Goma, President Kabila ultimately refused to recognise the M23 as a legitimate interlocutor, and clashes broke out inside the city. The rebels entered Goma on 20 November, forcing the Congolese army to retreat to Sake.

The new offensive is a tragic repeat of the threat by Laurent Nkunda's Conseil National de Défense du Peuple (CNDP) to take Goma in 2008. Once again, the civilian population is paying a heavy price. As in 2008, the same causes could produce the same fearful effects:

- the fall of Goma could lead to serious human rights abuses against civilian populations;
- the settling of accounts or even targeted extrajudicial executions against authorities and civil society activists who have taken a stance against the M23 since the beginning of the crisis in

March could raise the death toll and fuel more violence;

- Kinshasa's capitulation to the M23 could send shock waves throughout the Kivus and relaunch open warfare between the DRC and Rwanda; and
- the UN and the ICGLR, both responsible for conflict management in the region, are being discredited.

As immediate steps, regional and international actors must secure:

- an end to fighting inside Goma;
- M23's commitment to respect MONUSCO's mandate to fully protect civilians; and
- M23's concrete assurances, visible on the ground, to respect civilians and property in areas under their control, and prevent further human rights abuses.

To avoid a regional implosion, the following steps are also necessary:

- explicit condemnation by the UN Security Council, African Union (AU) and ICGLR of external involvement in the fighting;
- immediate efforts by MONUSCO's leadership to seek to negotiate and secure a formal ceasefire, as well as accelerate the deployment of the Joint Verification Mechanism and the Neutral Force agreed by the ICGLR;
- sanctions by the European Union (EU), UN Security Council, and especially France, the UK and the U.S., as well as the AU, not only against the rebellion's leaders, but also against their external supporters;
- an investigation by the International Criminal Court into the actions of the M23 and new armed groups, and the request by the court that MONUSCO transfer its files concerning M23 leaders; and
- the immediate establishment of a joint fact-finding mission in the region by the AU, EU, Belgian, South African and U.S. special envoys for the Great Lakes to determine the best course for arriving at the long-term resolution of this crisis.

The immediate priority is to stop the current fighting and protect civilians.

Long-term solutions will require that the UN Security Council, AU and ICGLR ensure that peace agreements and that stabilisation plans no longer remain empty promises. To achieve this, coordinated and unequivocal pressure on the Congolese government and the M23 rebel movement, as well as the latter's external supporters, is required from international donors and regional actors.