

Rebel soldiers advance in Congo

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27 November 2012

Rebel soldiers attached to the Movement M 23 are continuing to advance in the Democratic Republic of Congo. On November 20, they captured the city of Goma in the east and the following day the city of Sake. A representative of the rebels addressed an audience of 10,000 inhabitants in the main stadium in Goma, declaring that they intended to take the city of Bukavu in the near future and then advance on the capital city of Kinshasa in the west.

The rebel militia M 23 was founded in April 2012 after a mutiny by about 700 soldiers. It consists largely of former members of the organization “National Congress for the Defence of the People” (CNDP), who belong to the Tutsi ethnic group. The CNDP was disbanded in 2009. Following the arrest of their leader, General Laurent Nkunda on March 23, 2009 (hence the name M 23), the soldiers were integrated into the Congolese army.

Nkunda had been a general in the DRC army until deserting and launching the rebellion against the government of Joseph Kabila. The dissident general claimed to be defending the interests of the Tutsi minority in eastern Congo, who were subjected to attacks by Hutus who had fled after the Rwandan genocide. Nkunda was captured in a joint operation between the Congolese and Rwandan militaries nearly four years ago.

The main motivation of the insurgents is their dissatisfaction with their lack of equipment, lack of chances for promotion and unpaid wages while their military leaders have enriched themselves. Some of the leading officers are alleged to have accumulated assets worth billions. The stated aim of the movement is to overthrow Kabila, the son of president Laurent Kabila who was assassinated in 2001.

Following heavy fighting in Goma that forced 100,000 people to flee, the Congolese army capitulated with barely any resistance. More than a thousand

soldiers and police are reported to have switched sides and gone over to the rebels. The 1,400 “blue helmet” forces from the United Nations stationed in the town did not intervene and gave up control of the airport in Goma without a fight. The UN currently has 18,000 soldiers stationed in the country under MONUSCO (UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo)—the largest such mission ever in Africa.

The rebels are led by the Congolese ex-general Bosco Ntaganda and the Rwandan Sylvestre Mudacumura. Mudacumura was deputy commander of the Presidential Guard of the Rwandan armed forces for two years and was trained at the German Army University in Hamburg. In 1994 he participated in the genocide in Rwanda. Both Mudacumura and Ntaganda have the support of the Rwandan Defense Minister James Kabarebe, who is alleged to be giving orders to the rebels and supplying them with weapons and equipment. There are reports that Rwanda has already sent 2,000 of its own soldiers to fight the Congolese army.

The Congo, with a population of over 70 million, is geographically the second largest country in Africa. It has a 130-year history of colonial exploitation—beginning with King Leopold’s declaration of Belgian rule in 1885—in which its rich resources have been plundered through a series of brutal imperialist-led wars and civil wars. One of the most resource-rich countries on the African continent—with vast supplies of copper, cobalt, diamonds, gold, tantalum and other minerals—it occupies last place (187) on the UN scale of “human development index”.

More than seventy percent of the population is undernourished and the country lacks functioning schools and a health care system. One-fifth of government revenue is spent on interest payments on

previous loans, with the lion's share of remaining state revenue ending up in the pockets of the country's corrupt elite. A proposal for so-called debt relief by the IMF is currently being challenged by the US hedge fund NML Capital, which has bought up most of the country's debt.

The situation for the masses of people has deteriorated considerably following layoffs in the mineral industry in the wake of the world economic crisis of 2008 and increases in the price of staple foods over the past two years. This explains why the rebels have been able to win support with their call for the overthrow of the Kabila government.

The attitude of the major powers to the rebel movement is ambivalent and characterized by competing interests. The US initially hesitated to intervene following the foundation of the M 23 but then threatened to withdraw its military aid to the Rwandan government due to its role in the fighting in Congo.

The fact that UN soldiers failed to intervene against the M 23 in the most recent fighting, despite protests from the French government, indicates that the UN is prepared to permit a further destabilization of the Congo. A likely reason is China's involvement in the Congo and the readiness of the Kabila government to cooperate with the US's main world competitor.

Economic relations between the Congo and China have developed rapidly since 2006. China, which has been the largest investor in Africa for the past four years, concluded a more than \$9 billion "deal of the century" with Congo in 2007. The sum is almost three times the annual budget of the government. It stipulates that the Chinese side will be responsible for infrastructure projects such as the construction of roads, railways, hospitals, schools and dams, as well as for the development of mines. In return, the Kabila government has committed to providing up to ten million tons of copper and thousands of tons of cobalt, with an estimated market value of between \$40 billion-\$120 billion.

Chinese companies are currently expanding the telecommunications network in the capital city of Kinshasa and throughout the rest of the country. Almost all of the minerals mined in the Katanga Province are exported to China. In return, China has supplied the Congo with military vehicles, protective clothing, AK-47 rifles and other military equipment.

President Kabila, who studied in Beijing, described his meeting with the Chief of General Staff of the Chinese People's Liberation Army in March 2010 as a "new starting point for military cooperation between the two countries."

A diplomat in New York recently announced that the UN has requested several states, including the US and France, to supply drones in order to monitor movements along the Congolese border. Last weekend a ceasefire took place in the Congo in order to allow leaders in the region to hold a meeting in Kampala. The assembly called on the rebels to withdraw to their former positions twenty kilometers north of Goma within two days and demanded that the Congolese government listen to and examine the "legitimate demands" of the rebels, and "make concessions if necessary." The Rwandan president did not attend the meeting.



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