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Field Dispatch: Civilians Under Siege in Goma

Strategic Town on the Congo's Border with Rwanda Falls to M23 Rebels

Enough Team

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The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

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ON THE COVER

Congolese citizens look at tank shells lying next to the roadside, left behind by retreating government troops as they fled an assault by M23 rebels, in eastern Congo, Wednesday, Nov. 21, 2012. Thousands of Congolese soldiers and policemen defected to the M23 rebels Wednesday, as rebel leaders vowed to take control of all Congo, including the capital Kinshasa. The rebels organized a rally at Goma's Stadium of Volcanoes Wednesday after seizing control of the strategic city in eastern Congo Tuesday. (AP Photo/Marc Hofer)

Writing from the Democratic Republic of the Congo's North Kivu province, the Enough team reflects on the impact that the March 23 Movement's dramatic seizure of the strategically important border town has had on civilians in the area. A city of over one million people, Goma is a commercial hub for the country's mining sector, houses countless international humanitarian agencies, and also hosts a number of camps for internally displaced people who fled their homes due to conflict in other parts in the country. This latest round of hostilities, ending a three-month-ceasefire between the rebels and the government, has precipitated a humanitarian catastrophe for civilians in the region and raises grave questions about prospects for peace.

Introduction

Goma awoke to artillery and mortar fire on November 19, as rebels with the March 23 Movement or M23 pushed their way into the outskirts of town, taking control of North Kivu province's main airport. Main streets were deserted, and local radio stations halted regular broadcasts, playing only music to fill the airwaves. Those residents who had not already fled sought refuge inside their homes. By mid-afternoon, the Rwandan backed M23 rebels brazenly claimed full control of Goma by marching down the town's main road to the "Grande Barriere" border crossing with Rwanda. Soon, the explosions stopped and any remaining government Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo, or FARDC, soldiers cleared off the streets, either fleeing the city or going into hiding.

Speaking to Enough, M23 spokesman Lt. Col. Vianney Kazarama argued that the rebel group had no other choice than to advance to Goma to compel the Congolese government into direct peace talks. M23 issued a communiqué on November 18 demanding a place at the table for direct political negotiations.¹ However, government officials in Kinshasa continue to dismiss the rebellion as "fictitious forces put in place by Rwanda to hide its criminal activities in DR Congo."² It remains unclear if the rebel's seizure of Goma will force Kabila's government to revise this hard line position. In the meantime, there is every indication that the conflict zone will widen in the coming weeks, espe-

cially in the absence of a peace agreement. Asked about where the group has its sights set now, a senior M23 source told Enough they are “not going to wait even a week” to start making their way to Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu.

Context

The March 23 Movement, which takes its name from a dishonored 2009 peace treaty between the group’s predecessor, the Congrès National Pour la Défense du Peuple, or CNDP, and Kabila’s government, is led by International Criminal Court indictee Bosco “The Terminator” Ntaganda and the recently internationally sanctioned Sultani Makenga. In April 2012, former CNDP soldiers under Ntaganda’s command, who had been integrated into the regular armed forces under the 2009 treaty, mutinied against the central government.³ The U.N.’s Group of Experts research has documented clear links between the M23 rebel movement and the government of Rwanda, extending all the way up to command and control by Rwanda’s minister of defense, James Kabarebe.⁴ Government representatives in Kinshasa and international observers frequently cite the group’s use of sophisticated equipment, including night vision goggles, as evidence of Rwandan support for the armed insurrection within the Congo.⁵ The Group of Experts recommends individual sanctions against several Rwandan and Ugandan officials named in its report.

The United Nations maintains one of its largest and its most expensive peacekeeping operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or MONUSCO has 1,600 troops on the ground in Goma tasked with protecting civilians. During M23’s assault on Goma, these troops’ engagement with M23 was limited and restricted to civilian protection. France’s head diplomat at the United Nations explained the decision, emphasizing “U.N. blue helmets are not party to a civil war. They are not supposed to do the job of the national army.”⁶

An Easy Victory

In advance of the November 19 attack, a large reinforcement of government FARDC soldiers had come to Goma from Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu province. These reinforcements engaged with the M23 elements that had infiltrated the city ahead of the full rebel advance. Nevertheless, the bolstered FARDC ranks buckled under the onslaught from the M23 fighters, who were reportedly supported by 3,000 Rwandan soldiers who crossed into the border village of Kibumba from the Bigogwe military camp in Gisenyi, Rwanda. Attack helicopters commanded by U.N. peacekeeper engaged rebel targets previously, but failed to deter the rebel’s advance. M23 made an announcement on the public radio on the afternoon of November 19, calling on people to return to their homes and resume their normal activities, and even attend a valedictory military parade on the next day.

An FARDC captain on the frontlines admitted in a phone call with Enough that, despite some successful operations against the M23 on that day, morale was low and that their likely defeat would be in part due to “lack of food, ammunition, and troop rotation.” Along some side streets, women offered drinking water to the rows of the chronically underfed government troops who trudged through town on patrol. In some places, young men even helped exhausted government soldiers carry their heavy weapons. Elsewhere, reports emerged of soldiers taking advantage of the chaos: looting shops and robbing. Frustrated by what they saw as a lack of support for the army under siege, military families in Goma took to the streets burning tires and throwing stones at MONUSCO patrols. An unknown number of U.N. peacekeepers have reportedly been wounded.

Ramifications for Civilians

The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, has expressed “deep concern” about the deteriorating situation of civilians in eastern Congo.⁷ Pillay noted that she particularly worries about civilians, who have been targeted by the M23 for resisting recruitment, opposing looting or because of their perceived collaboration with the government’s FARDC forces.⁸ In some cases, the high commissioner noted, civilians were injured during crossfire or while trying to flee the conflict zones during the ongoing hostilities.⁹

Civilians—many of whom were already displaced by insecurity elsewhere and living in camps on Goma’s outskirts—have been on the move en masse since Saturday, when clashes between the M23 and the FARDC approached Kanyaruchina camp for internally displaced people, six miles from Goma. At least 60,000 people from the Kanyaruchina camp and surrounding area fled toward Goma. Even before the latest hostilities, fighting had forced more than 260,000 people to abandon their homes and seek refuge within the province, while over 70,000 have fled to Rwanda and Uganda, according to U.N. estimates. Border crossing points between the Congo and Uganda remain closed under government orders, blocking evacuation routes as the situation deteriorates.

The evacuation and restricted movement of aid groups has compounded the vulnerability of displaced civilians and other communities reliant on humanitarian assistance for survival. These challenges are further compounded by the U.N.’s decision to evacuate all non-essential international staff, leaving the city bereft of much needed humanitarian service providers. The United Nations Children’s Fund has highlighted “the psychological trauma faced by children,” in Goma, many of whom are targets for forced recruitment, “in addition to the risk of cholera outbreaks following a recent upsurge of the disease among internally displaced people, or IDPs, in Kanyaruchinya.”¹⁰ Many IDPs who fled the Kanyaruchinya camp are “locking up or hiding their children fearing attack and forced recruitment,” according to Olivia Kalis, policy and advocacy advisor for the Norwegian Refugee Council in Congo.¹¹

“If fighting intensifies further, there are very few places people can go for safety,” said Oxfam’s humanitarian coordinator, Tariq Riebl. “With almost 2.5 million people now displaced across eastern Congo, this catastrophe requires a concerted humanitarian and diplomatic response.”¹²

Steps Forward

The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, or ICGLR, the regional body that has been hosting talks on how to address M23, called an emergency meeting on November 19 that included Presidents Kabila and Kagame. The Congolese government has publicly stated that it prefers not to negotiate with M23. Moving forward with a viable peace process will require the involvement of eastern Congolese civil society in the talks.

The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution on the topic late Tuesday night, which was weaker than expected but lays the groundwork for a peace process, if greater political will is mustered. The resolution condemned the rebels for their advance upon Goma and demanded their immediate retreat and dissolution.¹³ Resolution 2076 also names M23 commanders Innocent Kaina and Baudouin Ngaruye as subject to additional U.N. sanctions, but failed to specifically identify Rwanda as an external supporter of M23. The council has tasked the U.N. secretary-general with exploring options for high-level dialogue between the parties, including the option of appointing a special envoy to shepherd the peace process. High-level commitment to this process from the international community is crucial, as civilians suffer the most in this latest round of hostilities.

Endnotes

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Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, South Sudan, eastern Congo, and areas affected by the Lord's Resistance Army. Enough conducts intensive field research, develops practical policies to address these crises, and shares sensible tools to empower citizens and groups working for change. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

