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President Felix Tshisekedi (2019-present) and his Rwandan counterpart Paul Kagame (2000-present) agree to meet and discuss the ongoing and worsening conflict in the eastern DRC. United Nations (UN) under-secretary-general for peace operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, reports on 8 March that escalating conflict in the DRC could turn into a regional conflict. The African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council on 5 March endorses the deployment of foreign forces to the DRC to return stability and peace to the region, overruling protests from Rwanda, which sees support for the mission as a threat. President Tshisekedi arrives in Doha (Qatar) and meets with the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani (2013-present) on 5 March.

Tshisekedi and Kagame agree to meet...

Angola's foreign minister, **Tete Antonio** announced on 11 March that Rwanda's President, **Paul Kagame** (2000-present) has agreed to meet President **Felix Tshisekedi** (2019-present) to discuss the ongoing and worsening conflict in the eastern DRC.¹ The announcement came after a meeting in **Luanda** (Angola) between Kagame and Angola's President **Joao Lourenco** (2017-present). Lourenco serves as the **African Union's (AU)** mediator to deal with the diplomatic crisis between the two neighbouring countries.² The date of the meeting remains unknown, however, Antonio revealed that ministerial delegations from both countries are already actively working towards facilitating the dialogue.³ Rwanda's presidency also posted on its official account on X on the same day that,

"The heads of state agreed on key steps towards addressing the root causes of the conflict, and the need to uphold the Luanda and Nairobi processes to achieve peace and stability in the region".⁴

This development comes weeks following an announcement by the DRC presidency on 28 February that Tshisekedi had agreed "*in principle*" to meet with Kagame to discuss the conflict in the DRC.⁵ The Congolese presidency also added that Tshisekedi was demanding a withdrawal of the **Rwanda Defence Force (RDF)**,

"from Congolese territory, the cessation of hostilities and the M23 rebel quarters before meeting Paul Kagame... No dialogue will take place with our aggressor as long as it occupies a portion of our territory".⁶

None of those demands have yet been met. Since June 2022, Tshisekedi has maintained that the RDF is guilty of conducting operations in the DRC in support of the **M23** rebel group, leading to tensions escalating between the two governments on several occasions and at some points, even prompting fear of war. The international community, including the **United States (US)**, **France**, and **Germany**, also agree that Rwanda is backing the Tutsi-led M23. The US state department on 17 February also condemned Rwanda's support of the M23, calling on the Rwandan government to withdraw all RDF personnel as well as its surface-to-air missile systems which the US says poses a threat to civilians and

¹ News24, 11 Mar 2024

² AFP, 11 Mar 2024

³ Africa News, 12 Mar 2024

⁴ Rwanda Presidency, 11 Mar 2024

⁵ The East African, 28 Feb 2024

⁶ The East African, 28 Feb 2024

peacekeepers.⁷ The department further called on M23 to cease hostilities amid worsening violence in the eastern DRC. Despite evidence from the **United Nations (UN)**, the Rwandese government has repeatedly denied any connection to the M23 or any other rebel groups operating in the DRC.

Major doubts also remain on whether the planned meeting between Tshisekedi and Kagame will yield any positive results, particularly as their last meeting ended poorly. The two met in **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** on the sidelines of the AU leaders' summit on 16 February during a 'mini-summit' organised by Lourenco.⁸ Anonymous diplomatic sources in Addis Ababa claim that the meeting between Tshisekedi and Kagame was extremely tense and ended with an "*exchange of insults*".⁹

This new meeting is a positive step but the two countries share such a bitter history that will take much more than meetings to ease tensions and bring peace to the eastern DRC. Even if the RDF exited the DRC and stopped supporting the M23, as widely speculated, there are still more than 100 rebel groups operating in the eastern DRC that would continue causing instability in the region, particularly in pursuit of minerals which has helped fuel the violence.

UN warns that conflict in DRC could escalate into regional conflict...

UN under-secretary-general for peace operations, **Jean-Pierre Lacroix**, told reporters on 8 March that escalating conflict in the DRC could turn into a regional conflict without increased efforts to reduce tensions, adding that the growing presence of foreign forces in the DRC is "*a recipe for disaster*".¹⁰ Lacroix also revealed that UN peacekeepers in the **North Kivu** province are struggling to protect civilians amid a major offensive by M23 rebels that forced another 100,000 people to flee their homes in the previous week.¹¹ Intense fighting is ongoing in North Kivu between the M23 and government forces, **Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo (FARDC)**, particularly in the **Kirima, Kikuyu** and **Nyanzale** areas.¹² The violence is escalating despite the recent arrival of troops from the **Southern African Development Community (SADC)** and other African countries to contain the situation (see below).

In the previous month, fighting intensified in **Goma** (North Kivu province), on Rwanda's border, as M23 rebels also encircled the trading hub and blocked its main routes for essential goods, prompting the UN to warn that there could be an influx of increasingly deadly weapons in the region. In the nearby town of **Sake**, residents also fled heavy fighting between the M23 and FARDC.¹³ International aid group **Mercy Corps** has reported that more than one million Congolese have been displaced from the armed conflict in the DRC since November.¹⁴ The UN also estimates that at least seven million people have been displaced since the start of the conflict in the DRC, with 2.5 million coming from North Kivu alone.¹⁵

UN peacekeepers have established humanitarian corridors in North Kivu to support the disbursement of humanitarian aid and guarantee the safe passage of civilians escaping the violence.¹⁶ However, the situation on the ground is escalating and it will take a major effort by FARDC, UN peacekeepers and SADC forces to contain the violence.

African Union to provide logistics and financial support to SADC troops in DRC...

The 15-member **African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council** on 9 March announced its endorsement of the deployment of foreign forces to the DRC to return stability and peace to the

⁷ US State Department, 17 Feb 2024

⁸ News24, 11 Mar 2024

⁹ News24, 11 Mar 2024

¹⁰ Bloomberg, 9 Mar 2024

¹¹ Bloomberg, 9 Mar 2024

¹² United Nations, 7 Mar 2024

¹³ Bloomberg, 17 Feb 2024

¹⁴ Bloomberg, 17 Feb 2024

¹⁵ News24, 11 Mar 2024

¹⁶ United Nations, 7 Mar 2024

region, overruling protestations from Rwanda, which sees support for them as a threat.¹⁷ While the decision by council was taken on 4 March, the communique was only made available on 9 March. In its statement, the AU council also demanded that there be an immediate ceasefire, creation of humanitarian corridors and the urgent disarmament of “*negative forces*” operating in eastern DRC.¹⁸

Following its endorsement, the **AU Commission** and relevant organs of the continental bloc are required to provide the necessary logistical and financial support to SAMIDRC, which began deploying in the DRC on 15 December 2023.¹⁹ To this point, the AU also requested that the AU Commission expedite the transfer of the equipment donated to SADC, which is still in **Cameroon**, to support efforts to ensure the effective implementation of the **SADC Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC)** mandate.²⁰

South Africa also announced on 12 February that the country will deploy 2,900 soldiers to help restore peace and security in the eastern DRC as part of a SAMIDRC, codenamed **Operation Thiba**, at a cost of \$106m.²¹ SADC forces are joined by soldiers from neighbouring **Burundi** and **Uganda**, as well as a contingent of private military already on the ground in the DRC. The SADC deployment in the DRC comes as the UN peacekeeping mission, **Mission de l’Organisation des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo (MONUSCO)**, prepares to withdraw from DRC by December 2024. The force will close its military and police deployments in **South Kivu** province no later than April.²² The **East African Community Regional Force (EACRF)** also officially exited on 31 December following tensions with Tshisekedi.

Rwanda has vehemently opposed the deployment of SAMIDRC and the AU’s support for it, claiming that the force will exacerbate the conflict.²³ Last month the Rwandan government also wrote to the **UN Security Council (UNSC)** to oppose its support for SAMIDRC.²⁴ Ahead of the AU Peace and Security Council meeting, Rwandan foreign minister, **Vincent Biruta**, in a letter addressed to the chairperson of the AU, **Moussa Faki**, on 4 March said that the SAMIDRC force “*cannot substitute for a political process that has been blocked by the government of DRC*”.²⁵ The Rwandan government has also accused SADC forces of fighting alongside the FARDC and other coalition armed groups, which include the ethnic Hutu rebel group, **Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR)**.²⁶

A local source told **Africa Risk Consulting Briefing (ARC Briefing)** that Rwanda is seen by regional actors as a “*spoiler*” in efforts to restore peace in the eastern DRC,

*“But, it must be understood that Kagame genuinely believes that Hutu rebels in the DRC are backed by Kinshasa and are a real threat to his government and until they are eliminated, Rwanda is not going anywhere”.*²⁷

Tshisekedi visits Qatar...

Tshisekedi arrived in **Doha (Qatar)** on 4 March for a visit that culminated in official talks with the Emir of Qatar, **Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani** (2013-present), on 5 March to discuss strengthening Kinshasa and Doha’s ties in various fields, particularly investment and economy.²⁸ Tshisekedi and Sheikh Tamim also discussed regional and international issues, including the ongoing conflict in **Gaza**, where Qatar is a central mediator hoping to reach a ceasefire.²⁹ Tshisekedi also

¹⁷ The East African, 11 Mar 2024

¹⁸ African Union, 4 Mar 2024

¹⁹ The East African, 11 Mar 2024

²⁰ African Union, 9 Mar 2024

²¹ South African Presidency, 12 Feb 2024

²² United Nations, 13 Jan 2024

²³ The East African, 11 Mar 2024

²⁴ Bloomberg, 9 Mar 2024

²⁵ Anadolu Agency, 5 Mar 2024

²⁶ Anadolu Agency, 5 Mar 2024; The East African, 11 Mar 2024

²⁷ ARC Source, Local Resident

²⁸ QNA, 5 Mar 2024

²⁹ Doha News, 5 Mar 2024

signed an agreement granting Qatar’s national carrier, **Qatar Airways**, traffic rights to serve the DRC, which has been facing an aircraft crisis since the second half of 2023 when the national carrier, **Congo Airways**, suspended its activities, due to the lack of operational aircraft.³⁰ Qatar Airways is expected to begin serving the DRC as early as June.³¹

In addition to business matters, it also appears that the Qatar government harbours genuine ambitions to act as a mediator in the DRC-Rwanda diplomatic row. In January last year, Qatar attempted to host peace talks between the conflicting sides in the conflict and attempted to bring together Congolese, **Kenyan**, Angolan and AU officials.³² However, the meeting was cancelled due to a no-show by Tshisekedi. In September 2023, Qatar’s foreign ministry spokesperson, **Majed Al-Ansari**, confirmed that the country had succeeded in attaining a mediator role in easing tensions between Rwanda and the DRC,

*“What we are doing right now, one of the main issues we are working on right now, is the DRC and Rwanda, you know there has been a lot of animosity there on the border areas and we are working with both sides in coordination with the Americans to make sure we can reach some kind of an agreement over there”.*³³

With Tshisekedi’s trip seemingly bolstering relations between the DRC and Qatar, it is expected that the Gulf nation will want to be more invested in easing tensions in the region, as it strengthens its mediator role in international politics.

Planner

Apr 2024 **South Kivu (DRC) Mission de l’Organisation des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo (MONUSCO)** to close its bases in South Kivu province;

Dec 2024 **Kinshasa (DRC) End date of peacekeeping mission Mission de l’Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo (MONUSCO);**

15 Dec 2024 **Kinshasa (DRC) End date of the SADC peacekeeping mission Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC)**

Chronology

11 Mar 2024 **Luanda (Angola) News24.** Angola will host a meeting between **Rwanda’s** President **Paul Kagame** and **Democratic Republic of Congo’s (DRC)** President **Felix Tshisekedi** to discuss the ongoing security issues in eastern DRC;

7 Mar 2024 **Kinshasa (DRC) North Africa Post.** Local officials report that the **M23** rebel group has seized the town of **Nyanzale** in eastern DRC, killing at least 15 people and displacing thousands in the process;

6 Mar 2024 **Kinshasa (DRC) Biz Community.** **United States (US)** district of **Columbia** court of appeals rejects an appeal by former Congolese child miners and their representatives against five US-based tech companies – **Alphabet, Apple, Dell Technologies, Microsoft** and **Tesla** – for allegedly using child labour in cobalt mining operations;

³⁰ Digital Congo, 7 Mar 2024

³¹ Digital Congo, 7 Mar 2024

³² Doha News, 5 Mar 2024

³³ Doha News, 5 Mar 2024

5 Mar 2024 **Kinshasa (DRC)** *The Peninsula*. President **Felix Tshisekedi** leaves **Doha (Qatar)** after a working visit to meet with the Emir of Qatar, **Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani**;

3 Mar 2024 **Goma (DRC)** *Africanews*. Chiefs of defence staff of the **Southern African Development Community (SADC)** hold a high-level meeting in Goma to discuss ongoing operations in the region and strategies to improve;

1 Mar 2024 **Kinshasa (DRC)** *The East African*. The death of former minister and opposition party member, **Cherubin Okende**, who was found dead last year, is ruled as suicide;

29 Feb 2024 **Kinshasa (DRC)** *Le Monde*. Foreign affairs minister **Christophe Lutundula** calls for international sanctions against **Rwanda**, reiterating DRC's stance that Rwanda is supporting the **M23** rebels;

28 Feb 2024 **Kinshasa (DRC)** *The East African*. President **Felix Tshisekedi** says he is willing to meet with his **Rwandan** counterpart, **Paul Kagame**, over the ongoing tensions between the two countries and the instability in eastern DRC;

28 Feb 2024 **Algiers (Algeria)** *North Africa Post*. **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** summons Algeria's ambassador to DRC, **Said Chengriha** over his recent trip to **Rwanda**;

26 Feb 2024 **Johannesburg (South Africa)** *IOL*. **South African National Defense Force (SANDF)** refutes allegations circulating on social media that its soldiers are in **DRC** for commercially motivated reasons related to the abundance of minerals in the country;

24 Feb 2024 **Kampala (Uganda)** *The East Africa*. Uganda's security apparatus says the renewed fighting in neighbouring **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** has put it on high alert;

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