

Opinion – Rwandan Support for M23 Rebels Cannot Continue

Written by Wilder Alejandro Sánchez

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/01/10/opinion-rwandan-support-for-m23-rebels-cannot-continue/>

WILDER ALEJANDRO SÁNCHEZ, JAN 10 2023

The rebel March 23 Movement (M23) continues its operations in the Eastern areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Fighting is reportedly occurring in North Kivu province, not far from the regional capital of Goma. A cease-fire negotiated in November is on shaky grounds, and it is unclear if the DRC military and its regional supporters can defeat M23. Moreover, calls for the Rwandan government to stop supporting M23 are also proving ineffective. This support includes providing weapons, ammunition, uniforms, and evidence that the Rwandan Army has “engaged in military operations” against the DRC military to support M23. Given this reality, it is time to discuss framing Rwandan President Paul Kagame as being a regional disruptor more than a stabilizer.

Rwanda’s role in the DRC conflict has brought criticism from the U.S. and its allies. A joint statement by Washington and the Great Lake envoys from Brussels, London, and Paris called for parties to stop supporting M23 on the 18th of November, 2022. Whilst Rwanda is not mentioned explicitly by name, it is quite evident that it is the target of the joint statement, following a statement from the 31st of October by the U.S. State Department, which has similar phrasing and tone. Furthermore, U.S. Senator Robert Menendez suggested in 2022 that the U.S. suspend aid to Rwanda due to human rights abuses and Kigali’s role in the DRC conflict. The European Union has made similar requests to Kigali to stop supporting M23. Thus, we can safely say that criticism of Kagame’s sustained intervention and support for M23 is rife.

Between the 13th and 15th of December 2022, Washington hosted the US-Africa Leaders Summit. Rwandan President Kagame attended the Summit but did not reportedly meet with U.S. President Joe Biden. Apart from requesting an end to M23 support, Washington has requested Kigali release Paul Rusesabagina, a human rights activist who helped Hutu and Tutsi refugees during the 1994 genocide. In 2021, a Kigali court convicted him to 25 years due to terrorism-related charges; Rusesabagina and his supporters argue that the trial was politically motivated due to his criticism of the Kagame regime and that he was kidnapped from exile.

The Rwandan President’s response to Washington’s request was that: “We’ve made it clear there isn’t anyone going to come from anywhere to bully us into something to do with our lives.” As for Rwandan support of M23 militants, President Kagame said, “this problem was not created by Rwanda and is not Rwanda’s problem,” adding, “it is Congo’s problem. They are the ones that have to deal with it”.

Dealing with President Paul Kagame is a complicated matter. Since coming to power in 1994, he has ruled the state uninterrupted and was most recently re-elected in 2017 for a seven-year term, meaning he will rule for at least three full decades. Kagame has brought some development and stability to his country and also managed to create and export the image of Rwanda being an island of tranquility and stability in a region thought to be known for tensions and conflicts.

Indeed, some media reports have labeled Rwanda “Africa’s policeman” because of Kigali’s involvement in U.N. peace missions and other multinational operations across Africa. For instance, as of the 31st of October 2022, Rwanda has deployed over six thousand troops, police, officers and experts to four U.N. peace missions, particularly in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Despite constitutional and legal challenges

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from within the U.K., over the course of 2022, London and Kigali reached a highly-controversial agreement in which London would send asylum seekers to the African nation. To be blunt, Washington alongside several European governments have supported the Kagame regime over the years precisely because of his pro-Western and apparent pro-regional stability policies.

Alas, during his almost three decades in power, Kagame has behaved in an increasingly authoritarian manner to retain control. His regime has cracked down on opposition groups and individuals considered antithetical to his administration – hence it is no surprise that he won the 2017 elections with an unbelievable 99% of the vote. Nonetheless, a recent scandal involves Kigali using dirty tactics, including feeding fake intel to Interpol so the international law enforcement agency would issue warrants for Rwandans who criticize Kagame. Organizations like Freedom House and Human Rights Watch have highlighted the lack of freedoms in the African nation. The arrest and conviction of the aforementioned Rusesabagina have been internationally criticized.

The situation in the DRC may be a new turning point in the relationship between Rwanda with the United States and several European governments. Since 23 March Movement insurgents commenced a new offensive against the DRC last November 2021, Rwanda's role and pro-M23 stance in the conflict has become well-known. A confidential report for the U.N. Security Council was leaked in mid-2022 and widely quoted; the authors gathered evidence to confirm that Rwandan troops have fought alongside the M23 against Congolese army bases in the Eastern DRC. These incidents certainly have led to a sense of observable strain and tension between Western states and Kigali.

Whilst the Rwandan government has denied support for M23, the evidence appears undeniable. Moreover, this is not the first time Rwanda has engaged in proxy warfare to gain control of the DRC's resources. Dr. Delphin R. Ntanyoma, a visiting researcher affiliated with the Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam explains that M23 is an offspring of the National Congress for the Defence of the People. M23 "claim that the Congolese Tutsi and other ethnic communities in north and south Kivu are discriminated against. They are considered of Rwandan descent and are commonly referred to as 'Rwandophones.'" Many M23 fighters come from North Kivu province, specifically Masisi and Rutshuru; "these territories are close to the border of Rwanda where fighting takes place," explains Dr. Ntanyoma. It is logical that Kigali aims to utilize this violent movement and capitalize on its grievances to access and control DRC's forest and mineral resources.

Nonetheless, M23 has argued that they respect plans to withdraw from DRC-controlled areas, including handing over "the military camp in Rumangabo to the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF)." However, this statement is difficult to believe as other reports argue that "M23 rebels reportedly [took] control of the Kisharo area Jan. 2 and the Nyamilima area Jan. 4 following prior clashes with DRC armed forces in both areas." Furthermore, a recent report by the Joint Mission Analysis Centre (JMAC), a U.N. intelligence unit, argues that the M23 remains active in North Kivu, "their total withdrawal from the area has not yet been confirmed."

President Kagame has shown no interest in finally stepping down from power after almost three decades, and, at only 65, he could very well seek to rule for at least one more term. During the lengthy Kagame regime, Rwanda has had its uses for Washington and Europe. Still, Kigali's sponsoring of proxy warfare in the Eastern DRC via the M23 demonstrates that President Paul Kagame is less an asset or "policeman" and more a security liability and disruptor.

About the author:

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