

Peacekeepers killed in DR Congo

Eight UN peacekeepers have been killed in clashes in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the UN says.

The Guatemalan special forces members were killed when they met a group of Ugandan rebels in a national park.

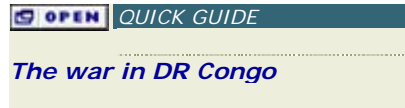


The Congolese army is working with UN troops in eastern DR Congo

They had been looking for fighters from the Lord's Resistance Army, accused of carrying out atrocities across northern Uganda and in southern Sudan.

The UN and the Congolese army are trying to rid numerous armed groups from eastern DR Congo before elections.

The latest clash took place in the Garamba National Park on the border with Sudan, according to the UN.



"The unit which was conducting an operation in this area established contact with rebel elements at 6 a.m. There followed an exchange of fire lasting four hours, requiring the intervention of armed helicopters," the UN statement said.

Rebels killed

A UN military spokesman said at least 15 LRA fighters were killed, out of a group estimated to number 50 or 60.

Five members of the peacekeeping force were injured in the incident and were flown to hospital in Bunia, several hundred km south of the park.

UN spokesman Kemal Saiki said the deaths would not deter the peacekeeping mission.

"We are determined to stay the course," he told the AP news agency.

"And anyone who thinks we're going to give up is seriously mistaken."



Some 20,000 people crossed into Uganda to escape separate fighting in the area over the weekend, says the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Some 15,000 UN troops are stationed in DR Congo: the world's largest peacekeeping force.

The east has been out of the control of central government for many years.

Despite an official end to the civil war in 2003, bands of militia groups still terrorise civilians and exploit the region's minerals and timber to finance their operations.

Several neighbouring countries were drawn into DR Congo's brutal five-year conflict which led to some 3m deaths.

DR Congo's first multi-party elections in four decades are due on 29 April.

DR Congo formally adopts constitution

Sat Feb 18, 3:51 PM ET

President Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) signed into law a new devolutionary constitution, saying nothing should now delay landmark general elections scheduled for later this year.

The adoption of the basic law, overwhelmingly approved in a December referendum, is seen as a milestone in DRC's envisaged transition from its devastating 1998-2003 war, which sucked in around half a dozen countries in the region, to a stable, decentralised democratic state.

The new constitution also ushered in the country's Third Republic.

"By virtue of my constitutional powers, I declare that the new constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo is now in effect," Kabila said at the ceremony in Kinshasa.

The event, broadcast on state television, was marked by a 21-gun salute that shattered windows in the presidential palace, and was warmly applauded by thousands of people.

The constitution, backed by 84 percent of voters in the referendum last December, provides for a semi-presidential regime.

Now that it is on the statute books, parliament can vote on the electoral legislation required for the polls, slated to take place before the end of June under a blueprint for the transition process.

Parliament is due to vote on the legislation early next week.

"Now nothing can delay the organisation of elections that are on the horizon," Kabila said shortly after the official signing.

"The DRC has just taken a crucial step on the road to normalisation and to resolving the eternal problem of rulers' legitimacy," he added.

DRC has not held properly democratic elections for more than 40 years.

"I now invite all political actors, for the sake of our people, to respect the verdict of the ballot box," Kabila said, adding that it was "now up to the politicians to show their intelligence so that the wishes of the people become reality."

With campaigning due to get off the ground in the coming weeks, the president also called on the Congolese people to "keep the peace and national unity" and on politicians to refrain from "any hateful rhetoric that reignites divisions based on religion, clan and tribe."

Given that Saturday's ceremony was well behind schedule, that numerous legal and logistical hurdles lie ahead, and that the country's infrastructure lies in ruins, many doubt that the end of June deadline can be met.

Another problem is the lack of candidates to lead a planned EU military mission to the DRC to help 16,000 United Nations peacekeepers already on the ground provide election security, with Britain, France and Germany reluctant to take the helm of such a deployment.

Some four million people are estimated to have been direct or indirect victims of the war.

Guests of honour at Saturday's ceremony included African Union Chairman and President of neighbouring Republic of Congo Denis Sassou Nguesso and President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, a key player in DRC's transition.

The European Union representative to Africa's Great Lakes region, Aldo Ajello, and European Development Commissioner Louis Michel also attended.

Michel said that the promulgation was a "new important step" towards establishing a state ruled by law.

"The people of (DR) Congo have taken a new and important step forward to rebuilding a democratic constitutional state and turning a dark page of their history," he said, adding that the European Union was heavily committed to making a success of the transition process.

A new national flag was hoisted, featuring a yellow star in the upper-left corner of a sky-blue background with a diagonal wide red stripe edged in yellow.

EU battles to set up DR Congo election force

Wed Feb 15, 1:49 PM ET

EU plans to send troops to the Democratic Republic of Congo to help UN peacekeepers provide election security are being hampered by a lack of candidates to lead the mission, officials said.

Urged to move quickly by the United Nations, the European Union is studying three options and could send hundreds of troops to the resource-rich but poor central African country to help with the first free polls in four decades.

Diplomats say that Germany -- one of the world's biggest contributors to foreign military missions -- is under growing pressure from its 24 EU partners to take command.

However German Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung has ruled out any "front line" role, preferring instead to back up other EU members should they step forward.

The DRC is slowly making a UN-supervised transition towards democracy after a war in which some four million people have died since 1998 and around 1.6 million others have been left homeless.

On December 27, the United Nations called on the EU to help beef up the 16,000-strong peacekeeping force in the DRC -- MONUC -- particularly by providing a "rapid-reaction capacity."

"We have to send a very clear message by saying that a force, probably waiting on standby in Europe, could intervene very quickly," Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht agreed on Monday.

The mission is a valuable test for the Union as it tries to develop its ability to send troops to the world's hot-spots and particularly to Africa, where it believes it can play an important role.

There is no rush for now. The presidential and legislative elections are not due until the end of June, although a first round could be held in April.

But EU diplomats admit it will take time to define the mission's role.

"I really don't see where the troops will come from," one said.

On Tuesday, representatives from the 25 EU member states examined a plan to mobilize up to 1,250 soldiers, including a rapid reaction team that would probably be based outside the DRC.

A team of military experts, who visited the DRC last week, have identified seven tasks that the force could undertake, including providing security in the capital Kinshasa and at airports, and assisting Congolese troops.

Three main scenarios are being studied.

The first would see a force of 250 troops based in the Congo with a headquarters and intelligence and security specialists. A second option would be to send an additional 200 troops backed by air support.

The third would involve 800 additional troops -- bringing the total to 1,250 -- including a rapid reaction force. Under this scenario, not all the soldiers would be based in the DRC, an EU diplomat said.

After the meeting, officials and diplomats said a decision was still a way off, as the issue has to be debated by a military committee. It is also likely to figure on the agenda when EU foreign ministers meet on February 27.

Regardless of which scenario is chosen, EU has no intention of replacing the UN peacekeepers nor deploying around the DRC, a country the size of most of western Europe.

The question remains: who will lead it?

Britain, France and Germany are the only EU members with the military might to lead such an operation but they are discouraged by the likely costs, a lack of ready troops and fears of becoming embroiled in any conflict.

"The Germans are not keen, but the French might be," a diplomat said, while another said "it is up to the Germans, in principle, to take over as leader."

Paris claims it's not its turn, as France led the Artemis mission in the DRC's Ituri region in 2003, and Britain has categorically ruled out taking part.

"We would not be contributing troops to any mission that went to the Congo," said a British spokesperson. "Obviously if one member state is keen to do it and can provide the troops we won't stand in their way."

Military Brief - South Kivu

By Major Iqbal Shah / MONUC

18 feb. 06 - 18.53h



The security situation in South Kivu Province generally remained calm from the 7th to the 14th February. Throughout the week, the South Kivu Brigade carried out 284 patrols to ensure peace in South Kivu.

1. On the 10th February 06 ambushes were laid twice by supposedly FDLR elements inside Kahuzi Beiga National Park (KBNP) to stop the repatriation of 18 Rwandans (1xFDLR soldier, 2 x men, 7 x women and 8 x children). The Pakistani Contingent was providing an escort to the DDRRR (disarmament demobilization, repatriation, resettlement, and reintegration) team from Miti to Hombo and back. The escort was made of 4 armoured personnel carriers and 2 jeeps.
2. The first ambush was laid when the leading vehicle of escort had crossed Gate No 2 (exit gate) of KBNP and last vehicle was still 5 - 6kms behind the exit gate, FDLR elements fired on the vehicles which were at the tail of convoy. Due to immediate response and firing by the Pakistani Blue Helmets, FDLR elements fled from the scene. FARDC soldiers present at the site were hesitant to retaliate and go behind the rebels inside the forest.
3. The commanding Pakistani officer along with his guard went inside the jungle and pursued the fleeing FDLR elements, FARDC soldiers seeing this also accompanied. The small force followed the FDLR elements for about 3 kms and sustained fire by the rebels.
4. Due to thickness of the jungle, the force returned. FDLR elements, while running inside the jungle, left behind some looted material. Once the convoy reached near Saba Saba, a motor bike rider passing by indicated he had seen a few armed persons near the road taking positions along road side behind the trees.
5. Anti Ambush drills were carried out in pre-emption to prevent any ambush. At the same time the convoy received fire from the site, as indicated by the motorcycle rider. Exchange of fire continued for about 10 minutes. Timely response saved the convoy from any damage.
6. 499 returnees from Tanzania arrived at Baraka by boat on 08 Feb 2006 bringing total number to 7407. These returnees were received by the UNHCR representative and were moved to Refugees Transit Camps.
7. There is one company of Pakistani Blue Helmets stationed in Baraka. South Kivu is planning the deployment of a company to Kalehe (50 km north of Bukavu).

8. Officers visited a school and “adopted” children by covering the costs of their schooling material. They then interacted with the local chiefs of the Muslim and Christian Communities and local authorities to discuss the purpose and modalities of their deployment.

9. Daily operations are conducted to guarantee security in the local markets, which used to be a preferred spot for illegal taxing. For example troops of the third Pakistani Battalion conducted Operation Market Domination in Uvira Town zone Market and carried out detailed assessment of the situation. The operation was aimed at keeping vigilance and an effective check over illegal tax collection. Patrol went into the market and discussed the situation with people and notables of the area. It was learnt that the market activity is going on peacefully and there is no illegal tax collection taking place.

10. In support of the local population the Pakistani peacekeepers distributed gifts to the children at Mwanga Orphan House, clothes and cooked meals to the elderly at their compound in Uvira, cooked meals to the prisoners at Uvira Prison.