

U.N. Warns It Will Disarm Congo Rebels
By Nicholas Kulish
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NAIROBI, Kenya — The United Nations has threatened to forcibly disarm rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo, an early test of [the robust new mandate](#) for the multinational peacekeeping contingent that includes going on the offensive there. In an uncharacteristically stern warning on Tuesday, the United Nations ordered individuals near the eastern city of Goma to turn in their weapons or be deemed “an imminent threat to civilians.”

If they have not disarmed within 48 hours, the warning said, they will face the use of force by a new brigade of troops given responsibility for ending the violence in the region — a step beyond protecting civilians under imminent threat of attack, the traditional job of international peacekeepers.

The United Nations force is creating a security zone around the strategic city of Goma. The warning applied to anyone carrying a weapon, other than national security forces, but appeared to be directed at the rebel force called the M23 movement. The warning gave all parties until 4 p.m. local time on Thursday to turn in their weapons.

The United Nations force “will take all necessary measures to disarm them, including by the use of force in accordance with its mandate and rules of engagement,” the statement said.

The mineral-rich area of eastern Congo has been stuck in a cycle of violence for more than 15 years. The area around Goma has been the scene of intense fighting between the Congolese Army and the M23 group. The rebels captured and briefly occupied the city last November, a humiliating setback to the Congolese military.

In March, the United Nations Security Council authorized a new “intervention brigade” that would take “all necessary measures” to protect civilians. While United Nations peacekeeping forces have often been criticized as too passive, some observers have said they fear that adding an aggressive new force to the mix could lead to an escalation of violence.

In a statement on Wednesday, Oxfam’s humanitarian program coordinator in Congo, Tariq Riebl, said that the United Nations force should “proceed with the utmost caution as it enforces their call for disarmament” and that “the U.N. must ensure that its operations do not make a bad situation much worse.”

According to the United Nations, as many as 70,000 people have been displaced in the recent fighting. The organization accused the M23 rebels of using “indiscriminate and indirect fire, including by heavy weapons, resulting in civilian casualties.”

A United Nations group of experts accused Rwanda of covertly arming the M23 rebels, and last week the United States called for Rwanda to end its support for the group. The government in Rwanda denies backing the rebels.