

DR Congo troops abandon villages to rebels: envoys
AFP
1 August 2012

UNITED NATIONS — Government forces have abandoned villages to rebel forces in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo after running out of ammunition, diplomats said Tuesday amid mounting concern over the new conflict.

The UN leadership held a "crisis" meeting Tuesday on the advance by the M23 rebel group on a key regional capital. The UN Security Council is also discussing a statement warning the rebels, who are said to be backed by Rwanda.

The UN envoy to DR Congo, Roger Meece, gave the 15-nation council an alarming briefing on the renewed threat to the government in the resource-rich region, diplomats said.

"Government troops are running out of ammunition and just leaving villages to the M23," one UN diplomat quoted Meece as saying.

"There remain real questions about the FARDC's (the government army) capability" to resist the rebels, Meece said, according to another diplomat who was in Monday's meeting. The army has suffered "substantial" casualties, he added.

The rebels, led by Bosco Ntaganda, who is wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court, broke away from the army in April to launch an uprising. Their well-equipped forces are now closing on the Nord-Kivu provincial capital of Goma, in the region bordering Uganda and Rwanda.

M23 have moved from their base on the border toward Goma, taking several towns and villages with barely a fight, according to diplomats, quoting reports of the campaign.

The UN mission in DR Congo, MONUSCO, has several times put its helicopter gunships into action to support the army. UN leaders held talks on Tuesday on how to bolster its effort.

"MONUSCO is working on protecting civilian populations" and has been "moving troops around," said deputy UN spokesman Eduardo del Buey when asked whether reinforcements would be sent. He would not give details of the movements for security reasons.

MONUSCO is the UN's biggest peacekeeping operation with about 19,000 troops and police spread across the huge country.

M23 is made up of Tutsi fighters who were integrated into the regular army in 2009 but mutinied in April over pay and conditions. The rebel's spokesman, Colonel Innocent Kayima, has said they intend to take Goma.

The DR Congo government has accused Rwanda of sponsoring the M23 rebellion. A UN panel of experts report also said that equipment and fighters had been provided by senior Rwandan military officers. The Kigali government has strongly denied the charge.

"M23 seem to have much better equipment than the army and its forces have been growing in recent weeks," one senior UN official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

More than 470,000 people have fled their homes in eastern DR Congo since April, with more than 50,000 heading into Uganda and Rwanda.

The UN says it has received reports of indiscriminate and summary killings of civilians, rape and torture.

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