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Congo Opens Talks on Ending Fighting in Eastern Region

By AGENCE FRANCE-PRESS

GOMA, [Congo](#) (Agence France-Presse) — Talks to secure peace in conflict-torn eastern Congo opened Sunday amid warnings by the [Roman Catholic Church](#) against a “Balkanization” of the vast African country.

Participants in the nine days of talks, called by President [Joseph Kabila](#), include government ministers, lawmakers, international officials, religious leaders and representatives of armed groups in the eastern provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu, on the border with Burundi and Rwanda.

The discussions, at a regional university in Goma, the capital of North Kivu, will address the presence of local and foreign militias in the region, border controls, illegal trafficking in minerals and weapons proliferation.

Several important players, including Catholic bishops and Mr. Kabila, warned that the meeting should not be used to change the country’s political and geographical status quo.

“Territorial integrity, the inviolability of borders and national unity of the Democratic Republic of Congo are not negotiable,” the Roman Catholic Conference of Bishops wrote in a statement. Congo has remained politically fragile since the end of its 1998-2003 civil war.

In his opening remarks, Interior Minister Denis Kalume called on all renegade Congolese armed groups to “lay down their weapons and either opt to integrate into the armed forces or for the disarmament, demobilization and reinsertion program.”

The eastern region has been riven by a conflict that pits rebels led by the renegade former general Laurent Nkunda against government forces, and it is further complicated by the presence of other militia groups.

Mr. Kalume called for foreign militiamen to join a voluntary disarmament program that would lead to their repatriation “under the protection of the international community.”

Fierce fighting between the army and Nkunda loyalists in particular has gripped North Kivu since August, displacing 800,000 people, according to the [United Nations](#).

On Saturday, the government announced the suspension of military operations against Mr. Nkunda's rebels in order to lay the groundwork for the talks.

A spokesman for Mr. Nkunda, Seraphin Mirinid, said the peace talks would succeed only if the group's demands were taken into account.

Mr. Nkunda, who was invited to the peace talks, is a Congolese Tutsi who presents himself as the defender of his community. He has called for Rwandan Hutu rebels, some of whom are accused of participating in that country's 1994 genocide, to be driven from Congo, and for the return of around 46,000 Tutsi refugees forced into exile by violence.

Before the conference, President Kabila ruled out the possibility of power-sharing among warring factions.