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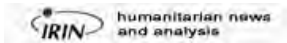
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Congo-Kinshasa: Doubts Mount Over Ugandan Mediation

19 OCTOBER 2012

Kampala — Uganda's mediation to end the fighting in northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between government troops and M23 "mutineers", which has caused large-scale population displacement, has come into question.

At their eighth summit in Kampala in August 2012, International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) heads of state and government mandated Uganda as its current chair to facilitate dialogue between M23 fighters (former DRC national army soldiers who mutinied in April) and the DRC government. It has since established contact with M23 and dialogue has been ongoing, according to a Ugandan government statement.

However, analysts are skeptical and doubt Uganda's impartiality and credibility in facilitating the talks, given its alleged support and arming of M23 in its six-month fight against government troops in DRC's North Kivu Province. Uganda denies giving any support to M23.

"It's within the context of ICGLR for Uganda to facilitate the dialogue. But there is confusion. You can't facilitate talks on the one hand, and on the other you are being accused of arming and supporting rebels," Philip Apuuli Kasaija, an associate professor of political science at Makerere University, told IRIN.

"There are several damning and alarming accusations about Uganda in the leaked UN Security Council's Group of Experts report. This raises doubts about Uganda's moral authority to mediate. We need this conflict to end. The people in eastern DRC have suffered for so long," he said.

IRIN has not seen the leaked UN report.

"Should Uganda be engaged in finding a lasting solution to the DRC problem - the answer is yes. But can Uganda be the facilitator? I don't think so. Not when its impartiality is being questioned," Stephen Oola, a transitional justice and governance analyst at Makerere University's Refugee Law Project, told IRIN.

"Uganda needs to engage and support a robust peace process for regional stability. There can be no peace in DRC without Uganda's goodwill and engagement. Just like there can't be sustainable peace in Uganda until Congo is stable and under effective governance and rule of law," he said.

Stability "intricately linked"

"I think Uganda, and indeed all the regional governments within the Great Lakes region must realize that our stability is intricately linked. The instability and insecurity in DRC has a direct spillover effect in Uganda, Rwanda, Sudan, Angola and Central African Republic," he said.

"Uganda's credibility to mediate in the conflict is questionable. Uganda is seen as an interested party. Uganda has been in the past accused of looting minerals and now for supporting M23. So it can't be in position to facilitate the dialogue," said an official in the Ministry of Internal Affairs who preferred anonymity.

"We can't accept the promotion of violence. We are tired of war in the Great Lakes region. It has caused the loss of lives, poverty and delayed development. We need the end of conflict in the region," John Baptist Odama, a member of the Acholi Religious Peace Initiative in northern Uganda, told IRIN.

"I supposed the ICGLR countries did it in good faith. If they did not, they will have to account for their action. The ball is in the hands of Uganda to prove its worth," he said.

"Uganda still has troops pursuing the Lord's Resistance Army in DRC. Its credibility and objectivity will always be doubted by the government of DRC and other players," Nicholas Opiyo, a constitutional and human rights lawyer in Kampala, told IRIN.

Uganda's standpoint

However, Henry Okello Oryem, minister of state in charge of international affairs, dismissed the allegations.

"The allegations in [a] UN leaked report are rubbish. We can't be derailed from this process. We have the moral authority to chair the talks between the DRC and M23 leaders," Okello Oryem told IRIN.

"There are some people who have malicious intentions to malign us. Uganda remains fully committed to spearhead the regional efforts to ensure security and stability in eastern DRC is achieved," he said.

The fighting between government troops and "mutineers" has forced thousands of refugees to stream into Uganda and Rwanda.

The ICGLR meeting agreed to form a 4,000 strong neutral international force to hunt down armed groups in eastern DRC. Tanzania has agreed to contribute one battalion.

But the International Crisis Group (ICG) in its October report called for a UN-negotiated settlement between the Congolese authorities and M23.

Sticking plaster solutions

"Any attempts to solve the problem of DRC can't be external. The external measure is just bandaging the wound. DRC is a weak state. Attempts should be made to strengthen DRC to have functional institutions. It should be helped to build a credible and capable army to defend its territory," said Kampala lawyer Opiyo.

"I think the continent now has institutions and systems for conflict resolution like the African Union and Intergovernmental Authority on Development who should take up the mantle and commit to a peaceful resolution of conflicts. Military approaches have been tried and are ongoing but with no end in sight. As a conflict analyst, I can attest that peaceful solutions pay a better peace dividend," Makerere University's Oola told IRIN.

Uganda has a high stake in the stability of all its neighbouring states, because regional conflict affects Uganda, just as conflict within Uganda affects its neighbours.

"So long as certain groups within the Congo feel excluded, marginalized, exploited and oppressed, there can be no peace and stability in the DRC. Until, this internal cohesion is achieved, outside actors and multinationals interested in exploiting their resources will keep on fuelling the mess, and conflicts will continue," said Oola.

[This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.]

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