



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on November 27, 2012

Rebels May or May Not Leave Congo City of Goma

Separate leaders of the M23 rebels issued contradictory statements, indicating either that they would withdraw from the city of Goma in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) — or that they will fight to hold the city. M23 took control of Goma, which has a population of one million, on November 20.



An AP report released on November 27 quoted M23 president Jean-Marie Runiga, who said the rebels will not leave the city of Goma, which they seized a week ago. The deadline imposed by the [International Conference on the Great Lakes Region](#) for the rebels to depart was midnight Monday.

Runiga also said that the rebels still want to negotiate with the central Congolese government and to further discuss the March 23, 2009 peace accord under which M23 became a political party, and its soldiers were integrated into the armed forces of the Democratic Party of the Congo (FARDC). It was from the date of that agreement (March 23) that the M23 movement took its name. A [Wikipedia article](#) explains: “The M23 was formed on 4 April 2012 when nearly 300 soldiers, a majority of them former members of the National Congress of the Defence of the People (CNDP), turned against the DRC government, citing poor conditions in the army and the government’s unwillingness to implement the 23 March 2009 peace deal.”

The Congolese government’s spokesman, Lambert Mende, has accused neighboring Rwanda (Goma is less than a mile from the Rwandan border) of backing the rebels.

According to the AP report, Runiga spoke to reporters at a press conference held in Goma the day after the deadline set for M23’s departure from Goma. Some reporters in attendance deduced that the Rwandan-style dress worn by female ushers at the conference was further evidence of Rwandan support for the M23.

An article in [Time](#) quoted from a report from the UN Group of Experts (GOE) on Congo, noting that Rwanda provides “direct military support, facilitation of recruitment, encouragement and facilitation of [Congolese army] desertions, as well as the provision of arms and ammunition, intelligence and political advice.” The GOE also reported that Uganda gives the M23 “direct troop reinforcements ... weapons deliveries, technical assistance, joint planning, political advice and facilitation of external relations.”

The government of the DRC has expressed a willingness to negotiate with M23 on the basis of the 2009 peace accord, but takes issue with Runiga’s stated intention to broaden the agenda. “Lots happened between 2009 and 2012. It is better to tackle the root causes of the issue once and for all,” he said.

However, the DRC is unwilling to depart from strict adherence to the original terms of the 2009 agreement. [Reuters](#) reported that DRC spokesman Lambert Mende told the news service from Kinshasa:



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It's a farce, that's the word. There's been a document adopted by the region. If each day [M23 is] going to come back with new demands it becomes ridiculous. We're no longer in the realms of seriousness.

As Runiga stated the M23 rebels would hold on in Goma, Colonel Sultani Makenga, leader of the M23 rebels, made a contradictory statement in a telephone call to the *Financial Times*, also on November 27: "We will draw back from Goma, we will leave Masisi — in Masisi we've already started gathering up our forces."

"The presidents in Kampala asked us to leave and we'll respect what they demanded. I think that is the way to bring peace — if we have to quit Masisi and Goma to bring peace, we'll do it," continued Makenga. The *Financial Times* explained that Makenga's statement was made in response to calls during the past weekend from the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, for the rebels "to stop all war activities and withdraw from Goma."

Though Col. Makenga expressed a willingness to engage in talks with Congo's president, Joseph Kabila, a person identified as a "senior Congolese official" told *FT* that it is Kabila's policy not to negotiate with any rebel who had been placed under sanctions. Both the UN Security Council and the United States have placed Makenga under sanctions after a UN panel report accused the rebel colonel of procuring weapons, plotting attacks jointly with the Rwandan army, recruiting child soldiers, and leading attacks against Congolese villages.

Jeffrey Gettleman, the East Africa bureau chief for *New York Times*, tried to make some sense out of the Congo crisis in a report published on November 26. He described President Joseph Kabila as being grossly incompetent and the army serving him as being completely corrupt and dysfunctional. The M23, despite charges of the rebels being Rwandan-financed and having a propensity to engage in self-serving and sometimes brutal behavior, has done a much better job than the central government at bringing order and efficient administration to areas under its control. Gettleman noted that Kabila is so unpopular that the only explanation for his reelection last November was widespread ballot-box stuffing and armed suppression of opponents who protested the corrupt electoral practices.

Corruption and oftentimes atrocious and brutal treatment of civilian populations have been a part of the Congo's history since its independence from Belgium. And UN "peacekeeping" troops sent to the region over several decades have often only made matters worse. The most notable example was in 1960, when UN troops committed numerous atrocities while trying to subjugate the peaceful Congolese province of Katanga. (Those atrocities were documented by 46 civilian doctors in a 96-page booklet entitled [46 Angry Men](#).)

Photo of M23 soldier looking on at a M23 rally in Goma, Congo: AP Images



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