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Thousands of Congolese Civilians Flee from Renewed Fighting

by Nick Long

KINSHASA — Rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo have launched attacks on positions held by government forces north of Goma. The U.N. mission in the Congo says the Congolese army is responding and U.N. peacekeepers are trying to deter the rebels from inflicting casualties on civilians.

The fighting is again focused on Rutshuru Centre, a town near Lake Edward in North Kivu province, and about 70 km north of Goma.

Commandant Thibaut de Lacoste, a spokesman for the U.N. mission in the Congo, MONUSCO, tells VOA that the Congolese army, FARDC, is resisting rebel efforts and the U.N. has reinforced its base in Rutshuru, where it is focusing on its main task.

"As long as the FARDC are still present to ensure the defense of the city, MONUSCO can focus on its main priority of protecting civilians, ensuring they do not suffer collateral damage. ...currently the only action taken by MONUSCO against the M23 is a show of force, to deter the M23 going further and launching any attacks that could threaten civilians. This kind of show of force has been used several times in recent days, yesterday and on 12th July," said de Lacoste.

The commandant says this deterrent show of force can involve MONUSCO helicopters firing live ammunition at the ground in front of advancing rebels to deter them from advancing further. He notes MONUSCO could - in extreme situations - fire directly at the rebels.

Omar Kavuta, a civil society coordinator for North Kivu, told VOA that regular army units from Uganda as well as Rwanda crossed into Congo last Saturday and have been involved in the fighting.

MONUSCO could not confirm the presence of Ugandan soldiers fighting alongside the M23 rebels.

Earlier this month, Rwanda and Congo agreed to the deployment of a neutral security force along their border to keep out foreign elements in the fighting. Despite this, the United States Saturday suspended \$200,000 in military training aid to Kigali, citing evidence Rwanda is helping Congolese rebels groups - including M23.

M23 is comprised of former soldiers believed to be loyal to Bosco Ntaganda, a warlord wanted by the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes.