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DRC Rebels Advance in North Kivu Province

by Nick Long

KINSHASA — The M23 rebel group in the Democratic Republic of Congo has defeated the government army in another series of clashes. The rebels were reported Thursday to be less than 30 kilometers from Goma, the capital of North Kivu province.

The M23 and the army were fighting since Monday for control of Rutshuru, a town on the border with Rwanda about 70 kilometers north of Goma. Media and local observers report that the Congolese army lost control of Rutshuru on Wednesday and the M23 has since reached as far as Kibumba, only 27 kilometers from Goma.

According to analysts at the International Crisis Group, the rebels say the government army started the latest round of fighting on Monday.

"There was another clash between the M23 and the Congolese army on Monday. As far as I understand the Congolese army was trying to get back to Rutshuru," explained Thierry Vircoulon, the main DR Congo analyst at the Crisis Group. "They lost again and they were forced to retreat. The M23 is saying that they have been attacked and so they just counter-attacked."

The United Nations mission in Congo, MONUSCO, said Wednesday it was concentrating on its main task of protecting civilians. Local sources told VOA that many civilians from Rutshuru have fled to a MONUSCO base at Kiwanja for protection.

Vircoulon said the M23 clearly wants to keep effective control of Rutshuru, although it withdrew its visible units from the town two weeks ago. The town is on a key strategic road.

"It is basically the commercial road from Goma to Uganda, so it's an important supply road, and that's why the M23 considers that this territory is so important," Vircoulon added.

The International Crisis Group predicts that M23 may not in fact plan to attack Goma, as this might involve a head-on clash with MONUSCO and would certainly cause a huge international outcry.

Vircoulon commented that the M23 numbers perhaps 3,000 fighters and is heavily outnumbered by the Congolese army. But he says the Congolese army is not really an army, more a collection of units from former armies and militias which have never been properly integrated.

Civil society sources in Goma reported on Wednesday that the M23 has been reinforced by a battalion of the Ugandan army.

"It seems to me a bit unlikely," Vircoulon said, "because of the traditional rivalry between Kampala and Kigali. Uganda has reinforced the border security, that's for sure, but I have no report that they have actually crossed the border. And I have no report that they are supportive of the M23."

The International Crisis Group says disorder has also been spreading in other parts of North and South Kivu. Vircoulon says the fighting between the M23 and the Congolese army has diverted attention from massacres allegedly carried out by a new Congolese armed group, Rahiya Motomboki.