

Summary

The week of February 12, 2024 saw several anti-Western protests take place in the capital of Kinshasa and other major cities, such as Lubumbashi. These protests have been targeting foreign embassies, international organization offices, and foreign owned businesses as well as diplomats, employees of international organizations and their vehicles. The protests come following the advances made by the Rwanda-backed M23 rebel group in recent weeks in eastern DRC towards Goma. The M23 rebel group is one of dozens of armed groups that have long plagued the country's mineral-rich east, battling for control of the land there.

Recent events and developments

On February 12, angry protesters burnt the flags of the US and Belgium, DRC's former colonial power, for not using their influence over neighbouring Rwanda to curb the spread of M23 rebels towards the eastern city of Goma. Fighting in the eastern portions of the country, Goma and Sake has intensified with bombs dropping on IDPs (internally displaced people), escalating the use of heavy artillery. As a response to protests turning violent, police have begun to fire tear gas to disperse the crowds leading to injuries. Protesters are accusing the international community of indifference in the face of a humanitarian crisis resulting in the need for police officers to be deployed to protect the UK, French, US and other Western embassies which have closed. As a precaution, international schools have remained closed, and US citizens were advised to remain home. Further, French and EU flags were seen being removed from a Belgium-owned hotel as crowds were outside demonstrating. Not only were flags being burned, but vehicles belonging to the United Nations mission MONUSCO were as well. The gradual withdrawal of MONUSCO is planned to begin April 2024. The South African Development Community (SADC) sent soldiers to the DRC to fight against armed rebel groups, such as the M23. Two were killed by mortar fire in the east of DRC. On another note, the month of January brought with it massive floods and a cholera outbreak that wreaked havoc across the country.

Impact assessment

This week's protests will continue to significantly impact the state of safety and security negatively, in Kinshasa and eastern DRC (Sake, Goma, Lubumbashi). This is due to the protests and demonstrations targeting Westerners and foreign aid workers. It is heavily advised to avoid large crowds and demonstrations and limit exposure on the street due to increased vulnerability which can manifest itself in violent attacks, harassment, and kidnappings directly aimed at Westerners. Violent protests are likely to continue in the coming days and may spread to other major cities throughout Southern DRC such as Goma. The territorial spread of the M23 is likely to continue according to reports based on their current movements and capabilities. As a result, the discontent of citizens is not likely to decrease and therefore fuels the continuation of protests. With the MONUSCO withdrawal in April, a security vacuum will be left behind which M23 may grab hold of to expand their presence in the DRC, likely to overwhelm foreign fighters such as the SADC and the DRC army. Many Western embassies have closed as of February 12. The heightened security risk faced by Westerners and foreign aid workers in such circumstances is worsened by potential limited diplomatic protection and restrictions on evacuation services. Moreover, a further breakdown in transportation services underscores the importance for Westerners and foreign aid workers to ensure they have an ample supply of essentials at their place of residence.

Advice from Forth Global

- Ensure that all employees travelling to the DRC undertake a three-day HEAT training prior to deployment.
- Advise staff to avoid all non-essential travel to North Kivu provinces. If travel is necessary, advise staff to avoid governmental buildings, military bases, and crowded locations.
- Ensure that staff in major cities, such as Kinshasa, and cities in the province of North Kivu such as Goma have tested their crisis response plans and evacuation procedures.
- Ensure that security plans are up to date and appropriately distributed to workers on the ground.
- Continuously monitor local news and liaise with local partners to stay up to date with any developments in the region.

Customized advice

Please contact us for specific advice:

+31 (0) 35 543 04 37

christiaan@forthglobal.com

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