

# Security Threats That Led to the Deployment of Kenya Military Contingents in Congo

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze security threats that led to the deployment of Kenya Military Contingents (KENCOM) troops in the DRC. An interview guide and document guide formed the data collection tools that helped obtain data from a sample population of 23 respondents. The 23 participants were purposively selected and made of five Ministry of Foreign Affairs staff in Kenya, five personnel of the DRC embassy in Kenya, three political analysts from Kenya, five academicians, and five Kenyans living in the DRC. In addition to the primary data, the study also collected secondary data from newspapers, published research papers, and other collaborative media reports. Qualitative analysis in thematic and narrative format helped analyze the collected data. The results showed that the security threats that resulted in the deployment of KENCOM included the threat to regional stability, the rise of several extremist groups such as the M-23, the need for regional cooperation on matters of peace and security and the UN mission which required other EACRF forces to be on board alongside the UN humanitarian personnel in the affected areas. The study concluded that given the tenets of the expected utility theory of international conflict, even though Kenya may have appeared to act in a manner to safeguard the interests of the DRC.

**Keywords:** deployment, KENCON troops, national interests, security threats

## INTRODUCTION

The United Nations offers security and peace worldwide and has immense experience and attainments in peacekeeping operations (Tuvdendarjaa, 2022). However, approximately half of the global UN peacekeeping missions are in Africa. They include Western Sahara (MINURSO), South Sudan (UNMISS), Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and Abyei, a region contested by South Sudan and Sudan (Klobucista & Ferragamo, 2023). As of 2023, more than 50,000 troops had been deployed for UN operations across the continent (Klobucista & Ferragamo, 2023).

The high peacekeeping missions in Africa can be attributed to the countless security threats that the continent experiences. For instance, the continent witnessed over 8,200 death tolls and 1,878 terrorist attacks in 2020, with such attack incidents demonstrating elevation and persistence in Northern Mozambique, Somalia, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Sahel (Amani Africa, 2021). In addition, between January and December 2023, the Africa Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism's (ACSRT's) database demonstrated a 53 percent upsurge in the number of terrorist-related deaths and a 99 percent upsurge in the number of terrorist attacks in the previous year (Amani Africa, 2024). Within the same duration, the continent registered 43 terrorism-related deaths and 8 terrorist attacks per day (Amani Africa, 2024). In addition, the African security landscape is linked to a rise in the intricacy, intensity, and scale of non-traditional security threats, asymmetric warfare, the propagation of light weapons and small arms, drug and human trafficking, transnational criminal networks, and porous borders, which have further degraded the African security sphere.

In response to the increasing security threats, the UN continually deploys various forces to tackle the fragmentation and proliferation of non-state armed groups, illicit trafficking of light and small weapons, propagation of weapons of mass destruction, and terrorist acts. Kenya has always remained receptive to the UN's requests to engage in peace operations on the grounds of the parties in the host state consenting to their contribution (Ministry of Defence, 2024). One of the latest peacekeeping operations involving the Kenyan Military Contingents was deploying Kenyan forces as part of the East African Community Regional Force to the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Within this peacekeeping mission, the forces' mandate involved overseeing armed groups' (including M23) withdrawal from the eastern DRC region (Russo, 2023). At the time, this region had more than 120 armed groups. In addition, the force was obligated to ensure that the December 2022 ceasefire negotiation was upheld (Russo, 2023).

Kenya's strategic investment interests contributed to the deployment of sending troops to DRC. First, the Kenyan legislators established that the cost of not deploying its forces would be worse than deploying (Mutambo, 2022). Through the deployment, the country also intended to secure its critical interests including the usage of the Mombasa port by the DRC, bilateral trade with the DRC, various Kenyan businesspeople in the DRC, and Kenyan businesses such as banks working in the DRC. Second, the Kenyan Contingent (KENCON) had immense goodwill from eastern DRC residents because Kenya does not share a border with DRC, which endorsed their deployment (Mutambo, 2022). However, besides financing, the deployment was subjected to issues and questions on exist strategy. Nonetheless despite addressing the issues affecting the deployment and Kenya's national interests, little attention has been paid to the security threats that resulted in the KENCOM troops' deployment. Therefore, this study aimed to analyze security threats that led to the deployment of KENCOM troops in the DRC.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Deployment of forces to a given country has been used as an intervention approach on various occasions. American troops, for instance, have been deployed to places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, with a general feeling that this may strengthen the case against the US for purportedly invading Islamic lands and fighting Muslim governments (O'Hanlon, 2008; Salaun, 2019). But while the world has more than 20 million soldiers in arms today, it does not have enough capability of deploying quickly and effectively to all the places in the world in good time (Salaun, 2019).

In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for about three decades, they have been embroiled in violence. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC; the Congo) achieved its independence in 1960 (Center on International Cooperation, 2008). It is the fourth-largest African country by population and is endowed with many vital natural resources. However, these natural resources and massive human resource endowment, peace has eluded the DRC, and human security challenges have been on an upward trend. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), a humanitarian organization, identified the DRC as the world's most overlooked, under-addressed refugee crisis in 2021 (Bwire & Guensburg, 2022).

Although there are some exceptions, the majority of the clashes in the eastern region of the DRC revolve around regional politics and are the result of factors such as local ethnic structures and competing over natural resources. Nonetheless, some political analysts have opined that rather than see it in strictly political terms, the situation is not merely the product of a lack of political will on the part of the DRC government, but more of a manifestation of the intricate and rather fragmented nature of its military landscape (Baaz & Verwijen, 2013).

One of the evident reasons behind the conflict in the DRC is weak governance. This is exacerbated by the presence of various armed groups (Global Conflict Tracker, 2023). Such groups have indeed, subjected the people of Congo to widespread suffering including rape and sexual violence, massive human rights violations, as well as extreme poverty. Indeed, it is estimated that more than 100 armed groups operate in eastern DRC, an unsettled region where conflict has raged for decades but has escalated in recent months (Adunimay 2022; Bwire & Guensburg 2022). This generates a humanitarian crisis as has been witnessed in other places where such situations have occurred (Bruwer and Dyk 2005).

Another reason for the conflict is the availability of numerous natural resources. Therefore, competition for resources and influence in DRC also has sharpened long-standing rivalries between Rwanda and Uganda. In a way, this has globalized the conflict in eastern DRC where most of these minerals are found (Defis Humanitaires, 2023). In this regard, it is notable that the U.S. companies have in the past owned vast cobalt mines in the DRC, but later, many of these have been sold to Chinese companies to the extent that nowadays, most of the cobalt mines are controlled by China. This arguably gives China a comparative advantage in terms of energy and technology over the U.S.A.

China's relationship is also another emerging reason behind the Congo conflict, particularly, its economy. It has been noted that the Congolese government is getting support from China to fight the rebel groups and Uganda as well acquires arms from China to carry out military operations within DRC's borders. One more thing about the China-DRC relationship is the fact that it has resulted in limited access to these resources both by other countries and the people of Congo.

Another factor behind the conflict, especially in the Eastern part of Congo is the Nairobi Agreement. In this regard, the rebel groups were rooting for the implementation of a 2013 pact signed with the DRC government, in Nairobi) that would grant them amnesty and reintegrate them into the Congolese army or civilian life (ISS, 2022). Nonetheless, despite tensions as to whether this was a worthy step to take, it generally appeared agreeable that it was worth it to risk the lives of the Kenyan troops, for the sake of the many innocent lives that would be saved by the end of the mission to protect humanity (The Platform Magazine, 2022).

In general, studies have identified several reasons for the persistence of war, especially in the volatile east of the country which include; ethnic intolerance, the illegal exploitation of the country's vast natural resources and a Congolese elite that benefits from the chaos. However, the available sources have not come out clearly to talk about the causes of the current situation and the real stakeholders involved in the conflict. This is because, as it is alleged, there are some hidden hands behind what is being seen to be the parties involved. This study sought to bring out such details.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study analyzed and collected data qualitatively. Both primary and secondary data were collected in the study. The primary data collection entailed interviews with Kenyans living in DRC, academicians, political analysts, embassy staff, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials. Interview guides were employed in the data collection. On the other hand, secondary data entailed information gathered using a document analysis guide from existing written sources comprising newspapers, published research papers, and other collaborative media reports.

Twenty-three participants comprising five Ministry of Foreign Affairs staff in Kenya, five personnel of the DRC embassy in Kenya, three political analysts from Kenya, five academicians, and five Kenyans living in the DRC. This sample size was chosen purposively. Besides, the interview guide was pretested involving one political analyst, two embassy staff, two Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, and two academicians. The tools were also checked for validation and reliability. The researcher used the pilot study findings to determine how replicable they can be. This study was essentially qualitative and while the concept of validity in qualitative research is highly debated, the validity of the findings of this study was related to the careful recording and continual verification of the data that the researcher undertakes during the investigative practice.

The data collection procedure commenced with the researcher getting the proposal approved by the graduate school (Kenyatta University) which also provided a letter of approval of the proposal as well as a letter of introduction to NACOSTI for securing a research permit. The researcher, having acquired a permit from NACOSTI, visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Embassy of Foreign Affairs for a courtesy call and introduction to the study. Upon such visits, the researcher also presented these letters of authorization including the research permit, and went ahead to book appointments with the respondents from the offices visited.

The researcher then identified the respondents of the study through the sampling techniques outlined above and approached them. The researcher booked an appointment with them at a time of their convenience for interview

sessions. Data collected were recorded using reliable but agreed-upon methods to increase the reliability of the data. This data collection process followed the procedures as laid down in the ethical considerations section of this proposal.

Data collected during the data collection phase was well preserved awaiting analysis. Data collected for this study was of mainly a qualitative nature. Accordingly, the data analysis exercise was guided by qualitative data analysis approaches. These include thematic approaches where responses are seen as presenting certain ideas which when brought out carefully will constitute some thematic issues. Therefore, data collected from the respondents was analyzed thematically and supplemented by information obtained from the documents that were analyzed. Both data sets were presented in narrative form. Lastly, ethical considerations consisting respecting the respondents, ensuring informed consent, and communicating the research process were observed throughout the study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The primary question guiding this inquiry was about the threats leading to the deployment of KENCON Troops to the DR Congo. But a quick review of the events leading to the situation indicates that in June 2022, the heads of state in the five East African countries; Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda called for an immediate ceasefire in the eastern DRC and hence followed this call with a decision to forge a joint force to fight jointly with the Congolese force to restore calm in the Eastern part of DRC (Institute of Security Studies, 2022). In this arrangement, Ugandan forces would support the fight against the rebel coalition that has aligned with the Islamic State in North Kivu and Ituri area while the Kenyan troops would pursue the other rebels in North Kivu alongside the UN soldiers in the UN force. The troops from Burundi and Tanzania were assigned to operate in south Kivu to deal with the RED-Tabara militia while a relatively small contingent from South Sudan would face the remaining Lord Resistance Army in Haut-Uele (McCreedy 2022, Nelleke van de Walle 2022).

The deployment of Kenyan troops to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been a complex process influenced by an interplay of a combination of factors (The East African Newspaper, 2023). All the respondents who participated gave some suggestions of what they understood to be some of the threatening events and occurrences that led to this decision:

### Regional Instability

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has, indeed, experienced protracted conflict for decades, characterized by civil wars, rebellions, and ethnic violence plaguing the country. This instability has spilled over into neighboring countries, posing a security threat to Kenya besides the humanitarian crisis it causes leading to an influx of refugees from DRC to Kenya and other neighboring countries. This instability is rooted in the historical context of DRC's colonial legacy marked by the Belgian's arbitrary division of territories as well as the exploitation of resources during colonialism creating tensions and grievances among different ethnicities (Vlassenroot et. al. 2020). Currently, this trend continues in the form of internal competition for these resources fueling conflict. All these factors have been worsened by the weak governance of the country manifested in challenges such as deep-seated corruption and political instability thereby creating a power vacuum that has often been exploited by armed militia groups (The Platform Magazine 2022). Unfortunately, there have also been cases of regional interference where some neighboring countries have intervened in DRC Congo's internal affairs by either supporting their allies or protecting their interests thereby heightening the conflict.

While this may be the case, Denisova and Kostelyanets (2023) have observed that numerous books and articles by Russian and foreign researchers have argued, that instead of working towards stability in this region, some neighbors like Rwanda are part of the forces maintaining permanent instability in the DRC. Accordingly, it becomes rather complicated to rely on the neighbors to enhance regional security (The Platform Magazine, December 2022). On the other hand, there are those sources that have argued that the problem of DRC is merely a problem of a country's size.

In this argument, larger territories have challenges of the inefficiency of the central government controlling all the corners of the country and instead having the peripheral areas beginning to feel the control of the neighboring

country more than their own country (Sidorova, 2017). In this regard, the findings on this aspect would be in line with what was discussed in the literature by Global Conflict Tracker (2023) as weak governance.

### **Rise of Extremist Groups**

The emergence of extremist groups like the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in eastern DRC is one of the factors that have, in a significant way, contributed to the instability and insecurity in the East African region. The ADF originated in Uganda in the 1990s as a rebel group to establish an Islamic state in the region and overthrow the governments of Uganda and the DRC. The attacks by these groups are also waged in neighboring countries, including Uganda and Kenya, thereby compromising regional security.

The ADF's presence in the DRC poses a direct threat to Kenya's security. The group has been known to cross the border into Kenya to carry out attacks, targeting both civilians and security forces. These attacks have caused casualties and instilled fear among the Kenyan population. According to the International Crisis Group:

“East African countries have worried about insecurity in the eastern DRC for years, but prior discussions about intervention by a regional force have never led to an actual deployment (CRISIS GROUP website).”

To address the threat posed by the ADF and other extremist groups, Kenya has been involved in regional counter-terrorism efforts, working with other countries in the region to improve security and intelligence cooperation. Other East African Countries should be involved too as this is in line with the East African Community Protocol on Peace and Security Article 6 on Combating Terrorism (East African Community Protocol on Peace and Security). Indeed, in talking about the current state of terrorism in Africa at large, the Special Report Research Report by Amani Africa - Media and Research Service (2022) indicates that there is no longer one region in the African continent that can be considered as completely free from the activities of groups identified as terrorists. In this case, it is noted that while this may be a problem experienced in East Africa, it is a problem borne by the people of Africa as a whole.

### **Regional Cooperation**

Kenya has been a key player in regional peace and security initiatives in East Africa. The country has actively worked with its neighbors to address the challenges facing the region, including conflict, instability, and economic development (Salaun, 2019). The case of DRC Congo was one such case and so it called on Kenya to extend the support it has always given to the other neighboring countries in the same situation (Kamais, 2019). In any case, the DRC president preferred Kenyan forces as a neutral arbiter to Tanzania, Uganda and Uganda as he claimed that the three other neighbors have some vested interests. It is however notable that the region is expansive and therefore there is need to bring other EAC members on board and work in cooperation if this goal is to be achieved.

### **The United Nations Mission**

The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) is a major peacekeeping operation aimed at supporting stability and security in the DRC (Nibizi, 2018). However, following the 2022 eruption of violent protests, the United Nations mission in the Congo suffered criticism in the form of a crisis of confidence among local communities as it had failed to protect civilians and improve security in the region, despite having stayed there for more than two decades. This surely exposed persistent problems facing MONUSCO thereby casting doubt on its operational effectiveness (The Conversation, 2023). In general, therefore, the UN Mission has been criticized on several grounds including; failure to protect civilians, prolonged stay in DRC, operational challenges including violation of human rights and the general local discontent (The Conversation, 2023).

Kenya has been a significant contributor to this mission, playing a crucial role in maintaining peace and protecting civilians working alongside other forces, including the UN mission (Defis Humanitaires, 2023). These factors, combined with the deteriorating security situation in the DRC, partly led to the decision to deploy

Kenyan troops as part of a regional effort to address the challenges facing the region. The deployment aims to contribute to peace, security, and stability in the DRC and the wider region.

In general, this situation in the DRC was seen to have several negative consequences for Kenya including the influx of refugees thereby exerting some undue pressure on Kenya's resources and social services, the disruption of economic activities between the two countries of Kenya and DRC such as trade and Kenyan investments operating in the region and security threats where extremist groups operating in the DRC have been known to carry out attacks in neighboring countries, including Kenya. This has posed a direct security threat to the country.

It was one of the ways of addressing these challenges, Kenya has been involved in regional peace and security initiatives, including contributing to the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC (MONUSCO). However, the instability in the DRC remains a significant challenge for Kenya and the wider region. Despite MONUSCO having faced numerous challenges in the DRC including the complex security environment, the vastness of the country, and the presence of armed groups, it still seeks to bring peace to the area. This was evidenced in the several demonstrations in Goma against the presence of UN peace-keepers as well as EACRF yet the atrocities meted on the locals continued unabated thereby making the context of the operation by KENCON and EACRF to be more volatile (McCreedy, 2022). Nevertheless, interviews held with officers at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nairobi indicated that Kenya's contribution to MONUSCO has been instrumental in these achievements, thus:

“Indeed, Kenyan troops have demonstrated their commitment to peace and security, and their presence in DRC, when they were there, surely helped, to a significant extent, to de-escalate violence and protect civilians... (Officer, MOFA, September 2024, Nairobi).”

In addition, the literature on this subject indicates that the KENCON's commitment was evident, particularly considering that they were able to get the M23 to agree to a ceasefire that would allow the locals to continue with their economic activities such as growing crops on their farms to ease the biting humanitarian crisis they were in (The Weekly Review, September 2023).

But despite such a notable contribution to the security situation of the DRC Congo, the locals were reportedly critical of KENCON's role decrying its failure to pacify the area (The Weekly Review, September 2023). In the view of the locals, the Kenyan troops appeared not adequately resourced to meaningfully contribute to the stabilization of the Eastern part of Congo. The perception of 'mission impossible' is to be interpreted through the lens of the requirement of EACRF that each troop-contributing country fund their contingents thereby leading to a financial problem. This was exacerbated by the subsequent rapid depreciation of the shilling. Kenyan troops therefore exited the DRC earlier than the popular expectations. However, since the main reasons for such an exit were not made public, this issue has been left for speculation.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study aimed to analyze security threats that led to the deployment of KENCOM troops in the DRC. The threats that were identified and reported in the findings included the threat to regional stability, the rise of several extremist groups such as the M-23, the need for regional cooperation on matters of peace and security and the UN mission which required other EACRF forces to be on board alongside the UN humanitarian personnel in the affected areas. The study concluded that given the tenets of the expected utility theory of international conflict, even though Kenya may have appeared to act in a manner to safeguard the interests of the DRC, there is every possible reason for one to believe that Kenya was equally acting in her best interest as well. This is so especially considering that instability in DRC also means instability in the region where Kenya is also located. When there is peace and security in the region, and considering that Kenya has some good bilateral ties with DRC, Kenya is bound to benefit in many ways including economically, politically and diplomatically.

However, this study was carried out in Kenya with the respondents mainly drawn from Kenya. It however was not possible to get a sample of people from the affected areas where the KENCON Troops was operating from and listen to their narrative of experiences. It was therefore recommended that similar studies be carried out to

include larger samples of respondents from the affected areas where the KENCON Troops was carrying out its operations.

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