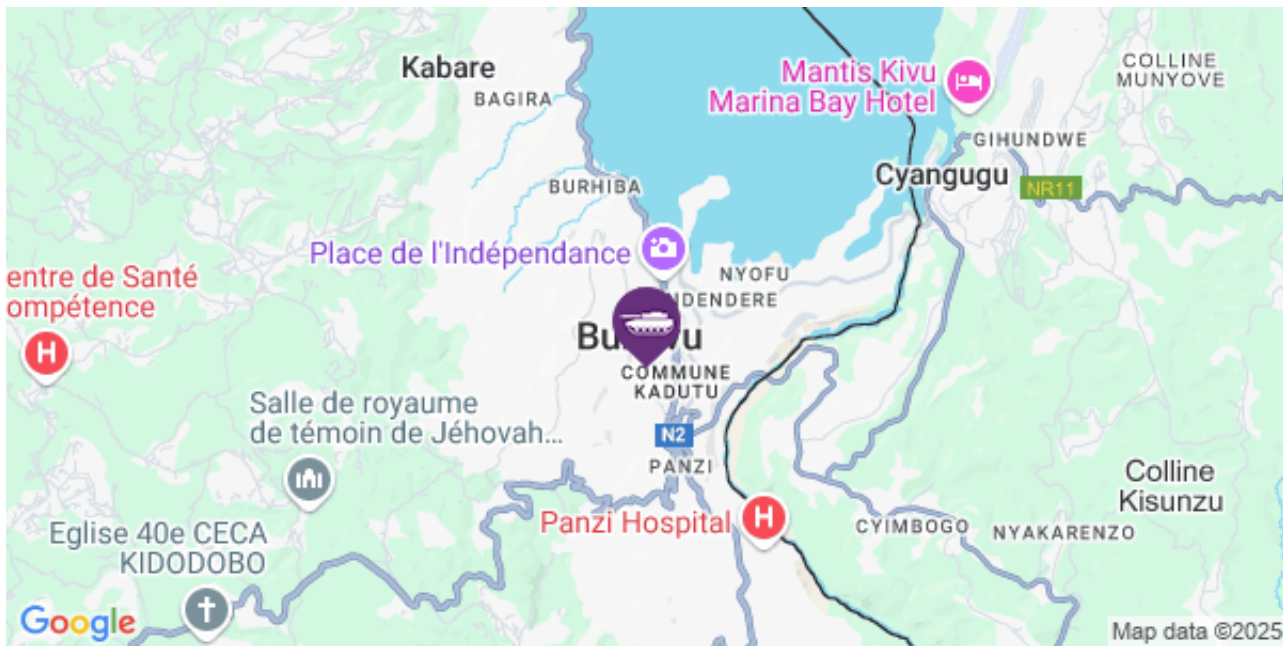


Armed Conflict



15

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DRC SITUATION UPDATE: M23 rebels enter South Kivu's provincial capital Bukavu after taking over its airport in Kavumu on February 14

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Executive Summary

- The March 23 Movement (M23) rebels captured Bukavu and its airport in Kavumu, South Kivu Province with minimal resistance on February 14, marking a significant achievement. This grants the rebels control over vital infrastructure like the Ruzizi hydropower plant, and enhances their economic power through control of border routes and mines.
- The rebels claim their actions protect civilians, but their control facilitates the flow of supplies from Rwanda and mining resources to Rwanda, likely strengthening their operations. M23's actions mirror previous tactics in Goma, including prison breaks to bolster their ranks and foster a narrative of liberation.
- International calls for a ceasefire and diplomatic resolution are expected, but Kinshasa will likely refuse direct dialogue with M23, instead seeking sanctions against Rwanda. The situation remains volatile, with the rebels expected to consolidate their control, while the potential for diplomatic progress remains slim. Regional tensions will likely persist, especially between DRC and Rwanda.

Current Situation

- Reports indicate that during the March 23 Movement (M23) rebels entered South Kivu's provincial capital Bukavu on February 14. The rebels were reportedly met with minimal resistance as they advanced through various neighborhoods, including central Bukavu. M23 also took control of the Ruzizi hydropower plant on the DRC-Rwanda border to the east of Bukavu.
- Most security officials in Bukavu reportedly fled the city, or surrendered, with very minimal and localized sounds of gunfire exchange reported in some parts of the city during the overnight hours on February 14-15. A prison break was reported soon after M23's takeover of Bukavu, with over 2,000 prisoners estimated to have been released.
- Emerging unconfirmed reports from the early morning hours (local time) on February 15 indicate that the security forces are engaged in clashes with the M23 near the main weapons depot of Bukavu, which caught fire.
- This immediately follows M23 announcing their capture of the Bukavu Airport in Kavumu, about 30 km north of Bukavu, on [February 14](#) as well. Some fighting was reported near the airport before its capture, but the clashes were short-lived and M23 did not face significant resistance from the security forces in Kavumu either, with soldiers reportedly fleeing to Bukavu.
- Unconfirmed reports indicate that the Congolese military had removed all aircraft from the airport and closed it before the rebels entered. However, the rebels were able to seize some weaponry and military vehicles in the area. M23 celebrated this with images depicting their fighters at the airport, claiming to have achieved the goal of securing civilians in the area.



Assessments & Forecast

1. M23's rapid advance to Bukavu with minimal resistance represents a significant achievement for the rebels and a massive setback to the government. The rebels now control the two largest regional airports and are seemingly close to solidifying de-facto control over Bukavu, making it the second provincial capital in the region under M23 control within a month after Goma's occupation in late [January](#). This significantly weakens the security forces as well, preventing them from instrumentalizing their aerial advantage from the Bukavu Airport against the rebels as easily. The

rebels' celebration of securing civilians in the area aligns with their constant narrative that their takeover of the airport and Bukavu is only intended to prevent the security forces' continued use of these sites as a base to launch attacks deliberately targeting civilians. The rebels' rapid advance aligns with their known heightened capabilities compared to the security forces, with the M23 likely capitalizing on its bolstered momentum over the recent days to overwhelm the security forces and take over Bukavu. It is likely that the rebels' advance from Kavumu to Bukavu included not only progression along the National Road 2 (N2) but supported by rebels' progression through the nearby hills running parallel to the road.

2. Additionally, the reports of soldiers surrendering and fleeing align with the developments observed during M23's takeover of Goma, highlighting their heightened threat perception due to the soldiers' lack of capabilities to tackle the rebels. It also highlights the ineffectiveness of the recent bolstering of Burundian and South African troop presence in the area to tackle the M23 advance on Bukavu. The occupation of Bukavu gives the rebels complete control over Lake Kivu and the route running along the stretch of the DRC-Rwanda border between Goma and Bukavu. It also essentially positions the rebels better to increasingly take control of mines in the area, with the rebels already controlling in the North Kivu Province, and in South Kivu's Kalehe Territory. Given Rwandan support for the M23, this control over the border areas is likely to further ease the flow of reinforcements and supplies from Rwanda, across the border to M23, and the flow of mining resources and minerals from eastern DRC to Rwanda. While these routes are already very active, their amplification will likely further strengthen the M23, and amplify their economic gains through illegal trade, thereby allowing them to comfortably continue their operations.
3. The M23's capture of the Ruzizi hydropower plant is likely intended to take over critical infrastructure to ensure continuity of services as they seek to set up governance structures and consolidate control while gaining local support. M23 presence at the power plant at the border with Rwanda will also likely fuel concerns about the potential inflow of rebel reinforcements from across the border. The prison break, soon after capturing Bukavu, also mimics M23's actions in Goma. Such prison breaks are intended to support the rebels' narrative of being "liberators" of those unfairly and ethically targeted by the state. They are also intended to bolster partnerships with local armed groups, whose fighters often occupy these prisons, to aid the rebels' operations, with the recruitment of other criminals amplifying the rebels' ranks.
4. **FORECAST:** In the immediate future, the M23 is expected to engage in efforts to consolidate its control over the Bukavu Airport and the city. This will likely include incursions deeper into the hilly regions in the vicinity of Bukavu with a gradual capture of additional mines in the area to aid the M23's illegal mineral trade economy. Additionally, the M23 may venture further south and closer to the Rwandan and Burundian border towards areas near Luberizi and even Uvira to join troops with the allied Twirwaneho militia fighters and Burundian rebels. As evidenced in Goma, the rebels will likely also hold a gathering in Bukavu to portray popular support, as well as erect governance structures and appoint their own officials to Bukavu and the larger South Kivu Province to formalize their control and gain legitimacy as a political entity. Kinshasa will likely repeat its denunciation of M23's activities and seek to reassure the population with promises of ongoing efforts to improve the security situation. In this context, the security authorities may mount counter-insurgency operations to recapture some areas. However, these are unlikely to significantly alter the situation or push the M23 back, which will likely comfortably hold on to strategic areas. The situation on the ground will likely remain extremely volatile and vulnerable to rapid evolution as M23 decides on further progressions.
5. **FORECAST:** The latest developments will likely bolster international and regional calls for a ceasefire and a diplomatic resolution to the conflict. This will particularly be seen in the upcoming meeting of the AU on the situation in eastern DRC, scheduled for February 15-16, which will likely echo recent regional calls for direct dialogue with the M23. However, Kinshasa will likely maintain its long-standing refusal to engage with the M23 to avoid legitimizing the rebel group as a political actor. In turn, Kinshasa will reiterate calls for international sanctions against Rwanda for its support for M23, leading to persistent regional tensions. Burundi may support these calls against Rwanda and also seek to deploy more troops to the south of Bukavu to prevent M23 from reaching closer to its borders. This is over heightened threat perceptions for the conflict to spill over into Burundi, particularly given M23 and Rwanda's support for Burundian rebels that operate further south of Bukavu. Despite these efforts, there is only a narrow chance for significant progress on a

diplomatic resolution to the ongoing conflict, with the primary stepping stone for it being reconciliation between Rwanda and DRC, with the implicit involvement of M23. Amid heightened regional tensions, amplified international and regional mediation efforts are likely to persist over the coming days and weeks.

Recommendations

1. Those operating or residing in Bukavu on February 15 are advised to minimize all movement and shelter in place given the uncertainty of the hours ahead.
2. Avoid all travel to Masisi, Nyiragongo, Rutshuru, Walikale, Lubero, and Beni territories in North Kivu Province, as well as to the Kalehe and Kabare territories in South Kivu Province given the elevated risks associated with the ongoing fighting.
3. Defer all travel to Goma due to the ongoing conflict and volatility of the situation.