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Congolese Bishop Willy Ngumbi Ngengele of Goma, in choir dress, and other representatives from Congo's Catholic Church address the media outside the Serena Hotel in Goma Feb. 12, 2025. The media briefing followed a meeting with a rebel leader after the Rwandan-backed M23 rebels seized Goma in late January. (OSV News/Fiston Mahamba, Reuters)

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Bukavu — February 18, 2025

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After the M23 Rwanda-backed rebels Feb. 16 occupied Bukavu, a second major city in mineral-rich eastern Congo, Catholic bishops and experts are warning this offensive in the provinces of North and South Kivu signals a clear intent to establish a permanent foreign country presence in the region.

Johan Viljoen, director of the Denis Hurley Peace Institute of the Southern Africa bishops' conference, said such actions are a blatant violation of the sovereignty of Congo. The vast central African nation of about 100 million people remains one of the poorest countries in the world, despite its massive reserves of minerals, timber and freshwater. About two-thirds of the population lives on less than $2.15 a day, according to the World Bank.

"It clearly signals intent by M23 to establish a permanent presence in North Kivu. By extension, given that they (M23) are to an extent a proxy of Rwanda, it also signals Rwanda's intention to stay there," Viljoen said.

"This is a direct assault on DRC's territorial integrity and sovereignty," he added.

The latest report published by the Denis Hurley Institute said that the M23 rebels installed provincial officials in North Kivu province and continued their advance into South Kivu — with the milestone of capturing South Kivu's capital Bukavu on Feb. 16.

He said the international community did not provide an adequate response as the rebels advanced despite the unilateral ceasefire that came into force Feb. 4 after a deadly battle for the city of Goma, the capital of North Kivu, which the rebels captured at the end of January.

"The response by the international community has been pathetic," Viljoen noted after the Feb. 8 meeting of the heads of state of the Southern African Development Community and the East African Community, gathered in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to discuss the conflict in Congo.

"A perfect example," Viljoen said of the international community's reaction, is "the meeting of SADC and EAC leaders" where they "did not even mention Rwandan support for M23."

Among other issues, the summit called for an immediate ceasefire, the restoration of essential supply lines for food and other essential commodities to ensure humanitarian support and the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

The Kivu regions' violence is fueled by rich deposits of cobalt, coltan and gold.

Meanwhile, a top European Union bishop urged the EU to take further action over the crisis affecting millions of people in the African country.

Italian Bishop Mariano Crociata, president of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, or COMECE, said in a Feb. 12 statement that the international community needs to "do everything possible to resolve the conflict by peaceful means."

Expressing deep sorrow and urgent concern about the situation, he said that the "involvement of foreign armies and militias, in particular Rwanda's alleged support for the M23, constitutes a serious violation of international law."

The Italian prelate leading COMECE warned that the announcement by the M23 rebels that they plan to extend the conflict to reach the capital and control the country "represents a major challenge for the DRC and the region."

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The M23 rebels and their allies have plunged the vital city of Goma into chaos, COMECE said, resulting in nearly 3,000 deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands in recent weeks, according to the figures provided by the United Nations.

"Civilians, including newborn babies killed in hospital bombings, have become victims of widespread violence, while thousands seek refuge in churches, schools, and makeshift camps amid severe shortages of food, water, and medical supplies," COMECE news release said.

"The EU and the international community must put pressure on these actors to cease their support for the M23, to negotiate in good faith, to respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the DRC, halting the exploitation of its natural resources," Crociata stressed.

During a Feb. 9 Mass to pray for peace in the country, Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu of Kinshasa said that "dialogue is the sacred word, the key word that can help us get out of our current situation."

"We will find solutions to our crises that have lasted for decades by engaging in dialogue, even with those we consider as enemies," Besungu said, urging the faithful that "the nation is in danger" and "every passing minute is crucial."

"Let us not waste any more time if we want to save our country," he added.

The leaders of the Justice, Peace, and Development Commission of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, or SECAM, said in a Feb. 8 statement that Christians cannot remain indifferent to "this tragic situation experienced by thousands of people, including women and children, who are forced to move without any glimmer of hope on the horizon for the moment concerning the cessation of hostilities.

"We are deeply troubled by the numerous losses of life, as well as the looting and destruction of property that have caused widespread suffering and significantly disrupted the lives of countless individuals and families in the region," the SECAM bishops said.

Congolese bishops played a part in peace negotiations in the Kivu provinces.

"The aim was to convince them that armed struggle is not a solution and that we come with a proposal that can contribute to building a lasting peace, hence the so-called 'Social Pact for Peace and Coexistence in the Democratic Republic of Congo,'" Msgr. Donatien Nshole, secretary general of Congo's bishops' conference, or CENCO, said of the Feb. 12 meeting, as quoted by Fides agency.

CENCO and the Church of Christ in Congo representatives met in Goma with the leaders of the M23 militia as rebel leader Corneille Nangaa attempted to position himself as the public face for politicians and rebel groups opposing Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi.

Msgr. Nshole said he was convinced that there was room for negotiations to resolve the conflict peacefully. "We explained our dynamics for dialogue and our interlocutors have agreed to participate in it."

Meanwhile, Crociata of COMECE urged the EU and the international community "to take immediate action to ensure the cessation of hostilities as well as an absolute respect for human dignity and international law."