



Democratic Republic of Congo: a gathering momentum towards peace?

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The Special Representative of UN Secretary-General on Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Martin Kohler – who is also the head of the UN mission, MONUSCO – has claimed that there is a “[new momentum](#)” behind efforts to stabilise the country. The deputy head of MONUSCO, recently said that almost 90% of the country is now under government control.

There is plenty to support the Special Representative’s claim. In October 2013, joint military operations by the Congolese armed forces and a UN Force Intervention Brigade with a strong mandate led to the rapid [surrender and disbandment](#) of the rebel armed group known as [March 23](#) (M23), which has links with Rwanda. Since then, there have been further concerted operations against other militia, including the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda ([FDLR](#)), originally formed by Hutu leaders implicated in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and the Allied Democratic Forces/National Army for the Liberation of Uganda ([ADF/NALU](#)), an armed group of Ugandan Muslim origin that until recently was dormant but which has resurfaced in eastern DRC; some assert that it has links with al-Shabaab in Somalia.

These gains have been reinforced by the voluntary abandonment of armed activity by a number of other groups and their agreement to enter the political process. A national [programme](#) for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration has been (re)launched. More controversially, parliament has passed an [amnesty law](#) which gives immunity from prosecution to rebels who committed acts of insurrection, acts of war and political offences between 2006 and 2013. Meanwhile, the International Criminal Court has convicted rebel leader [Germain Katanga](#) of war crimes and crimes against humanity (he was acquitted on some other charges). Having been suspended in April 2013, DRC is taking steps to re-join the [Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative](#).

If the situation on the ground continues to improve, the 2016 presidential and national legislative elections could be the first in the history of the DRC to be held under conditions of genuine peace and security. But even the DRC’s international supporters are quick to acknowledge that this is still a big ‘if’. Russell Feingold, the US special envoy for the DRC and the Great Lakes Region, [argued](#) earlier this month that much remains to be done. He noted that continuing competition for control over the country’s vast mineral resources, combined with regional and ethnic rivalries, could throw recent progress rapidly into reverse – relations between Rwanda, Uganda and DRC are still far from ‘normalised’. He said that there remain many other “armed groups that continue to prey upon the population, undermine state authority, complicate the DRC’s relations with its neighbours, and illegally exploit the country’s natural resources [...] The internal displacements and humanitarian consequences caused by these armed groups make sustainable development in the region virtually impossible.” The number of IDPs in the DRC has been [rising](#) and now stands at

2.9m; there has been a new influx of refugees in the north – as well as fleeing [Séléka militia](#) – from neighbouring Central African Republic, posing a fresh threat to stability. Feingold concluded that there remain many obstacles to free and fair elections in 2016: “flawed 2011 elections underscore that a stable and successful democratic future for the country is far from assured.”

While the ADF/NALU may be close to defeat, the FDLR is not yet. It has sympathisers within the army, with which it collaborated in the past against Rwandan incursions. Outsiders are often unaware of [how many](#) rebel armed groups there are in DRC. Dozens of militias go under the label ‘[Mai Mai](#)’. In general, when any rebel group agrees to disarm and join the political process, there is often a break-away faction which then sustains the cycle of violence. Controversial plans to divide existing provinces – part of a wider [decentralisation agenda](#) – could generate more militias in future. One place where this is already happening is [Katanga Province](#) in the south, where discontent has been fuelled by a mining boom that has brought few benefits to the majority of the population. The activities of armed groups there has so far displaced up to 400,000 people. MONUSCO recently sent in [more troops](#).

While the performance of the Congolese armed forces has improved over the last year, much of the progress made against rebel armed groups has been down to the arrival of the well-equipped and professional [Intervention Brigade](#). The Congolese armed forces also lost a key leader in January 2014, when [Colonel Mamadou Ndala](#) was assassinated in unclear circumstances during military operations against the ADF/NALU. Absorbing rebel elements that have recently set down their arms will, as it has been in the past, be very challenging.

President Joseph Kabila has been strengthened by the run of military victories over the last six months. However, his position remains precarious. On 30 December 2013 there were coordinated attacks by armed groups in Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Kolwezi and Kindu; Kabila’s supporters have characterised these attacks as an attempted coup. The attackers appear to have been adherents of a self-proclaimed prophet [Joseph Mukungubila](#).

Under the Constitution Kabila cannot stand for a third term of office in 2016. Many suspect he will find a way of circumventing this obstacle, although he insists that he has no plans to do so. Some [speculate](#) that he might support an ally to run for the presidency – perhaps even his wife – and become prime minister. Kabila has reappointed a long-standing ally, Apollinaire Malu Malu Muholungu, to run the new Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI). Like their predecessors in 2006 and 2011, the 2016 elections will be predominantly donor-funded. It remains to be seen under how much pressure they will be prepared to put Kabila and CENI to ensure that the elections are freer and fairer than 2011.

Kabila dissolved the government in October 2013 and has not yet appointed a replacement. He has [said](#) that he wants to form a government of national unity, but he seems short of takers. The political opposition continues to be undermined by ongoing official harassment. In February 2014 former ally and parliamentary speaker [Vital Kamerhe](#) was prevented from travelling from Kinshasa to his home area, South Kivu, in the east. Meanwhile, Kabila’s defeated rival for the presidency in 2011, Étienne Tshisekedi, remains under close official observation; he has refused to recognise Kabila’s 2011 victory.

Further reading: [UN Secretary-General’s report on the DRC](#), 5 March 2014; Global Witness, “[Proposed EU law will not keep conflict resources out of Europe, campaigners warn](#)”; UK Government [webpage](#) on the DRC; DFID ‘[development tracker](#)’ webpage; DFID’s [Anti-corruption strategy for the DRC, January 2013](#); [EU relations with the DRC](#); [BBC maps](#) of the DRC.

Previous Library briefings: [SN06482](#) (November 2012); [SN05012](#) (December 2009); RP 06/51, [The African Great Lakes: An End to Conflict?](#) (October 2006).