

Rising hate speech in Congo conflict alarms UN

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Demonstrators carry a poster honouring the Democratic Republic of Congo armed forces during a protest in Goma on June 15, 2022. PHOTO | AFP

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The UN Commission on Human Rights is alarmed over the rising tensions and hate speech in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo as EAC Heads of State met in Nairobi on Monday to discuss the security situation.

In a statement to the press, both the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet and Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide Alice Nderitu expressed their deep alarm about the impact of a recent increase in hostilities between the M23 rebel group and the armed forces of the DRC on the local population in the east of the country.

The two top officials called for all attacks against civilians to stop immediately.

“We call on all parties to respect international human rights law and international humanitarian law,” Bachelet and Nderitu stressed.

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“We have also noticed an escalation of hate speech and incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence nationwide – and specifically against Kinyarwanda speakers – as the DRC government has accused Rwanda of supporting the M23,” the UN officials said.

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They noted that some political and civil society actors and members of the Congolese diaspora are propagating hate speech and xenophobia against Rwandans.

“Hate speech fuels the conflict by exacerbating mistrust between communities. It focuses on aspects that have previously mattered less, incites a discourse of ‘us vs them’, and corrodes social cohesion between communities that have previously lived together,” they said.

The UN has documented eight cases of hate speech and incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

Read: [Alarm as anti-M23 protests turn xenophobic in DRC](#)

“Times of heightened political tensions and armed conflict tend to correlate with increased use of hate speech and incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence”, said the two top officials.

“Hateful messages heighten the risk of violence, including atrocity crimes targeting specific groups of people. The use of such hate speech should be condemned by the highest national authorities and curbed,” said Bachelet and Nderitu.

“We urge the government to ensure accountability for the abuses and violations committed.”

Looting

Bachelet and Nderitu also expressed concern about recent developments in Bunagana, Rutshuru territory, North Kivu Province, where restrictions on freedom of movement, as well as lootings and ransacking of official buildings,

private businesses and media organisations by fighters of the M23 have been reported.

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On Monday, President Uhuru Kenyatta chaired the third EAC Heads of State Conclave on the Inter-Congolese dialogue of the Nairobi process on the peace and security situation in eastern DRC.

Among the presidents in attendance include Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), Paul Kagame (Rwanda), Evariste Ndayishimiye (Burundi), Salva Kiir Mayardit (South Sudan) and Felix Tshisekedi (DR Congo).

Stern action

The Congolese government, noting the rise of xenophobic threats, said it would take action against those found guilty. “The government, through its specialised services, notably the police, is on the trail of all who threaten to attack the Tutsis. As soon as they are apprehended, they will face the rigours of the law. Let’s not confuse the two and preserve national cohesion,” said Patrick Muyaya, the government spokesman.

Kinshasa Governor Gentiny Ngobila also warned against those who make threats against communities, including Banyarwanda and Rwandans.

The UN senior officials also urged Parliament to expedite the debate and adoption of a bill on racism, xenophobia and tribalism.

Hostilities against DRC troops by the M23 rebels resumed in November 2021. Since May, the UN notes that at least 23 civilians have been killed and 16 injured, and scores displaced from their homes. They include three children who died when the M23 fighters shelled their school.

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