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## **DR Congo: Civilian protection urged as tens of thousands flee escalation in fighting**

As the Rwandan-backed M23 armed group advanced towards Goma and fighting resumed today around the capital of North Kivu province, combatants on all sides of the escalating conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo must take steps to safeguard civilians from attack, Amnesty International said.

Tens of thousands of civilians have already fled – including many who were previously displaced – and the humanitarian and security situation has deteriorated dramatically since fighting between M23 and the Congolese army (FARDC) resumed some 30 km north of Goma on 15 November.

"The advance towards the gates of Goma places thousands more civilians at risk," said Salil Shetty, Amnesty International's Secretary General.

"All parties to the conflict must protect civilians from attack and respect international humanitarian law, as hostilities get closer to densely populated areas."

Since the M23 was created in April 2012, Amnesty International has documented numerous human rights abuses attributed to its fighters – including unlawful killings, forced recruitment of children and young adults, and rape.

The latest clashes bring to a close three months of de facto truce between the national army and the M23, which controls most of the Rutshuru territory in North Kivu.

Despite the FARDC receiving support from UN MONUSCO peacekeepers' attack helicopters, on 17 November the M23 overran the city of Kibumba, 30km north of Goma. The Rwandan-backed armed group then continued their advance towards Goma.

Fear of being caught in the crossfire has forced some 70,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) living in the Kanyaruchinya camp 10 kilometres outside Goma to flee again. The M23 is now reportedly strengthening its positions in the Munigi area, just outside Goma.

The majority of displaced people from Kanyaruchinya have now crossed Goma to join other IDPs in the Mugunga camp, where the humanitarian situation is critical.

"As the fighting encroaches on Goma, the Congolese army and MONUSCO should take coordinated measures to ensure civilians are protected against the effects of future attacks," said Shetty.

According to a UN statement, the M23 is now well equipped with heavy weapons, including 120mm mortars. Such weapons may have indiscriminate effects if used in densely populated areas.

With FARDC military installations and equipment located in Goma's densely populated centre, there is increasing risk for the civilian population.

"The Congolese army should avoid placing military targets within densely populated areas to spare the civilian population, in case the M23 launches an offensive," said Shetty.

Amnesty International also calls on the FARDC to stop allying itself with other local armed groups – some of whom are already involved in abuses against the civilian population – in the fight against the M23.

MONUSCO has a strong mandate to ensure the protection of civilians, including humanitarian personnel, under imminent threat of physical violence.

"UN peacekeepers must do more to avert a looming civilian protection catastrophe," said Shetty.

"This must be matched with concrete measures by the international community to end violations of the UN arms embargo and prevent supplies of weapons to armed groups in eastern DR Congo."

In July of this year, Amnesty International documented M23 using Rwandan recruits and weapons supplied by Rwanda. The organization also documented numerous violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses committed by the M23, including forced recruitment of children.

The UN Group of Experts on the DRC also accused Uganda of providing support to the M23.

Although Rwanda and Uganda have breached a UN arms embargo, the UN Security Council has yet to take concrete measures to press them to halt support to the M23.

Both Rwanda and Uganda have publicly denied providing support to the M23.

### **The M23 armed group**

M23 is named after a failed peace agreement signed on 23 March 2009 and composed of soldiers who defected from the FARDC in April 2012. Most were previously members of the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), another Rwanda-backed armed group that integrated into the Congolese armed forces in 2009.

M23 is led by Bosco Ntaganda, a former General in the Congolese army who is under an International Criminal Court arrest warrant, and Colonel Sultani Makenga, recently placed on the UN sanctions list for recruitment of child soldiers.

Recent months have been marked by an increase in ethnic-related violence in eastern DRC. Other armed groups including the Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda (FDLR), the Nyatura and Raia Mutomboki have targeted civilians on the basis of their perceived ethnicity.