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The deployment of the East African Regional Force (EARF) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): imminent challenges

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The GLOCEPS Advisory

EARF should expect regional and international resistance at varied points of the peacekeeping mission. This will be fueled by the vested interests of some ruling elites and the illegal exploitation and smuggling of resources that run on transnational criminal networks within East Africa. Nonetheless, EARF should take advantage of the endorsement of the African Union and the international community to rally for fiscal and technical support. Most importantly, the regional force must seek to enhance its credibility through active combat, professionalism, and protection of civilians as this will define the trajectory of support it will earn from the international community.



Photo Credit: Nile Post

The East African Community (EAC) efforts to stabilise peace in Eastern DRC will face hurdles due to the complexity of the regional and international factors at play. The East African Regional Force (EARF) deployment is unprecedented and will encounter challenges in its mandate, financing, composition, and the interests of great powers.

There are a lot of grey areas in the EARF mandate. Other than Rwanda, EAC states never ratified the mutual defence cooperation agreement. Yet, DRC is a member of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Brigade, whose Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) is operating alongside the UN

Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). Given that most EAC states (other than Tanzania) are members of the East African Standby Force (EASF), the deployment of EARF is likely to compound the regional security architecture. While some EAC states, such as Kenya and Uganda, have bilateral interventions in DRC, their military doctrines differ and this could easily compromise the overall goal of achieving peace and stability in Eastern DRC. Evidence of parallel military interventions exists. For instance, as FIB (which Tanzania contributes troops to) disengages from active combat and relegates fighting to the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC), Kenya and Uganda have adopted an active combat doctrine against the rebels.



Photo Credit: Daily Maverick





The EARF mandate will also be haunted by the underlying inter-state tensions and the perceived war crimes of Uganda and Rwanda from 1993 to 2003 peacekeeping missions. There are active contestations between DRC and Rwanda even as unresolved issues among Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi remain. In particular, the grievances related to war crimes of Rwanda and Uganda continue to limit popular support for EARF among DRC citizens. Moreover, the fact that Uganda has ignored the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling to pay reparations to DRC has heightened international concerns about the conduct of their peacekeeping operations and civilian protection. This is mainly because some potential EARF states are under autocratic leadership, and yet there seems to be no legal framework to guide their operations in DRC.

EARF will also have to manage the festering inter-ethnic genocide rhetoric. While Kinshasa is accusing Kigali of financing, arming and training M23 (a resurgent rebel group), ethnic cleansing rhetoric is simmering in the Great Lakes region. Tutsis—who reside in DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi—are being targeted by ethnic extremists claiming that peace can only be achieved if Tutsi invaders are eliminated. There is increasing hostility to Rwandese nationals in DRC, and social media warfare matches the same. Community leaders, rebel groups leaders, Congolese public figures and Congolese diaspora in Europe, North America and South Africa are at the forefront of these campaigns that seek to liberate DRC from foreign invasion. The urge to destroy Tutsi's Hima empire is gaining ground, and the entry of Rwandan troops through the EARF contingent could easily escalate the inter-community tensions in the three states.

EARF will also face challenges in getting adequate financial support despite the diplomatic and political support from the international community for the Inter-Congolese (DRC) consultations. Global 'peace and security' finances are focused on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Meanwhile EAC economies are struggling with debt, rising cost of food, fuel and general inflation.

The DRC conflict is one of the most neglected humanitarian crises of this century, yet there have been increased calls to wind down MONUSCO and reconfigure the FIB to cut peacekeeping costs. EARF is coming into a heavily funded and over-politicised peacekeeping space, yet the regional security architecture continues to be underfunded. So far, Uganda has increased its defence budget as part of its commitment to the pacification of Eastern DRC. However, EARF will need external support to make the deployment a reality.

The DRC conflict is one of the most internationalised conflicts with external donors who 'support' the peace operations having vested interests in DRC and the region. Peace in DRC does not necessarily align with the economic interests of some great powers as their multinationals have been implicated in the economic plunder of mineral resources and have deliberately undermined the formalisation of the extractive sector. The escalation of violence in 2021/2022 stems from the old powers being edged out by new entrants who want DRC'S wealth and are ready to equally finance conflict in the region.



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