GREAT LAKES REGION:  
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MILITANCY, EBOLA, AND BORDER CLOSURES POSE NEW COMMERCIAL RISKS

Ongoing security, political, and humanitarian challenges in the Great Lakes have prompted a series of meetings among regional heads over the past few months with the most recent being a summit between Angola, the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda in July. We examine the issues that likely prompted this recent gathering and the wider impact they are having on the region.

On 12 July 2019, the heads of state of Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Uganda attended a one-day Quadripartite Summit in Luanda. The purpose of this meeting was to address “security along the borders between the three countries [DRC, Rwanda and Uganda] and relations between Rwanda and Uganda,” according to Angolan President João Lourenço. Following a closed-door session that lasted roughly three hours, a joint communiqué was released that indicated the four presidents would “prioritise the resolution of any dispute between their respective countries by peaceful means,” and that Angola and the DRC had been mandated to help solve the Kampala-Kigali impasse. Little further information has since been provided.
The meeting itself was nevertheless significant, as it comes at a time when the Great Lakes is facing major security, political, and humanitarian challenges. We explore the main concerns that could have prompted this summit and their impact on businesses and civilians in the region, with a specific focus on border closures.

The proliferation of armed groups in the DRC

One of the key areas of discussion focused around armed non-state actors. Just a few weeks prior to the summit, Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi hosted two important gatherings aimed at addressing this issue. In Kinshasa in May, Lourenço, Tshisekedi, and Rwandan President Paul Kagame held their first-ever tripartite meeting to discuss security in the region with a particular aim of uprooting non-state armed groups in the DRC, under their so-called ‘Congo-Angola-Rwanda’ axis. Thereafter, in June, Tshisekedi hosted a meeting of the Chiefs of the Intelligence and Security Services from the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania to develop an understanding of the security situation in eastern DRC and to agree on actions to neutralise these groups.

Violence and the proliferation of armed groups in eastern DRC is a major concern for all regional players. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 140 armed groups were active in Congo’s North Kivu and South Kivu provinces, which border Rwanda and Uganda, last year. Assailants – including security forces – reportedly killed more than 883 civilians, abducted nearly 1,400 others and displaced tens of thousands in the region over this period. Such violence has also had an enormous ripple effect across the border as well: Rwanda and Uganda are estimated to have hosted 75,740 and 312,691 refugees and asylum seekers respectively from the DRC over the course of 2018.

The ADF and P5 militant groups

The local militant groups known as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and Platform Five (P5) would have been key talking points at the Quadripartite Summit (See DRC/UGANDA: ISLAMIST INSURGENCY POSES A GROWING RISK OF COMMERCIAL DISRUPTION).

The ADF, established over 20 years ago as a merger of Ugandan rebel groups, is believed to have carried out close to 100 attacks around Beni in 2018 in which over 200 people were killed, earning it the title of the deadliest armed group in the DRC. Moreover, the ADF reportedly relies on a sophisticated recruiting network that sources fighters from Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania, and even South Africa and further managed to establish tentative links with Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East in 2019. In response to a wave of attacks in the DRC by the ADF last year, Uganda announced the deployment of approximately 4,000 troops along its border to prevent infiltration. Both the DRC and Uganda have also previously both decried the links
between ADF and IS and have attempted to shore up US counterterrorism support in the fight against the group (See DRC: REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE FOR AN ISLAMIC STATE CALIPHATE PROVINCE IN THE CONGO).

The P5 rebel group would have been another hotly contested topic at the summit. The P5 is a coalition of Rwandan opposition political organizations including the Amahoro People’s Congress (AMAHORO-PC), the Forces démocratiques unifiées-Inkingi (FDUINKINGI), the People’s Defence Pact-Imzani (PDP-IMANZI), the Social Party-Imberakuri (PSIMBERAKURI) and the Rwanda National Congress (RNC).

In December 2018, a UN Group of Experts Report found that the military wing of a coalition of Rwandan opposition groups, known as the P5, had amassed 400 recruits under the leadership of former Ugandan senior officer and Rwandan Army Chief of Staff, General Kayumba Nyamwasa - currently exiled to South Africa. In 2011, Nyamwasa, a former head of the Rwandan military, was sentenced in absentia to 24 years in prison after he was convicted of multiple charges including terrorism, genocidal denial and crimes against humanity. The stated aim of the P5 is to “liberate Rwanda” and Nyamwasa is staunchly anti-Kagame. Moreover, reports have indicated that the P5 receives support (weapons, ammunition, food, medicine, boots and uniforms) from Burundi and Uganda. In response to these developments, as well as the continued threat posed by the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) that is also operational in eastern DRC, Rwanda has reportedly deployed its own Special Forces to South Kivu. In doing so, it allegedly supports local Mai-Mai militia as well as an anti-Burundian rebel group, known as the Red Tabara, in incursions against the P5. Such inter-state meddling on all sides widens the potential for conflict not just in the DRC but the Great Lakes region as a whole.

Rwanda and Uganda stalemate

Another major discussion point at the Quadripartite Summit would have been the ongoing stalemate between Rwanda and Uganda, which is linked to instability in eastern DRC. Formerly close allies, tensions between Kagame and Museveni have escalated once again over the past six months. The aforementioned UN Group of Experts Report in which it was revealed that regional actors – notably Burundi
and Rwanda - were propping up the P5 helped trigger this stalemate.

Following the release of the report, Rwanda decided to unilaterally close its Galuna Border Post with Uganda in February 2019, accusing Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni of harbouring fighters associated with the P5 and of detaining and torturing its citizens. Uganda has repeatedly denied the claims but it, in turn, alleges that Rwanda has deployed spies to the country to undermine Museveni’s government. Rwanda has also responded by issuing a travel advisory warning its citizens not to travel to Uganda where it claims that 900 Rwandans have been deported without consular support or due process and that 106 individuals remain in detention. Just prior to the latest summit the border was re-opened in June; however, it was shut again after 12 days and remained closed at the time of writing.

In response to the ongoing dispute, three civil society groups on behalf of communities along the border filed a complaint with the East African Court of Justice demanding repatriations from Uganda and Rwanda for their losses on 21 June. The lawsuit asks the court to issue a permanent injunction against both governments to keep them from closing the border and preventing the free movement of people and trade. The Ugandan government has not responded to the lawsuit but has advised locals to find alternative routes. However, as recently noted by the Minister of Trade and Industry, while routes via the DRC were previously proposed, “now there is the challenge of Ebola”.

Ebola crisis

Ebola likely featured as an additional talking point at
the summit in Luanda. The outbreak, first confirmed in the DRC in August 2018, has claimed around 1,604 lives and is centred on the North Kivu and Ituri provinces, which border Rwanda, Uganda, and South Sudan. Outside of the DRC, around two dozen ‘active cases’ have been caught at border points since the outbreak began and there were three fatal cases reported in Uganda in June. Rumours of a recent case in Rwanda have been denied (See DRC: RESHUFFLING THE POLITICAL CARDS).

The local situation escalated on 14 July, when the first confirmed case was reported in Goma – a major urban centre through which tens of thousands of people travel daily. In response to the geographic spread of the disease, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the epidemic a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). The WHO noted the declaration was in recognition of “possible increased national and regional risks and the need for intensified and coordinated action to manage them”. The WHO concluded that national and regional risk levels remain “high”.

Efforts to address the outbreak, however, have been hampered by what aid officials describe as a “perfect storm” of regional insecurity in eastern DRC. Not only do local armed groups pose a challenge to aid workers in all affected areas – prompting medical teams to travel with armed escorts and reinforce clinics with sandbags – but widespread false narratives have even prompted locals to attack centres as well. In June, for example, a driver working with the Ebola response team in Beni was left in a critical condition after angry crowds hurled rocks at him and set his vehicle on fire.

**INSIGHT**

The issues that likely prompted the summit - and the gatherings just prior - together pose an unprecedented challenge to both regional governments and, indeed, civilians and businesses in the Great Lakes. While there is a high risk of injury and death to all entities in eastern DRC as a result of armed rebel groups, we explore the far-reaching and even deadly impact of border closures as a result of these issues. We explored similar issues in our Threats To African Borders analysis series (See THREATS TO BORDERS: AFRICAN MILITANCY AND TERRORISM).

The ongoing stalemate between Ugandan and Rwanda has already significantly-impacted the economies in both countries. Uganda’s Ministry of Trade and Industry recently noted that its exports to Rwanda decreased from about USD 660 million prior to the closure to around USD 203 million in June. Rwanda, in turn, has reported a loss of USD 104 million over the same period. Notably, the main route for Rwandan exports - along with goods from eastern DRC and Burundi - is through Uganda towards the Kenyan port of Mombasa. Our recent special report on supply chain risks in Africa mentions further commercial implications (See SPECIAL FEATURE: SUPPLY CHAIN RISK IN AFRICA).

The border closure has also severely impacted the movement of people. Indicative of this, several Ugandan schools reported a drastic decrease in its student numbers at the start of the second term, as Rwandan learners were prevented from crossing the border. Similarly, an estimated 30,000 Ugandans work and study in Rwanda. Locals have further been caught in the crosshairs. In May, Rwandan soldiers crossed the border and shot dead an alleged Rwandan clothes trader and a Ugandan civilian who tried to intervene on his behalf. This was the second such incident since February in which locals have been killed for crossing the border, highlighting the vulnerability of the situation.

At the time of writing, the borders into eastern DRC remained open and businesses were operational despite severe security and health threats. In response to the geographic spread of Ebola, the African Union Centre for Disease Control and Prevention recently appealed to the international community and member states in Africa not to impose restrictions on travel to anyone going in or out of the DRC, claiming this would hamper their efforts to administer aid. While free movement still stands, Rwanda has nevertheless warned its citizens not to travel to any areas affected by the outbreak across the border, including Goma. Should the outbreak continue to escalate or expand in reach, some restrictions on movement in and out of the east is expected.