

100426 D R Congo - MONUC to leave the DRC, mission unaccomplished

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Summary & Comment: While the United Nations peacekeeping mission (MONUC) is planning to withdraw from DR Congo in three years, the government wants MONUC to leave the country by September 2011, driven by its political interest rather than peace and stability in the country. The situation in Eastern Congo remains fragile with rebels and other foreign armies fighting government forces in Eastern Congo. What is really best for the people of DR Congo? MUB

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With celebrations of the 50th anniversary of independence coming up in June this year, as well as important elections next year, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) government is keen for the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission, known as MONUC, to start withdrawing within the next few months. They want MONUC out of the mission area by September 2011. This announcement of the DRC's desire for a MONUC withdrawal came as a surprise to both Congolese as well as the international community. Congolese rebels and foreign armed groups are still fighting the Congolese army, Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) across much of the east, and parts of the north of the DRC and gunmen from all sides are still committing gross human rights abuses, especially rape.

The international community believes that the situation is still extremely fragile and it is not the time to leave. The withdrawal must rather be based on achieving certain exit objectives rather than based on political rhetoric. The Congolese government is of the opinion that their military and police will be able to deal with the security situation when MONUC leaves. However, MONUC should continue to play a vital role in creating security while the Congolese government builds up its own capacity to protect civilians. A UN technical team recently prepared a draft drawdown plan in close consultation with MONUC. The proposed plan envisaged that the withdrawal of the MONUC force could be completed over a period of three years, if the security situation continued to improve and on the basis of steady progress towards the accomplishment of the critical tasks.

The first critical task should be to neutralise the threat posed by the Forces démocratiques pour la libération du Rwanda (FDLR) and the Lord Resistance Army (LRA). The completion of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of all pending caseloads of Congolese combatants throughout the country, including those belonging to FARDC and foreign armed groups, as well as the provision of support to the national reintegration process for former combatants and residual Congolese armed groups is equally critical. This process includes non-military and military measures carried out in compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law, as well as refugee laws.

The second critical task should be to build a professional FARDC core force, which the mission considered could be up to 20 battalions. This core force should be complemented by a similar core police capacity, which can progressively assume law and order enforcement responsibilities in full respect of international human rights law.

The third critical task is the establishment of effective state authority in the areas freed from armed groups, in particular along the strategic axes in the eastern provinces which are identified in the Stabilisation and Reconstruction Plan, in order to facilitate the sustainable return and reintegration of refugees and internally displaced persons. In this regard, the capacity of the public administration, policing, judicial and correctional systems in the DRC needs to be developed to a sustainable level to allow the independent monitoring of human rights, contribute to ending impunity and allow the establishment of an effective prison system fully respecting international standards.

MONUC has briefed the UN Security Council on a possible exit strategy that has to be discussed with the Congolese Government to get approval on a way forward. The plan is based on an assumption that the situation improves over the next three years and the critical areas ensuring stability are met. According to the plan, it is recommended that MONUC would have no direct military role outside of the three conflict-affected provinces in the east, and Kinshasa. Consequently, in the first phase of the drawdown, which could start immediately, MONUC could withdraw its troops from FARDC Defence Zone 1 (which covers Bas-Congo, Kinshasa (Province), Equateur and Bandundu). MONUC would however maintain a small military presence of up to a battalion in Kinshasa for the protection of UN personnel and facilities.

The Mission's reserve force, based in the east, would retain the capacity to respond, in extremis, to protect UN personnel and assets and, if requested by the Government, to support FARDC and the National Police in provinces beyond the Kivus and Orientale.

Phase two of the MONUC drawdown could start in the second half of 2010 and involve the complete withdrawal of MONUC forces from Kasai Oriental, Kasai Occidental and Katanga, completing the withdrawal from FARDC Defence Zones 1 and 2.

Phase three would involve a steady reduction of troops in FARDC Defence Zone 3, namely Maniema, Orientale, North and South Kivu Provinces, as the ongoing military operations are successfully concluded, effective state authority is established in areas freed from the armed groups and the build-up of an FARDC core force progressed.

Phase four could bring MONUC force levels down to some 5,000 troops when a core FARDC force became operational. The full withdrawal of the MONUC military forces could be completed once the Government and the UN agreed that the conditions for complete withdrawal without risking renewed instability were in place. The planned fourth phase is possibly going to be debated as to timelines because the Congolese government wants MONUC to complete its withdrawal by September 2011. However, it will be in the interest of the DRC and the region if MONUC stays until the exit criteria are met.

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