

Strategies for Restoring the Mediatorial Role of the Kenya Military Contingents in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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ABSTRACT:- The exit of the Kenyan Military Contingents from the Democratic Republic of Congo was associated with the DRC encountering multiple stability and security challenges, including the rebel groups avowing to retake the vacated regions. In helping address these challenges, this study established that the DRC could be alleviated by restoring the mediatorial role of the Kenya Military Contingents. Building from this premise, the study, from a qualitative research approach, explored the strategies for restoring the Kenyan military contingents' mediatorial role in the DRC. Particularly, the study utilized secondary data from existing written materials and primary data from interviews. The study findings showed that strategies that could restore the mediatorial role of the KENCON troops comprised leveraging regional and international partnerships, strengthening diplomatic channels and trust, capacity building for peace and security, and finally, offering humanitarian support. Therefore, the study concluded that the DRC could benefit from restoring the Kenyan contingent's mediatorial role. Finally, the study recommended Kenya maintains a neutral position in acting as an arbiter, mediator, and facilitator of conflict resolution and peace building in the DRC.

Keywords: *diplomacy, early exit, KENCON troops, mediator*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been subjected to prevalent violence since the Portuguese arrived in the 15th century. Then, King Leopold's, Belgian colonization of the DRC, led to the death of approximately ten million as well as multiple mutilations and atrocities [1]. Similarly, DRC's armed conflict between 1993 and 2003 was among the most substantial post-Cold War with numerous consequences and dimensions. This conflict underwent a rancorous cycle of violence to the extent of being named the biggest humanitarian catastrophe of the early 21st century, with the war-related deaths reaching several million. Approximately, between 1998 and 2007, 5.4 million died during the humanitarian crisis and more than 45,000 individuals continued dying every month [2]. The conflict was also attributed to women rape, extreme child abuse, forced displacement of millions, and other violent acts [2].

A similar trend is widespread in contemporary DRC. Particularly, the current DRC conflict is intricate with multiple differing relations, issues, and actors to the degree that it is challenging to comprehend exactly who wants what, when, how, and where [1]. Once more in 2022, violence upsurged in the DRC following increased battles between more than 100 armed groups and security forces in the east of the nation with both the Congolese army and M23 accusing each other of initiating the clashes that advanced into the crisis [3].

In helping mitigate the crisis, Kenyan military contingents deployed on 21 November, 2022 in the eastern DRC under the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) [4]. This force was tasked with fighting against M23 rebels that had seized a few areas in eastern DRC in the three most troubled regions of Ituri, South Kivu, and North Kivu [5]. The different contingents – Kenyan, Ugandan, and Burundian- were tasked with dissimilar missions. The Kenyan contingents concentrated on fighting against armed groups in the North Kivu region, where some of their colleagues were already entrenched in the UN force [6]. Besides fighting armed groups, their mandate also encompassed providing humanitarian relief, maintaining law and order, and supporting the Armed Forces of DRC (FARDC) in disarmament programs [7].

The forces recorded considerable attainments, among them being the armed groups' successful withdrawal to the defined cantonment regions and generating buffer zones in regions that were once taken over by the armed groups [7]. The forces were also involved in humanitarian aid programs that ensured the provision

of medical assistance, water, and food to the locals. However, after a year, following an East African Community summit, an official statement stated that the nation had decided against prolonging the regional force's mandate. The withdrawal deadline was then set on 8 December, 2023 [8]. As a result, Kenyan troops who had been working under the EACRF began leaving the DRC in early December [9]. However, the troops' exit came as the nation encountered a collection of stability issues and security challenges [10]. The M23, one of the eastern DRC rebel groups, further avowed to retake regions vacated by the troops following the exit [9]. In this light, the exit of the KENCON troops from the DRC could be linked to adverse outcomes including propagating violence within the eastern DRC, and as such, there is a need to explore strategies for restoring the mediatory role of the KENCON troops in the DRC.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Diplomacy is an essential part of any country in bettering its relationship with neighbouring or even other countries beyond their borders. In a way, good diplomatic relations enable countries to strengthen their own foreign objectives. Strong bilateral relations of a country have a positive impact on it standing in the global arena. While diplomacy is mostly used to serve the interests of individual governments, the end result is a more peaceful international community.

In general, the term diplomacy may be used to describe a situation of someone dealing with another person or difficult situation with skill, in a way that creates a peaceful solution without offending or upsetting them. It is this notion that is often applied in situations where countries are dealing with one another [11]. There are several instruments that guide the process of maintaining diplomatic relations between countries. One of such instruments is the Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations of 1961 [12]. However, the nature of the current crises such as the one feared to occur between Kenya and the DR Congo is typically of the nature of bilateral diplomacy [13]. This is the kind of diplomacy that occurs between two countries and officially involves foreign ministries and heads of state.

In the present days, this kind of diplomacy is increasingly taking the shape of other government departments, from trade to culture and defence engaging in bilateral negotiations and cooperation. Alternatively, there is the option of use of diplomatic missions [14]. These appear to be rather permanent structures for bilateral relations and which conduct bilateral diplomacy through non-resident ambassadors (DIPLO Academy website). They may also do so through multilateral centres. This may be maintained through meetings by heads of state or summits for that matter. In this study therefore, the investigations sought to establish the most viable ways in which Kenya can support the DR Congo in their quest for a peaceful eastern Congo region by way of deployment of the Kenya Defence Forces while at the same time not interfering with their diplomatic relations.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was purely qualitative. The researcher purposively chose 23 respondents from a target population of the Kenyan Ministry of Foreign Affairs personnel, DRC embassy personnel, International Relations academicians from higher learning institutions and political analysts, and Kenyans residing in the DRC. From these target groups, five respondents were chosen from the four groups: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, embassy staff, academicians, and Kenyans residing in DRC. From one group, political analysts, three respondents were chosen. Thus, a sum of 23 respondents were chosen to form the sample population.

Primary sources comprising an interview guide and secondary instruments including a document analysis guide formed the data collection tools. Secondary data was acquired from collaborative media reports, newspapers, and published research papers. Data from the secondary and primary sources were analysed thematically and presented in narrative format.

Among the ethical considerations for the research was that respondents to the research were to be respected and thus their informed consent became vital in this research process. As such, the researcher aimed to work within the confines of this consent. Before engaging any respondent in data collection, the purpose of the study was described to them to allay any fears that the respondent may have. If any recording and photos were taken during the interview, this was to be done via participant consent. Thus, the research required honest information from the respondents to enhance the attainment of research objectives.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Notably, Kenya is a key supporter of UN peacekeeping efforts internationally. Kenya has over the years remained receptive to requests to contribute to peace operations based on the consent of the parties in the host state. Kenya has however remained cautious of involvement in peace operations that have had an enforcement element – the notable exception remains the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which Kenyan forces joined in 2012 (Ministry of Défense). But in the case of Kenya and DRC, the study established that Kenya could restore its mediatory role using various approaches under the framework of KENCON, Kenya could adopt a multifaceted approach that involves diplomacy and practical action.

i. Leveraging regional and international partnerships

Kenya has been involved in peacekeeping missions before. Examples here include Sudan and even Somalia. In these missions, Kenya has gathered adequate experience. At the same time, it has earned the trust of other neighbours in the region. Kenya has also forged several partnerships both regionally and internationally. Accordingly, one of the ways in which Kenya could restore its mediatory role of KENCON in the DRC is work with other like-minded neighbouring countries and organs such as AU, UN and EAC to ensure that the peace-keeping efforts are supported regionally and internationally. In this regard, since UN reports have documented that the perpetuation of conflict in the Kivu and Ituri regions is a strategic aim of both Uganda and Rwanda, which are competing to maximize influence in eastern Congo and plunder its natural resources, Kenya could intervene in such a way of engaging with these countries – through the auspices of, say, AU to chart more acceptable and ways of legitimately getting to acquire such resources in more sustainable ways. This could be through bilateral trade arrangements or through signing of peace packs. Given its position of neutrality, Kenya could position itself as an arbiter in these matters [15]

This will not only smoothen the bilateral relations between the DRC and such neighbouring countries but will also enhance Kenya's image in the peace-keeping equation. This is likely to enhance the legitimacy of Kenya's involvement in the whole arrangement of regional peacekeeping efforts. This will not only be a regional legitimacy but also a multilateral one. In other words, there is a need to coordinate and align the mediation process to the international peace processes and not to duplicate such initiatives as carried out at the international level.

ii. Strengthening diplomatic channels and trust

At the moment, Kenya is already actively participating in the East African Community (EAC)-led process on the restoration of peace in the eastern DRC with its retired President Uhuru Kenyatta as the Facilitator of the process. Notably, one of the strategies being applied but which still poses a challenge in resolving the DRC conflict is the one of building trust between the various fighting elements and governments, as well as the affected communities. In other words, Kenya must be seen to be actively collaborating on conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts can build trust and stability in the region. In this regard, it is encouraging that Kenya's involvement in the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) and the Nairobi Process is a clear demonstration of its commitment to peace in the DRC.

Accordingly, given the strategic position of Kenya in this process, it can take advantage of this to intensify the Nairobi Process that leads to confidence-building. To yield better results, this process should harness ideas from both the political and the military tracks. However, this will only succeed if the East African Regional Force (EAC-RF) continues to enjoy the confidence of all parties and therefore, its role as an inter-positional army must be re-emphasized and accepted by all parties.

Besides such diplomatic processes, Kenya could also maintain and sustain regular high-level visits and discussions with DRC leaders in ways that can foster mutual understanding and cooperation. A good example is the recent visit to the DRC by Kenya's Prime Cabinet Secretary; Mr. Musalia Mudavadi as a Special Envoy of Kenya's President and which resulted in key agreements aimed at enhancing bilateral relations.

In all these, however, Kenya must try and maintain its position as a neutral mediator in the affairs of the DRC without any vested interests. In this way, Kenya will earn the trust of all parties that are involved in this conflict including the DRC and any other stakeholders. On another level, Kenya could even organize some informal meetings and invite the warring factions in Congo to air their grievances. This could be coupled with humanitarian support as well as public declarations of solidarity with DRC.

iii. Capacity building for peace and security

In the foregoing discussions, it was noted that the DRC does not seem to have the capacity to keep the country peaceful. This is partly because of the size of the country relative to the ability of the central government to exert control in all its parts. Secondly, there is the problem of inter-ethnic animosity and conflict in the affected areas. Of course, there was also the issue of the neighbours interfering with the internal affairs of the DRC as well as coming in under the disguise of supporting the DRC in security matters yet pursuing their interests. However, assuming that such would not apply to the situation of Kenya and the DRC, and given the problem of inter-community conflicts in the DRC, Kenya could offer technical assistance in areas such as intelligence gathering, logistics, and communication. This can help improve the operational capabilities of Congolese security forces.

Other areas of support include Kenya facilitating community engagement initiatives that promote dialogue and reconciliation among different communities in the DRC. This can help address the root causes of conflict and build trust among communities. As this is happening, it will paint Kenya in a good light in terms of involvement in peace efforts thereby fostering long-term good relations.

In general, Kenya can restore its mediatory role by supporting efforts to de-escalate current tensions and to support dialogue processes among countries of the region, notably the Nairobi process and the Angolan mediation process that are already underway but seem far from implementation.

iv. **Offering humanitarian support**

By enhancing its focus on humanitarian support to the DRC, Kenya can significantly contribute to peace-building in the DRC while reinforcing its reputation as a neutral and stabilizing force. This approach would not only address immediate needs but also lay a foundation for lasting peace and stability.

This could take the approach of providing humanitarian aid to the internally displaced persons in the affected regions of DRC. Other than demonstrating solidarity with DRC, it will help build goodwill and create conditions conducive to further negotiations for a peaceful existence. Practically, given the high number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in eastern DRC, Kenya can work with regional and international humanitarian organizations to facilitate the safe relocation and reintegration of displaced individuals. Providing secure supply routes for aid distribution, as KENCON has done by opening main supply routes like RN2, can ensure that essential resources reach affected communities. This logistical support builds trust among civilians, who may otherwise feel abandoned by international forces.

Alternatively, Kenya could undertake building partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the DRC to enhance Kenya's effectiveness in addressing urgent needs on the ground. Local organizations often have better insights into community-specific needs and cultural sensitivities, which are crucial for targeted aid delivery. This would include the provision of medical services to address both physical and psychological trauma among civilians, who have faced violence from various armed groups but who are now in IDP camps. By collaborating with these agencies, Kenya can ensure aid is culturally appropriate and locally relevant, strengthening its mediator role and credibility.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's objective was to explore the strategies for restoring the mediatory role of the KENCON troops in the DRC. The pinpointed strategies that could restore the mediatory role of the KENCON troops comprised leveraging regional and international partnerships, strengthening diplomatic channels and trust, capacity building for peace and security, and finally, offering humanitarian support. Therefore, the study concluded that the DRC could benefit from restoring the Kenyan contingent's mediatory role.

The study made several recommendations based on the findings. The first included Kenya functioning as an arbiter and working with the DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda through the auspices of the AU to plot more acceptable and legitimate manners of acquiring natural resources in more sustainable ways. Second, the study recommended Kenya maintain its position as a neutral mediator in sustaining regular high-level visits and discussions with DRC leaders and organizing informal meetings with the warring DRC factions to air their grievances. Third, the study recommended that Kenya offer technical assistance in intelligence gathering, logistics, and communication to enhance the Congolese security forces. Kenya could also provide support by reinforcing community engagement initiatives that promote reconciliation and dialogue among various DRC communities to help build trust among them and tackle the root conflict causes. The last recommendation entailed Kenya working with regional and international humanitarian organizations to aid the safe relocation and reintegration of internally displaced persons in the DRC, supplying routes for aid distribution, and working with local organizations to offer medical services to address the physical and psychological trauma of the displaced individuals.

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