

DR Congo leader has problematic rival

Written by reporter

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Congolese rebels were to meet Wednesday amid an open challenge to the leadership of Laurent Nkunda in a split likely to complicate the search for a solution to the conflict in eastern DR Congo.

A move to oust Nkunda was launched on Monday by chief of staff Bosco Ntaganda, but their relative positions remained unchanged ahead of Wednesday's emergency meeting of the rebels' high command.

Ntaganda signed a statement that Nkunda had been dismissed as leader of the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) for "poor leadership" and "bad governance". The CNDP later denied that. [Save](#)

UN peacekeepers were alerted to the possibility of clashes between rival rebel factions, but no fighting was reported after apparent efforts to lower tensions inside the rebel camp.

"There's little chance it will degenerate," said Stewart Scott, Nkunda's biographer. "The situation seems to have settled. Everyone now wants to calm things down."

Ntaganda was accused of "high treason" for his affront to Nkunda, but despite this he remains the rebel chief of staff, the CNDP spokesman said Wednesday ahead of the meeting of the rebel high command.

"We have to examine the question, the implications, the circumstances which have caused the chief of staff to take such a position," said Lieutenant-Colonel Seraphin Mirindi.

The rebels' woes were being regarded with a mixture of suspicion and derision by the government in Kinshasa.

"If this malaise can change the nature of this armed movement into a political party, that would be significant," government spokesman Lambert Mende said.

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"But if it's a manoeuvre to create a diversion, it will fail," he said, adding that it mattered little to Kinshasa who was leader.

"We are not fighting the CNDP because it is being led by Nkunda, but because it violates the laws of the republic, is killing populations and has caused the exodus of thousands of displaced people," said Mende.

On Tuesday, Ntaganda consulted with officers loyal to him at his headquarters in the Masisi region east of the Nord-Kivu capital Goma.

Nkunda was expected to chair Wednesday's delayed meeting of the high command in Rutshuru, north of Goma, to discuss the general's fate.

Nicknamed "The Terminator", Ntaganda had a previous scrape with Nkunda last October, when his signature appeared on a statement announcing that the rebel leader had died from a heart attack.

The authors of the statement remain unidentified, and Ntaganda was untouched. But this time, there seems little doubt about his open defiance of Nkunda, who founded the CNDP in 2006.

The general has become a focal point for internal opposition to Nkunda, an ethnic Tutsi.

Ntaganda, a hardliner, has the support of the Bagogwe Tutsi clan from the mountainous Masisi region, who have tired of the dominance of Nkunda's Rutshuru-based Tutsis in the rebel leadership.

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His move against Nkunda may have several motives, according to a UN source: including a military distrust of the increasing role of civilians in the CNDP leadership, and hostility to a strategy of greater openness toward rival Hutus.

But according to a rebel officer who declined to be named, it could also be sparked by anger over the blame being apportioned to Ntaganda, even by members of the CNDP itself, for the massacre of more than 150 civilians in a rebel attack on the town of Kiwanja north of Goma in November.

Ntaganda is already facing indictment by the International Criminal Court over his recruitment of child soldiers in northeastern Ituri province in 2002-2003,

Furthermore, Ntaganda has apparently never hidden his resentment over Nkunda's decision to halt last autumn's rebel offensive within a few kilometres of its greatest prize, the city of Goma on the shores of Lake Kivu, after government forces had fled in panic.

The rebels remain on the outskirts of Goma after the offensive which steam-rolled through a large swathe of government-held territory in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, which displaced more than 250,000 people.

Peacekeepers from the UN Mission in DR Congo (MONUC) have since bolstered defences in the city along with a restructured government force.