

Kabila sends troops to tackle Tutsi unrest in Goma

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GOMA, DR Congo, Sept 17 (AFP) - President Laurent Kabila has deployed troops in Goma in the northeast of his Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to smother seething unrest which threatens to spill over into open conflict.

Clashes between Kabila's army and the very armed Tutsis who helped it topple the dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko last May are costing at least two lives every day, according to an army source in the town.

Almost a year ago Kabila used Goma near the border with Tutsi-dominated Rwanda as the initial main base for his uprising against Marshal Mobutu, who died this month in exile in Morocco, but his forces subsequently swept westwards more than 1,000 kilometres (600 miles) to Kinshasa.

The sheer number of gun-toting troops now deployed in the powder-keg town has led to fears of an esca-

lation to a major conflict, according to western and local sources.

Disgruntled Tutsis who initially formed the backbone of Kabila's drive for power in the seven-month civil war are blamed for increasing violence and looting, while other ethnic groups have been embroiled in the discontent which has gradually replaced the euphoria of the early days of the new regime.

"Look at the street. Its six o'clock, people are in a hurry to get home. When night falls, there's nobody out," a resident told an AFP correspondent this week.

"It's worse than in Mobutu's time. I twice fought Mobutu's soldiers who wanted to rob me. But now, if you don't do what they want, the soldiers shoot," he said.

Many of the armed Tutsis have gone on looting rampages of businesses and private homes in recent weeks, according to local people and

western sources in the town.

"Since November, they have been crossing the frontier with televisions and computers. At first we thought they had come to liberate the country but their behaviour was offensive," said another local.

On Tuesday, a western official said that the Tutsis were probably unhappy at not being rewarded for their efforts during the war. "The Tutsi soldiers who fought on Kabila's side are very bitter. Some are looting houses and shops."

Marcel Balingene, political advisor to Goma's governor, dismissed the stories as "disinformation" but conceded there was a security problem, which he linked to "uncontrolled elements of the army" and the surfeit of weapons and ammunition.

Though the town is awash with troops, their allegiance is unclear. Tutsis have clashed repeatedly with soldiers wearing the same uniform, and tension is high.

Local authorities have changed the police uniform to pale green to make them more distinguishable for

the population at a loss as to where it should turn for help as anarchy takes a grip on Goma.

A humanitarian official welcomed the move, but said the situation remains volatile.

"The only ones we recognised before were the gendarmes with the yellow helmets. As for the rest, police, soldiers and rebels all look alike – young men in military uniform."

Other humanitarian sources reported recently that the unrest had forced an estimated 8,000 ethnic Tutsis from the Masisi region to flee their villages.

Lauchlan Munro, principal administrator for the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) for the area, told AFP that the Tutsis arrived two weeks ago in Goma after witnessing big troop movements.

A DR Congo human rights group, AZADHO, said earlier this month that 2,000 people had been killed since July in clashes in the region between Kabila's government troops and the local Mai-Mai ethnic group.

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