



BIG BROTHER

DRC seeks US help with Rwanda and the M23 rebels

By Julian Pecquet

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Rwandan President Paul Kagame and his Congolese counterpart, Felix Tshisekedi, in September 2019. © Village Urugwiro

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is turning to Washington for help in its escalating conflict with neighbouring Rwanda.

President Felix Tshisekedi's government has launched a multi-pronged strategy to get the US congress and Joe Biden administration to help push back against its neighbour's alleged meddling in eastern Congo, according to public documents and interviews with key players.

Efforts include building the case for the US to designate the *Mouvement du 23 Mars* (M23) insurgency as a terrorist group, asking the state department to investigate Rwanda's alleged support for the group and pressing the US to improve its diplomatic presence in the region.

“We’re trying to say, look, do you guys really want to deal with this issue?” says Joseph Szlavik, a former George H.W. Bush administration official whose Washington firm Scribe Strategies and Advisors signed a \$50,000-a-month lobbying contract with Tshisekedi’s government in March 2021. “You have to get people appointed here because if you’re going to address the issue, you have to have boots on the ground.”

Bad blood

The ramped-up campaign comes amid rapidly deteriorating diplomatic relations between the DRC and Rwanda in recent weeks. The DRC summoned the Rwandan ambassador and suspended RwandAir flights to the DRC late last month. The government also paraded what it said were two Rwandan soldiers who were detained while said to be supporting M23.

Rwanda denies backing the Tutsi rebel group. Instead, it says the DRC is to blame for the bilateral tensions because of its alleged support for the *Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR), an ethnic Hutu group whose members include perpetrators of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

The state department has raised concerns about Rwanda’s alleged involvement, but so far it has stopped short of any punitive action.

“We are alarmed by reports of cross-border violence between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda, and the increasing tensions between those two countries,” state department spokesman Ned Price told reporters at his **press briefing** [<https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-june-14-2022/#post-352636-CONGO>] last week. “We’re deeply concerned by reports of Rwandan military personnel participating in this fighting.”

A Washington surge

The DRC’s outreach to Washington has surged in recent days as its hired guns scramble to get lawmakers’ attention ahead of the two-week Independence Day recess. Lobbyists have been contacting key house and senate staffers in charge of Africa policy to raise the alarm over the threat posed by M23.

Last week, **lobbying disclosure records** [<https://efile.fara.gov/docs/7070-Informational-Materials-20220621-3.pdf>] show, influence firm Ballard Partners emailed a senior staffer for senate foreign relations committee chairman Robert Menendez to ask for the senator’s help in dealing with Rwanda.

The Republican-led firm became a key foreign policy influencer under former president Donald Trump and has been adding on Democratic staff since Biden's election in 2020. It signed a \$75,000-per-month contract with the DRC in March 2021.

"Sure you are aware that yesterday M23 rebels seized control of Bunagana, a border town in DRC," Ballard lobbyist John O'Hanlon wrote to senior senate Africa staffer Heather Flynn on 14 June. "DRC officials are convinced that Rwanda aided M23 militants in the hostile take-over. Children killed, etc. Brutal."

O'Hanlon went on to write that "at the request of the DRC government," the firm has been "asked to inquire" if Menendez's committee would send a letter to the state department asking for an investigation into Rwanda's involvement.

"Would any public statements be plausible?? Any other thoughts you may have???" he wrote.

Sanctions threat

The decision to engage with Menendez was not random. Late last month, the New Jersey Democrat put Kigali on notice that it could face repercussions if found to be fomenting instability in eastern DRC.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee  

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Alarmed by reports that Rwanda is again supporting M23 rebels fomenting violence, attacking DRC troops, UN peacekeepers, and civilians. We must investigate and sanction those responsible.



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The warning came as US relations with Rwanda were already strained due to Rwandan President Paul Kagame's crackdown on domestic opponents, including the arrest of humanitarian hotelier turned opposition politician Paul Rusesabagina, whom the state department has determined is being "wrongfully detained".

Menendez's office did not respond to a request for comment.

Terrorist list

The DRC is also making the case that the state department should designate M23 as a terrorist group, Szlavik says. This would notably carry repercussions for any country - including Rwanda - found to be supporting the rebels.

DRC government spokesman Patrick Muyaya told Reuters last month that his country had already designated M23 as such, and Szlavik tells *The Africa Report* that the Congolese parliament is set to shortly being debating the designation.

"Remember, when you designate them, if someone's caught aiding and abetting, there's all kinds of rules about foreign assistance," he adds.

Defining threats

Retired diplomat J. Peter Pham, who served as special envoy for the Great Lakes region under President Trump, tells *The Africa Report* that a formal Congolese designation of M23 as a terrorist group could prove useful to US deliberations on the matter, if done right.

"I would say that would not be an unhelpful process for them to run because the word [terrorism] is tossed about and there's no doubt this is a group that has carried out reprehensible actions and caused a great deal of pain," Pham says. "But it's one thing to

throw around the word terrorist [and] it's another thing to define. And so if the national assembly takes it upon itself to define what they mean by this, and what are the objective criteria, I think that's a helpful conversation to have on a policy basis.”

Even then, Pham adds, whether M23 would meet the US criteria for a terrorism designation remains to be seen.

People power

In addition to the pressure campaign on Rwanda, the DRC's lobbyists are urging Washington to ramp up its diplomatic presence in the region.

Szlavik is encouraging the senate to quickly confirm Lucy Tamlin, the current US *chargé d'affaires* in Sudan, to replace ambassador Mike Hammer in the DRC as he takes over as special envoy for the Horn of Africa. Szlavik also urges the Biden administration to rapidly name a replacement for former ambassador to Rwanda Peter Vrooman, who left Kigali for Maputo in February.

And Szlavik says the state department should name a new special envoy for the Great Lakes after going without one since Pham left the post to take over as special envoy for the Sahel in March 2020.

“The administration,” Szlavik concludes, “has no ambassador, anointed or designated, for Rwanda, no special envoy for the Great Lakes. The ambassador is leaving DRC. Not good.”