



The Deployment of East African Community Forces in Eastern DR Congo

Social Media Monitoring

February 2023

Summary

This brief presents public sentiment expressed online towards the East African Community (EAC) forces in the Kivu provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Based on social data extracted from the Twitter and Facebook social media platforms using AI-powered software, this brief highlights that a significant majority of Kivu-based social media users who have engaged in online discussions on the EAC forces between 19 December 2022 and 17 January 2023 hold negative sentiments towards the regional force.

Context

The resurgence of the Rwanda-backed March 23 Movement (M23) rebel group in November 2021 and its unchecked advance towards the North Kivu capital city of Goma provoked a regional and humanitarian crisis as tens of thousands of people fled from the areas affected by the militia's presence.

To stabilise the deteriorating situation in eastern DRC, the EAC – an intergovernmental organisation composed of seven countries in the Great Lakes region of East Africa, including the DRC – decided in June 2022 during the Nairobi EAC summit to deploy a regional military force to the DRC. This force is composed of troops from the various EAC countries, with the exception of Rwanda, which is seen in Kinshasa as the principal architect behind M23's resurgence. Starting from August 2022 with the arrival of Burundian troops, which were followed by Kenyan and Ugandan troops later in November 2022, the EAC forces gradually deployed in eastern DRC. South Sudan has also pledged to send troops, but their arrival has been delayed.

Although its presence appears to have prevented the M23 rebels from attacking Goma, the EAC force in the DRC has been increasingly criticised as having fallen victim to regional geopolitics. Indeed, despite the agreement at the Luanda EAC summit in November 2022 that the regional force was to dislodge M23 from occupied Congolese territory if the armed group did not withdraw voluntarily, the EAC forces continue to refuse to engage militarily with the rebels as the latter continue to gain further territory. Moreover, rumours of the Ugandan military's support for the M23 rebels abound, not least because of the overt support for the rebel group shown on social media by the Ugandan president's son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, who is also a general in the Ugandan army. In addition, despite Kinshasa's resolve not to legitimise M23 as an actor in the DRC by refusing to negotiate directly with the group, EAC actors – including Kenya's former president, Uhuru Kenyatta, and the EAC force's commander, Major General Jeff Nyagah – have both met M23 leaders.



In this context, frustration has been growing among people in the eastern DRC over M23's continued presence there and the resulting prolonged humanitarian crisis, culminating in violent protests against the EAC in Goma and elsewhere on 18 January 2023.

Methodology

This brief analyses public sentiment expressed in North and South Kivu provinces towards the presence of the EAC forces. It is based on public social media data collected with the use of AI-powered software. This software is fed Boolean search queries in a process that allows the filtering of all the social data that mentioned the EAC forces or M23. The data is then downloaded and manually cleaned.

Data was collected for a 30-day period between 19 December 2022 and 17 January 2023. To capture sentiment in the region that has been particularly affected by M23 and the presence of the EAC forces, only social data originating from IP addresses in North and South Kivu provinces was collected. The public social data was extracted from Twitter and Facebook. The data was cleaned and a new category – “sentiment towards M23” – was created in the dataset to examine whether sentiment towards the EAC forces correlated with sentiment towards M23. After the data was thoroughly cleaned to ensure that any data unrelated to this analysis was removed, the final dataset consisted of 136 main observations of public sentiment towards the EAC forces.

Findings on public sentiment towards the EAC forces

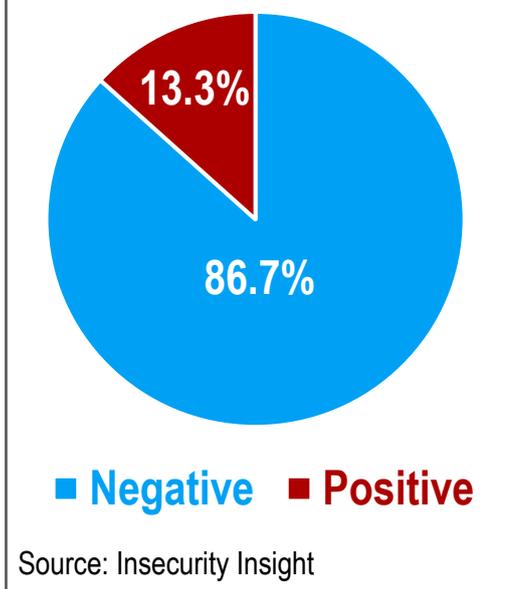
Figure 1 presents findings on online public sentiment towards the EAC forces' deployment among social media users over a 30-day period between December 2022 and January 2023 in North and South Kivu provinces, eastern DRC.

It suggests that an overwhelming percentage (88,7%) of social media users in these two Congolese provinces who expressed an opinion in relation to the EAC and its forces in the abovementioned period held negative sentiments towards both the regional organisation and the EAC forces' intervention in eastern DRC. In general, it is clear that local Congolese civilians do not trust the EAC force to produce tangible results on the ground, and rather view it as exacerbating existing problems in eastern DRC.

A minority of social media users (13,3%) who engaged on this issue expressed positive sentiments towards the EAC forces. As will be discussed in the section entitled “Profile analysis” (see below), social media users who expressed positive sentiments towards the EAC forces tended also to have content favourable to M23 on their social media accounts.

This suggests that sentiments towards M23 may be a critical factor in determining social media users' perceptions of the EAC forces.

Figure 1: Sentiment (%) on social media towards the EAC Forces in North and South Kivu



Understanding the negative sentiments towards the EAC forces

When expressing negative sentiments towards the EAC forces, social media users in North and South Kivu gave a range of reasons for their negative perceptions of the regional force. The most common included the following:

- **Perceived collaborative ties between M23 and the EAC forces:**

Many social media users believe that the EAC forces are colluding with the M23 rebels in eastern DRC, or at the very least enjoy good ties with the armed group. An examination of discussions on social media suggests that several reasons gave rise to this perception.

Firstly, photos of the EAC regional force commander, Major General Jeff Nyagah, and other EAC forces personnel reportedly interacting with M23 militants on the occasion of the partial retreat from Kibumba were widely shared on Facebook and Twitter. Occurring weeks after a massacre of civilians in Kishishe and Bambo by M23 militia, the appearance of images and reports of these apparently cordial meetings between M23 and members of the EAC forces appear to have shocked local Congolese civilians in North and South Kivu, who tend to think that the M23 is a terrorist group that should be dealt with by force.

Moreover, social media users tend to take the EAC forces' failure to militarily engage with M23 rebels as another sign of collaboration. Although the regional organisation had taken the decision in the Luanda EAC summit of 23 November 2022 that the EAC forces would drive the M23 rebels from occupied territories if the armed group failed to withdraw voluntarily, the EAC has thus far favoured a diplomatic approach, even if the M23 has largely failed to retreat and despite continued efforts on its part to acquire further Congolese territory. Many social media users have clearly interpreted the EAC's strategic decision to prioritise negotiations as a sign of collusion.

Another issue exacerbating the lack of trust in the regional force is the decision taken at the Luanda EAC summit that liberated territory must be held by the EAC forces and cannot be transferred to the Congolese army.¹ Social media users see this as effectively enabling a M23 demand that allows the militia to call the shots on the ground by determining the pace and the scope of the 'feigned' withdrawal, at the expense of the Congolese state and army.



¹ It should be noted that in the Luanda summit decisions there is no timeline indicating when the EAC force would hand over captured territory to the Congolese state.

- **Perception that the EAC will “balkanise” eastern DRC:**

Another prominent belief is that the EAC force is acting as a vehicle for rival regional states such as Uganda and Kenya to pursue their interests in eastern DRC, including tapping into the extensive mineral resources found in the area. Accustomed to constant damaging military incursions in eastern DRC by neighbouring states in previous decades – not least Rwanda through its support for M23 – civilians fear that the EAC intervention is simply a continuation of a legacy of foreign interference, this time in the form of a regional force. Augmenting this perception is the confusion regarding the endgame of the EAC mission in eastern DRC, which could mean that there will be an undefined period of time in which the Congolese army will not have access to swathes of Congolese territory being held by EAC forces in the eventuality that the M23 rebels does withdraw.



- **Perceived ineffectiveness of the EAC deployment:**

Although the EAC regional force was deployed in order to pacify and secure eastern DRC, thus far little has been achieved, and M23 continues to advance in some areas.

As mentioned above, the EAC force has thus far proved unwilling to launch an assault on M23, preferring to dig in and wait for the rebel group to withdraw. However, this state of affairs has led social media users to draw parallels with the UN peacekeeping force MONUSCO, which is widely seen in eastern DRC as having been ineffective in pacifying the area, despite its long-term presence. In other words, the EAC force is increasingly being perceived as yet another ineffective observer of the conflict, and not an active or effective participant.



Profile analysis

The social media accounts used in this analysis were also examined for the authors’ sentiments towards M23. The profiles of accounts that expressed positive and negative sentiments towards the EAC forces were analysed separately.

Firstly, the authors who expressed positive sentiments towards the EAC forces were found to have either expressed pro-M23 sentiments in the same post or reply, or elsewhere in their account. There are also indications that a number of these profiles may have a false identity, meaning that the person operating the account would be running it under a different name rather than under his/her real identity.

Moreover, most of these accounts tended to exclusively cover political topics, with users posting nothing or little at all about their personal lives, suggesting that the accounts were set up for the express purpose of spreading pro-M23 views.

Secondly, with a few exceptions, those authors who expressed negative sentiments towards the EAC forces tend to have diverse profile activities, suggesting that the information provided on their public social media accounts reflects their real identity.

The social media profiles therefore suggest that the negative sentiments discussed here about the EAC forces do reflect opinions widely held by private individuals in the DRC who choose to engage on the subject on social media.

It is likely that they also represent a widely held public sentiment in Congolese society in the Kivu provinces.



Conclusions and recommendations for NGOs operating in the field

There are no indications on social media that aid agencies are in any way associated with either the EAC or its forces in eastern DRC, or that their negative reputation in the DRC is impacting the reputation of the aid sector on the ground. Nevertheless, aid agencies should remain wary of any possible changes in this situation in the near future and take precautions to ensure that their image does not become associated with the EAC force or its activities.

Further resources

Social Media Monitoring in the DRC:

- [Wagner Mercenaries in Eastern DR Congo?](#) (February 2023)
- [Disinformation WFP Helicopter Crash](#) (November 2022)
- [CENI and the Red Cross](#) (July 2022)
- [Downing of a UN Helicopter](#) (May 2022).



Special thanks go to the participants of the ACAPS and Congo Hat webinar on 20 January 2023 for their great feedback. Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: info@insecurityinsight.org

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