

Assessing Social Media Perceptions of the SADC Military Deployment in the DRC

March 2024



Summary

This brief presents findings on public sentiment expressed on Facebook towards the new Southern African Development Community (SADC) military mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

In response to the deteriorating situation in eastern DRC due to the resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) rebel group, SADC deployed a military force in order to stabilise the region in December 2023.

An analysis of online sentiment gathered from Facebook comments (N=628) from 1 January to 29 February 2024 revealed that a majority (67%) of social media users expressed negative views toward the SADC deployment.

Criticisms included scepticism about foreign intervention, doubts about the effectiveness of past and current missions, suspicions of motives such as resource exploitation, and calls for stronger reliance on the national army.

Despite some positive sentiments, concerns persist regarding the SADC force's ability to address the conflict effectively.

Finally, research on X indicates that the SADC is also being targeted by disinformation by pro-M23 accounts on the social media platform.

Context

The resurgence of the M23 rebel group in November 2021 and its advance towards the North Kivu capital city of Goma provoked a humanitarian crisis as tens of thousands of people fled from the fighting.

To stabilise the deteriorating situation in eastern DRC, towards the end of 2022 the East African Community (EAC) deployed a regional military force to the DRC composed of troops from the various member countries. However, the EAC force has been the subject of increasing popular frustration in the eastern DRC over its perceived lack of offensive action against M23, culminating in violent protests against the regional force in Goma and elsewhere in January 2023. In December 2023 the EAC force [started withdrawing](#) from the DRC following accusations of collusion with the M23 rebels by the DRC president, Felix Tshisekedi, who refused to renew the mandate of the regional force following its expiration. At the same time, the UN peacekeeping force MONUSCO also started [withdrawing](#) from the country at the request of the government in Kinshasa.

Mailing List

In December 2023 a regional deployment by SADC, the [SADC Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#) (SAMIDRC), started replacing the EAC and MONUSCO forces. Led mainly by the South African military, the deployment has stated that its [mission](#) is the neutralisation of the main rebel groups present in eastern DRC, including the M23 rebels, which are allegedly supported by Rwanda.

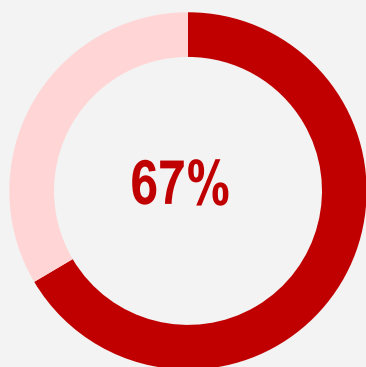
Despite hopes in Kinshasa that the South African deployment – which was key in defeating the M23 rebels around Goma in 2013 – would be decisive in pacifying the eastern DRC, [doubts](#) are emerging as to whether the deployment has the resources to be successful against the well-equipped rebels. In February two South African soldiers were killed and three others injured after a [mortar bomb](#) landed in their base.

Findings

In Facebook posts and comments posted in the DRC between 1 January and 29 February 2024 in the response to the announcement of the deployment of SADC troops in the DRC, some 67% of social media users expressed negative sentiments towards the mission, motivated by a number of different concerns. Around a third of users expressed positive sentiments.

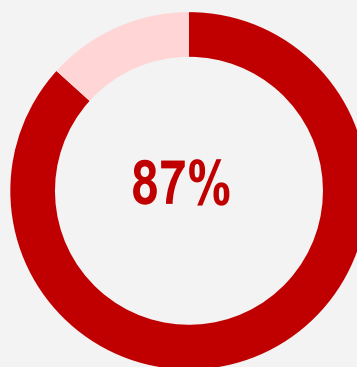
While the sample suggests that the majority of social media users in the DRC are against the SADC deployment, nevertheless a comparison with sentiment towards the EAC deployment using Insecurity Insight [data](#) published in February 2023 indicates that the SADC forces enjoys more positive sentiment (+20%). The very negative sentiment towards the EAC mission was related to a perceived lack of offensive initiatives against the M23 and resulted in protests in Goma and elsewhere in the DRC.

Figure 1: Positive (34%) versus negative (67%) reactions on Facebook to the deployment of SADC troops in the DRC



Source: Insecurity Insight

Figure 2: Data from February 2023 showing positive (13%) versus negative (87%) sentiment towards the EAC deployment in the DRC



Source: Insecurity Insight

Understanding the negative sentiments towards the SADC deployment

When expressing negative sentiments towards the SADC deployment, most commentators (64%) argued against reliance on a “foreign” (i.e. non-Congolese) intervention in the DRC to push back the M23 rebels and stabilise the eastern provinces (see Figure 3). Social media users overwhelmingly believe that the Congolese government should not rely on foreign or external actors, but should rather provide the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) with the necessary equipment and support to operate effectively.

“Nous en avons marre avec ces forces étrangères”

“Ça fait plus de 4 ans que la FARDC est entrain de recruter , le nombre des personnes qui peuvent affronter la guerre n'est pas encore atteint ou comment ? Ce sont des troupes étrangers qui nous amènent toujours les ennuis.”

“Moi personnellement je ne fais confiance à aucune force étrangère”

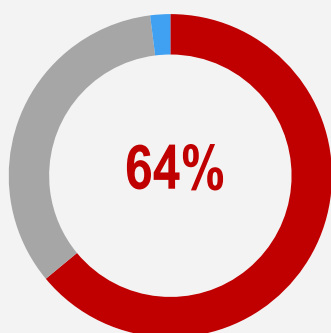
Most social media users tended to interpret the deployment of the SADC troop contingent, which in numerical terms is a fraction of the official size of the FARDC, as a humiliation for the DRC, and criticised the DRC government for not trusting or investing in the national army.

“Il n'y a que nos propres soldats qui vaincront cette guerre.”

A number of users (2%) dismissed the SADC deployment and called for a military intervention by Russia, even if Russia was not immediately relevant to the debate around the SADC deployment. Around a third (34%) of comments that expressed negative sentiments were not accompanied by any reasons or explanations for these sentiments.

“Il fallait plutôt nous dire que le président de la Russie envoie ses soldats en RDC que de nous parler du Sud Africain”

Figure 3: The reasons for commentators' negative sentiments towards the SADC military deployment in the DRC (%)



Against "Foreign" interventions (all reasons combined)

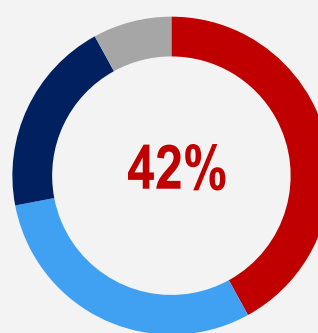
No reason provided

Preference for Russian intervention

Note: “Foreign” refers to any external actor outside of the DRC.

Source: Insecurity Insight

Figure 4: Disaggregating expressed sentiment against “foreign” military interventions



Ineffectiveness

Against Foreign Interventions in general

Looting

SADC Linked to West / International Community

Source: Insecurity Insight

Further disaggregation of these comments that opposed “foreign forces” highlighted the following range of reasons for their opinions (see Figure 4).

Over 40% of comments in this category argued that foreign (i.e. non-Congolese) interventions are not effective against rebels in eastern DRC, with many commentators comparing the SADC deployment with MONUSCO and the EAC mission, both of which are widely perceived as having been either unwilling to fight or incapable of defeating the rebels. The issue of effectiveness is clearly key for social media users, who largely suspect that the SADC mission will also fail just like MONUSCO and the EAC deployment. In fact, this world-weary view of foreign missions that have repeatedly failed to improve the security situation in eastern DRC was equally present among commentators who welcomed the deployment, with some either hoping that the SADC force would be more effective, or conditioning their support for SADC on the expectation that the force would carry out decisive offensives against the M23.

“Depuis décembre 2023 jusqu'aujourd'hui les militaires sudAfricain de la SADC n'ont tiré aucune balle aux rebelles du M23 Que le VPM des affaires étrangères s'apprête à élaborer un plan de retrait au sol congolais.”

“Force de l'EAC (kenya, Soudan,Burundi, Ouganda), MONUSCO, armée ougandaise, mercenaires roumains, Wazalendo, SADC, FARDC mais sur terrain l'avancement de M23”

“La Monusco, l'EAC et la SADEC qui l'ont précédées n'ont pas arrivé à plus de 2.900 militaires? Si oui; quel était leur restant sur terrain si pas la progression de rebelles du M23 jusqu'à la tombe de Bunagana et plusieurs autres parties de la RDC. C'est non événement ! La vraie bataille et la vraie victoire nous l'espérons chez nos FARDC et pas ailleurs !”

Furthermore, another major reason expressed for opposition to “foreign” interventions is the belief that SADC is intervening in the DRC in order to loot its mineral resources, as has been the case with a number of foreign forces in the past. As in the case of suspicions that the new mission will be largely of a defensive nature, it is clear that the negative experience of previous missions in the DRC has led to serious prejudgments against the new SADC force.

Distraction vous venez pour volé nos richesses

C'est pour volé nos richesses,pas question

Allegations from pro-M23 accounts targeting the SADC mission

In February 2024, an X (formerly Twitter) account published a Tweet alleging that South Africa received “financial guarantees” from the Congolese government in return for deploying troops to eastern DRC.

According to the Tweet, the South Africans are to be given the control of the Rubaya mines, located in Masisi territory in North Kivu province. Furnishing around half of the DRC’s coltan production, the mines are the largest coltan producer in the country.

Box 1: Allegations targeting SADC on X

TSHILOMBO ET RAMAPHOSA, UNE ALLIANCE MINIERE AU DETRIMENT DES CONGOLAIS ! DEUX AFFAIRISTES QUI VEULENT LA GUERRE POUR LA MINE DE RUBAYA (#MASISI/#NORDKIVU).

Les choses se clarifient enfin. L'Afrique du Sud a reçu de fortes garanties financières qui l'ont amenée à changer d'avis et à envoyer précipitamment les troupes pour le compte de la @SADC_News. TSHILOMBO @fatsh13 vite réglé le litige financier auprès de la SADC pour imposer une force militaire d'appui.

La mission de la #SADC est de TENTER DE PRENDRE LE CONTRÔLE DE LA MINE DE RUBAYA DANS LE MASISI (Nord-Kivu).

TSHILOMBO VIENT DONC DE VENDRE LA MINE DE RUBAYA À CYRIL RAMAPHOSA, président SUD-africain en campagne électorale présidentielle. Les opposants politiques comme @Julius S. Mulema et plusieurs intellectuels sud-africains ont découvert le pot-aux-roses de concussion et rejetant ce déploiement hâtif qui ne sert aucunement les intérêts de leur pays!

La mission de la #SANDF et de l'armée sud-africaine est donc claire et mercantile : Protéger la MINE DE RUBAYA DEVENUE UN INTÉRÊT SUD-AFRICAIN ET NON UN REGLEMENT DES CAUSES PROFONDES DU CONFLIT.

Tout a été boutique par l'Association sud-africaine de développement minier (MIASA) qui cherche à avoir accès au pôle minier congolais, poussant les troupes sud-africaines à combattre farouchement ! #AFC, peu importe les pertes civiles qui en résultent, dans le but de sécuriser les mines.

NOUS DENONÇONS ET CONDAMNONS CES CRIMES MULTINATIONAUX ET PRÉVENONS QUE L'AFC SE DÉFENDRA POUR SON PAYS ET POUR SON PEUPLE.

SEULE LA PATRIE LIBÈRE !

La Patrie ou la Mort !

Source: Insecurity Insight

The account belongs to Chalwe Munkutu Adam, a well-known activist who has recently joined the nascent political group Alliance Fleuve Congo (ACF), which he claims is the target of the South African operation in the DRC.

Created in December 2023 in Nairobi, Kenya, by Corneille Nangaa Yobeluo, the former president of the DRC electoral commission, ACF has been linked to the M23 military group. This link could also be seen in pro-M23 content on Chalwe's X account, which has on numerous occasions retweeted content published on X by M23's spokesperson.

Conclusion

A sample of social media comments (N=628) reacting to the SADC deployment suggests that around two-thirds are against the new regional military mission in the DRC. Despite the overall negative outlook in public sentiment, sentiment towards the SADC remains less negative than in the case of the EAC.

The negative sentiment is strongly underpinned by an aversion towards military deployments by external actors in the DRC. Often drawing parallels with MONUSCO and the EAC, users argue that the SADC mission will not bring any meaningful results on the ground in terms of pacifying eastern DRC. This sentiment is likely to increase in the coming months if the South Africa-led mission does not show that it is willing to go on the offensive against M23.

Furthermore, a significant number of users fear that the SADC mission is motivated by the DRC's rich resources, a sentiment which may have been fuelled by allegations circulated by pro-M23 accounts on X.

Methodology

Publicly available Facebook data was first collected in the DRC for the period 1 January-29 February 2024 using keywords associated with the SADC military deployment in eastern DRC. A total of 628 Facebook comments, all of which were written in reaction to news on the social media platform announcing the deployment of SADC troops in the DRC, were collected and analysed to identify sentiment. To do so, Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to identify pertinent data on Facebook. Moreover, research on X was conducted over the same period of time to assess whether the SADC military deployment is being targeted by disinformation or misinformation.

Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: info@insecurityinsight.org

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