

Congo-Kinshasa; Ituri Factions Recommit Themselves to Peace

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Following a week of heavy fighting in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), five armed groups that have been involved in battles around the town of Bunia on Friday signed an agreement to cease hostilities and re-launch the beleaguered Ituri peace process. According to the agreement, all five parties have committed themselves to observe an immediate ceasefire. They will begin the process of cantonment of their troops, and they have welcomed the proposed deployment of an international intervention force.

The deal comes after a week of heavy fighting between ethnic Lendu and Hema militias in Bunia following the withdrawal of Ugandan troops from the town. Humanitarian organisations say that hundreds have been killed in the fighting and tens of thousands have fled their homes. The belligerents also agreed to demilitarise areas that are densely populated and to "create and maintain the necessary conditions" to allow humanitarian organisations to operate. Furthermore, in what analysts said was a caveat to Rwanda and Uganda, foreign countries were called upon to stop supporting the different armed groups in the Ituri district of northeastern DRC, of which Bunia is the principal city.

The five parties involved in the talks were the Parti pour l'Unité et la Sauvegarde de l'Intégrité du Congo (PUSIC), Front des Nationalistes et Intégrationnistes (FNI), Forces Populaires pour la Démocratie au Congo (FPDC), Forces Armées du Peuple Congolais (FAPC) and the Union des Patriotes Congolais (UPC). Also present were members of the Ituri Pacification Commission and representatives of the DRC government and the United Nations. Both observers and interested parties welcomed the agreement as an initial step, but concern remains that unless an international force is deployed immediately, the signatures will mean nothing and insecurity will continue in the region.

Brig Kale Kaihura, the commander of the Ugandan troops that left Bunia and the Ugandan representative at the talks said he was glad that the UN had "woken up" but said he regretted that it had taken so long for people to listen to them. "Why did they wait until people die before they do something? It is only after the crisis that we see people reacting," he said. Kaihura said that while there had been enormous pressure on him to remove his troops, he had anticipated and warned people of the potential dangers that the power vacuum following their withdrawal would create.

DRC President Joseph Kabila, who met all the groups individually over the course of the two days, said that he hoped the groups would abide by the agreement and that the international force would arrive soon "to stop the massacres". However, there was still confusion over the implementation of the agreement as, according to the UN Mission in the DRC, known as MONUC, the forces are to be cantoned in "their own headquarters" and debates continue over where each group's headquarters are. They cited the example of the UPC, which is currently in control of Bunia and says that the town is their headquarters so they are entitled to stay.

Confirming these suspicions, UPC leader Thomas Lubanga told journalists after the ceremony that his troops "wouldn't move out of Bunia as they were in control, responsible for keeping the peace and had been told they could stay". Although he arrived only late on Thursday evening, Lubanga denied claims that he was a reluctant signatory. "I have never refused to participate in any forum that would bring peace to Bunia," he said. "I am happy with the signing and I hope all the parties respect the agreement."

The smaller factions also said that they were prepared for peace and wanted to be integrated into the Congolese army, but they accused Lubanga's UPC of being the remaining obstacle. "The problem goes beyond just the Hema and the Lendu. It is political and the UPC wants to cut Ituri off from the rest of the DRC," FNI chairman Ndjabu Ngabu said on Thursday.

Although no precise date or numbers have been given for the international intervention force, Behrooz Sadry, deputy special representative of the UN Secretary General in the DRC, told IRIN that the force was likely to be the size of a reinforced battalion (at least 750 soldiers) and it was "no longer a matter of months, but weeks" before they would arrive. "In the meantime, we hope that the ceasefire will hold until the details of the agreement today are worked out on the ground," he said on Friday.

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