

US cuts military aid to Rwanda over alleged support for Congo rebels

By: Associated Press

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JOHANNESBURG — The U.S. government said Saturday it has cut this year's planned military assistance to Rwanda amid concerns that the government in Kigali is supporting rebel movements in neighboring Congo.

"The United States has been actively engaged at the highest levels to urge Rwanda to halt and prevent the provision of such support, which threatens to undermine stability in the region," State Department spokesman Darby Holladay said in an emailed statement.

Rwanda has denied reports by the United Nations and rights groups that it is supporting the so-called M23 rebel movement in East Congo, which has sparked new fighting in the area that has forced more than 200,000 civilians from their homes since April.

"The United States government is deeply concerned about the evidence that Rwanda is implicated in the provision of support to Congolese rebel groups, including M23," the statement said.

The U.S. — usually a staunch Rwandan ally — therefore cuts \$200,000 of initially pledged military aid for a training academy, reallocating the funds to another country instead, the State Department said.

While the actual the amount of money being withheld is small, the move appears to be a clear snub at the government in Kigali, reflecting Washington's concerns over the recent instability in eastern Congo.

"Restraint, dialogue, and respect for each other's sovereignty offer the best opportunity" for Rwanda and Congo "to resume the difficult work of bringing peace and security to the broader region," it said.

Washington's move follows last week's statement by the U.N. Security Council, condemning all outside support to armed groups in Congo and demanding that such backing "cease immediately."

The leaders of Congo and Rwanda earlier this month agreed in principle to back a neutral international armed force to combat Congo's newest rebellion and other fighters terrorizing civilians in the country's mineral-rich east, and the African Union said it could help by sending soldiers. Details, however, have remained sketchy.

Congo already has the world's largest peacekeeping force of nearly 20,000 U.N. soldiers and police that cost nearly \$1.5 billion in 2011. Congo's army — ill-equipped, ill-paid and demoralized — is accused of pillaging and rape of civilians as often as are the rebels and militias, putting U.N. peacekeepers in an invidious position.

East Congo's conflict is a hangover from Rwanda's 1994 genocide. Hundreds who participated in the killings of some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus escaped into Congo and still fight there today. The M23 rebels are the latest incarnation of a group of Congolese Tutsi rebels set up to fight Rwandan Hutu rebels in Congo.