

After being forced to abandon three of its West African routes, Rwanda's national flag carrier has shifted its focus eastward and southward, targeting new markets like Mombasa and Zanzibar.

Speaking about the impact of being blocked by Democratic Republic Congo (DRC) over its airspace in a press conference, RwandAir Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Yvone Makolo said "It very unfortunate that politics enters aviation, but there working through that unfortunately we had to suspend some routes like Brazzaville, Abuja, and Contou because some flights routes became long."

"We're putting that capacity more on the Eastern and Southern routes in terms of additional frequencies, and we're looking at opening new routes, the first ones being Mombasa and Zanzibar, until the issues resolve, we will focus on East and Southern side of the continent" She added

As of February 14, 2025, DR Congo banned Rwandan-registered aircraft from its airspace amid escalating regional tensions. This ban has disrupted key flight paths, leading to the suspension of routes to Western and Central Africa such as Kigali-Abuja, Kigali-Brazzaville-Douala, Kigali-Libreville-Accra, and Kigali-Libreville-Cotonou..

The Kigali-Accra route was also modified to a once-weekly nonstop service, while the Kigali Bangui route now operates nonstop twice weekly, bypassing its previous stop in Douala.

RwandAir's London service is now facing a notable detour, adding approximately four hours to the typical flight duration. This ban is not just affecting RwandAir. Other carriers in the area, including Kenya Airways and Ethiopian Airlines, have also adjusted their flight paths.

The decision to ban Rwandan aircraft from Congolese airspace has compelled RwandAir to reroute its flights, resulting in longer travel times and increased operational costs. For example, flights to London now take an additional four hours, leading to higher fuel consumption and labor expenses.

This ban stems from the escalating tension between Rwanda and the DRC, particularly over the ongoing conflict involving the M23 rebel group in eastern DRC.

The Congolese prohibited any aircraft registered in Rwanda— or registered

elsewhere but based in Rwanda — from flying over or landing in the DRC. According to a Notice to Airmen (NOTAM), the restriction applies to both civilian and state aircraft, with officials citing security threats as the primary justification.

“Formal ban on overflight and landing in the territory of the Democratic Republic of Congo for all civil and state aircraft registered in Rwanda or registered elsewhere but based in Rwanda, due to the security situation linked to the armed conflict,” reads the NOTAM.

The DRC accuses Rwanda of supporting the M23 rebel group—allegations that Rwanda strongly denies. The conflict has led to significant disruptions, including the effective closure of Goma International Airport in eastern DRC in late January, when M23 forces advanced into the city and seized control.

Upon entering the city, M23 rebels captured Goma International Airport, reportedly seizing a Gomair ATR 72 cargo aircraft and several military helicopters. Since then, the airspace over North Kivu’s capital has been closed, halting both domestic and international flights.

Since then, Goma airport remains closed despite calls from humanitarian organizations for its reopening to facilitate relief operations. The situation has resulted in widespread humanitarian concerns, according to the United Nations.

Despite these challenges, RwandAir is also pursuing an ambitious expansion strategy, aiming to add 13 aircraft to its fleet in the next five years. This growth is intended to support the airline’s efforts to strengthen intra-African connectivity and capitalize on emerging tourism markets.

African aviation experts have also said that this airspace restriction isn’t merely a minor scheduling issue; it’s a significant operational adjustment forcing airlines to navigate around Congolese airspace, adding considerable flight time and, one assumes, extra fuel consumption and associated costs. Airfares are also said to be climbing noticeably in Southern Africa, as passengers are forced to foot the extra costs and bills, rather than the airlines.

“Kinshasa’s airspace plays a central connecting point for flights in West Africa. Its closure has now made Lagos, Nigeria’s infrastructure and strategic positioning an attractive alternative, despite the unplanned nature of this transition.” Experts noted that EthiopianAir is moving to capture routes impacted by the airspace

restrictions, aimed at maintaining connectivity for passengers in the region while expanding its reach within Africa.