

The M23 rebel group announced it would withdraw from the eastern Congolese city of Uvira, a key border town on Lake Tanganyika, in an apparent effort to demonstrate goodwill in ongoing peace talks. But on the ground, residents and reporters saw no immediate signs of a pullout.

M23 fighters seized Uvira last week amid a renewed offensive in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, despite mediation efforts by the United States and Qatar. The group said the withdrawal was in response to appeals from American mediators.

Since the announcement late Sunday, life in Uvira has appeared largely unchanged. Al Jazeera correspondent Ala Wani reported seeing armed patrols and vehicles moving through the streets as usual. "So far, nothing has changed," Wani said. "People here are only learning about the announcement through social media, and many were not even aware of it."

M23 said it would not hand the city back to Congolese government forces, citing past experiences in Walikale, where territory it had surrendered was later retaken without the promised deployment of a neutral force. The group says a neutral force must be in place before it leaves Uvira, though it has not specified which country or organization would provide it.

The capture of Uvira adds to M23's control over most major urban centers in eastern Congo, including Goma, the capital of North Kivu province, and Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu. The group also controls key border areas with Rwanda and Burundi.

Analysts say M23's withdrawal announcement is consistent with its past tactics.

"Saying 'we are withdrawing' is a tactic we have seen before," said Paul-Simon Handy, East Africa regional director at the Institute for Security Studies. "They take territory, appear to pull back, and then return. This is a negotiating tactic aimed at creating facts on the ground and pressuring the Congolese government into territorial and economic concessions."

Handy said the group's broader objective appears to be creating a buffer zone across parts of North Kivu and South Kivu territory neighboring countries, particularly Rwanda and Uganda, have a strategic interest in influencing.

“Officially, M23 says it wants to liberate its people,” Handy said. “But when you look at the geography, this looks more like an attempt to control a belt of territory that offers both strategic depth and economic returns, while potentially reshaping population movements in eastern Congo.”

The latest advance has drawn international criticism, including from the United States, which supports recent peace agreements between Congo and Rwanda, as well as talks involving M23. Handy said M23’s announcement of a withdrawal may reflect pressure from Washington.

“Holding Uvira would undermine negotiations in Qatar and Washington and place pressure not only on Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi, but also internationally on Rwandan President Paul Kagame,” Handy said.

Fighting in eastern Congo has displaced millions over the past three decades, with dozens of armed groups vying for territory rich in minerals and trade routes. M23, which resurfaced in 2021 after years of dormancy, has repeatedly denied acting on behalf of Rwanda, a claim rejected by Congo, the United Nations, and Western governments.