

A wave of panic swept through Bangboka International Airport in Kisangani early Sunday evening after the Congolese military intercepted two armed kamikaze drones targeting the facility, local witnesses and security sources said.

The attempted strike on the capital of Tshopo Province came just hours after separate, overnight drone attacks in eastern Congo missed senior leaders of the March 23 Movement (M23) rebel group, instead killing civilians in what rebels claimed was a botched government assassination attempt.

The dual incidents mark a significant escalation in unmanned aerial warfare stretching far beyond the traditional front lines of the conflict.

Airport Chaos in Kisangani

Witnesses said the Bangboka terminal was crowded with dozens of passengers and staff when the alert was triggered early Sunday evening, May 24.

“People evacuated in complete confusion,” said one account via social media, adding that travelers fled back to the city center, located some 17 kilometers (10 miles) away, fearing an imminent explosion. Air traffic was disrupted immediately, with a flight arriving from the capital, Kinshasa, canceled at the last minute.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) government has not issued an official statement regarding the airport attack, and no group has yet claimed responsibility. However, the facility has been targeted before. In February and March, the provincial government reported similar attacks involving explosive-laden devices. At that time, leadership of the Alliance of the River Congo (AFC/M23) coalition claimed responsibility, calling it a “warning” to the government.

Kisangani sits hundreds of kilometers from the front lines in North and South Kivu provinces, where the AFC/M23 has seized large swathes of territory since 2022, including the capture of key regional hubs Goma and Bukavu.

Botched Strikes in Rebel Territory

The airport incident followed an overnight drone blitz targeting the top echelon of M23 leadership in North Kivu province, which rebel sources say was carried out by the Congolese army (FARDC).

Local sources confirmed that the strikes, which occurred between midnight and

dawn in the Masisi and Rutshuru territories, relied on faulty intelligence. Instead of neutralizing rebel commanders, the strikes killed civilians and damaged local infrastructure.

At approximately 12:05 a.m., a drone strike hit a well-known guest house in the coltan-mining town of Rubaya, a site heavily frequented by travelers and temporary laborers. While social media reports initially claimed the M23-appointed governor, Bahati Musanga Erasto, was killed, rebel officials later stated on social he had stayed overnight in Goma. Residents confirmed civilians died in the blast.

Hours later, a second drone targeted a house in Rumangabo used for training the widows of park rangers. Rebel sources said attackers believed Gen. Sultani Makenga, the military chief of the M23, would be at the location ahead of a military ceremony. Makenga was not present, and though the building sustained heavy material damage, no casualties were reported.

Escalating Drone Warfare

Both Erasto and Makenga survived the operation. Later on Sunday, Erasto oversaw a pass-out ceremony in Rutshuru territory for more than 300 newly trained AFC/M23 cadres and visited the damaged site in Rumangabo.

Rebel officials strongly condemned the attacks, accusing Kinshasa of launching precision strikes in densely populated civilian areas. Writing on the social media platform X, M23 spokesperson Lawrence Kanyuka stated that the assault caused “loss of life among the civilian population and damaged homes and property of innocent people.” Kanyuka emphasized that the strikes hit vulnerable communities at a time when the population is already facing the threat of an Ebola outbreak.

The back-to-back drone operations highlight the rapidly expanding role of unmanned technology in the decades-long conflict, which has intensified dramatically in recent months despite regional peace initiatives.

The overnight strikes follow similar incident months ago in Masisi, which killed M23 military spokesperson Lieutenant-Colonel Willy Ngoma in an attack the rebels also attributed to the Congolese military.