

In North Eastern Kivu province, political violence and intimidation are threatening to undermine election campaigns, according to authorities.

On Sunday, DR-Congo's election campaign began, with incumbent President Felix Tshisekedi facing 25 candidates amid a tense political climate and fighting in the east.

President Tshisekedi on Friday said the immediate priority was to resettle displaced people. This too has faced a challenge from renewed violence.

The east of the country has been racked by fighting for three decades, and violence is surging again after the M23 group, supported by Rwanda, recently occupied much of Nord Kivu province.

Several Western countries, including the United States and France, have concluded that Rwanda backs the M23, though Kigali denies the claim.

The fighting is likely to impede normal voting in two territories in the province, but the whole process would be threatened if rebels took the provincial capital Goma.

"M23 will not take Goma," Tshisekedi said in an interview recorded earlier but only publicized on Friday by Radio France International and France 24 TV.

He insisted, saying "A return to calm is his priority along with improving services and the economy, building roads and respecting freedom of speech and of the press."

"We are continuing to make efforts to bring our people back to their homes, to their villages," he added

Over 44 million registered voters, out of a population of almost 100 million, will elect a president on 20 December.

They will also be electing members of the national parliament and regional assemblies in the DRC's 26 provinces, as well as local councillors.

In total there are a record 25,832 candidates for DRC's legislative elections – 44,110 for provincial bodies and 31,234 for municipal councils, according to the Electoral Commission (Ceni), which faces the struggle of organising voting across the

country's 2.3 million square kilometres and limited infrastructure.

The challenges are enormous. As the world's largest producer of battery material cobalt and a major copper producer, Congo has vast resources, but conflict and corruption are endemic.

Tshisekedi held his first rally on Sunday at the Martyrs Stadium in Kinshasa while one of his main challengers, Martin Fayulu, addressed a rally in the nearby province of Bandundu, his fiefdom.

While addressing his supporters, the outgoing President praised his achievements, including free basic education, free maternity and universal health coverage and the development program for the 145 territories, which, according to him, places the Congolese at the center of its action.

He also promised to boost agriculture and local production to cope with imports and thus lower the dollar rate.

Other main opposition candidates in the race are Moise Katumbi, former governor of the Katanga mining region; Doctor Denis Mukwege, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 for his work with victims of sexual violence; and two former prime ministers.

Experts have warned that the incumbent president is favoured to win, particularly since there is only one round of voting, but representatives of five leading opposition groups met this week in South Africa to study the possibility of proposing a single candidate.

A coalition has been formed and a common platform adopted, but Fayulu has yet to adhere.