

Plans for peace in eastern DR Congo have suffered a major blow after the M23 rebel group backed out of the scheduled peace talks in Luanda, Angola.

The talks, organized under the Luanda Process, were expected to be a turning point in resolving the long-standing conflict in eastern Congo. M23 had agreed to send a five-member delegation to meet with the Congolese government for the first time. In response, President Félix Tshisekedi's office had also agreed to send representatives, reversing the government's earlier position of not negotiating with rebels.

However, on the same day, the European Union announced new sanctions targeting top military leaders from both Rwanda and the M23 rebel group. The EU accused them of fueling the conflict and engaging in the illegal trade of minerals from eastern Congo.

Among those sanctioned are Rwandan military officers Ruki Karusisi, Eugène Nkubito, and Pascal Muhizi. The EU also sanctioned Francis Kamanzi, head of Rwanda's Mines, Oil, and Gas Board, for his alleged role in the trafficking of Congolese minerals. Gasabo Gold Refinery, a Rwandan company, was also hit with sanctions for reportedly refining gold from M23-controlled areas.

On the rebel side, the sanctions target Bertrand Bisimwa, the political head of M23, and several top commanders including Jean Bahati Musanga, Désiré Rukomera, and Jean-Bosco Nzabonimpa. These individuals are now banned from traveling to Europe, and any assets they hold in EU countries are frozen.

The European Union had already suspended defense talks with Rwanda before these sanctions. Other countries, including the US, UK, and Canada, have also imposed penalties on Rwanda for allegedly supporting M23 rebels.

The United Nations Security Council also recently passed a resolution demanding the immediate withdrawal of Rwandan troops from DR Congo and ordering M23 to leave occupied cities like Goma and Bukavu.

In response to the latest moves, Rwanda announced it is cutting diplomatic ties with Belgium. Kigali gave Belgian diplomats 48 hours to leave the country. Rwanda's Foreign Affairs Minister Olivier Nduhungirehe accused Belgium of spreading false information to influence EU sanctions.

Belgium's Foreign Minister Maxime Prévot called Rwanda's decision "disproportionate" and said Brussels will also expel Rwandan diplomats in return.