

Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta on Wednesday called for the deployment of a regional force to restore security in the Democratic Republic of Congo's violence-torn east, where heavy fighting has revived old animosities.

This follows weeks of violence that is growing into a diplomatic impasse between DR Congo and its neighbor Rwanda, who is blamed for the recent resurgence of the rebel group M23 militia.

The mineral-rich DRC is fighting to contain dozens of armed groups in the east of the vast nation, many of which are a legacy of two regional wars a quarter of a century ago.

Rwanda has repeatedly denied backing the rebels while both countries have accused each other of carrying out cross-border shelling.

"I call for the activation of the East African Regional Force under the auspices of the East African Community (EAC)," Kenyatta said in a statement.

The "open hostilities" threatened to derail an ongoing political process to address the security situation in the country of 90 million people, he added.

The decision to establish a regional force was arrived at in April when Kenyatta hosted the leaders of Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and the DRC in Nairobi to discuss the crisis.

Regional commanders of the seven-nation EAC bloc will meet on Sunday to finalize preparations for the deployment of the joint force, Kenyatta said.

"The East African Regional Force shall be deployed to the Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu provinces immediately to stabilize the zone and enforce peace."

A UN force, known by its French acronym MONUSCO, is already operating in the DRC.

Kenyatta said the regional force will work alongside local provincial authorities and in close coordination with MONUSCO to disarm anyone bearing illegal firearms.

His comments followed discussions between East African army chiefs in eastern DRC's commercial hub Goma last week on the "initial modalities" of establishing a regional military force.

Tensions between Rwanda and the DRC have surged following a comeback by the M23 militia, which this week claimed control of the key border town of Bunagana, forcing thousands to flee their homes.

A primarily Congolese Tutsi militia that is one of scores of armed groups in eastern DRC, the M23 leapt to global prominence in 2012 when it captured Goma.

It was forced out shortly afterwards in a joint offensive by UN troops and the Congolese army.

The group took up arms again in late November having accused the Kinshasa government of failing to respect a 2009 agreement that involved incorporating its fighters into the army.

Relations between Kinshasa and Kigali have been strained since the mass arrival in the DRC of Rwandan Hutus accused of slaughtering Tutsis during the 1994 Rwanda genocide.

Meanwhile, an anti-Rwanda rally in the eastern DR Congo city of Goma boiled over into looting Wednesday, as bare-chested men looted shops and searched cars they suspected of transporting Rwandans.

Over 2000 people took to the streets to protest Rwanda in the morning a day after the Congolese government reiterated claims that Kigali backs the M23 rebel group.

The demonstrators, some stripped to the waist, rushed the border with Rwanda, chanting slogans against Rwandan President Paul Kagame.

Riot police fired teargas to disperse the crowd, according to an AFP reporter, who said that at least one protester had been injured.