- ***How creeping suspicion between leaders might override EAC integration***

Stories depicting presence of creeping suspicion between some leaders in the East African community (EAC) bloc have been awash the media and the unprecedented postponement of the Presidents' Summit scheduled September 20th, 2020 let the cat out of the bag. While some leaders cited COVID-19 pandemic for opting to meet through a video conference others reportedly had security concerns on their heads.

Most regional meetings have been virtually held since the novel Coronavirus was confirmed on the African Continent mid-March 2020 in order to observe the prevention measures that mitigate further spread of the pandemic.

The situation, however, has proved to be a silver lining for some partner countries. It has uncovered many things including knowing who's a genuine friend, hypocrite and/or an enemy.

For more than two years relations between Uganda and Rwanda have been cold. The period characterized by accusations and counter-accusations with allegations of subversive activities on each other's territory, espionage taking centre stage. On top of that, Rwanda has repeatedly accused her former strong ally, Uganda, of committing arbitrary arrests and detentions of Rwandan nationals on the Ugandan territory as well as torture.

Rwanda, also, accuses Uganda of supporting negative forces like the Rwanda National Congress (RNC) – accused of seeking to destabilize Rwanda's security and stability. But Uganda has repeatedly denied the accusations.

Several efforts to mend the relations have so far not yielded. Angolan President João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço has been at the forefront of the mediations. The mediations have always received the blessing of the President of the Republic of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Félix Antoine Tshisekedi who called the September 20th meeting that flopped due to what analysts describe as perpetuated differences between the three presidents of Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda and of course the COVID-19 pandemic.

This time, the presidents blamed COVID-19 pandemic, preparation for the next AU meeting, lack of sufficient security and tight personal schedules for failure to attend the Goma summit.

Previously, dramatic events followed the fourth Quadripartite Summit at the Uganda-Rwanda common border at Gatuna on February 21. Shortly after signing the treaty, it emerged that President Yoweri Museveni announced new causes to the border closure and tensions between the two neighbouring East African countries.

President Yoweri Museveni again denied hosting Rwanda's rebel groups like the RNC. He said that Uganda should not be dragged into the problems that he said were internal problems of the RPF-Inkotanyi that led some to leave the country to live in asylum in South African.

"The origin of the problem is that these people we helped when they had problems, once they returned home they started to have divisions within them. Others fled to South Africa and Rwanda thinks they are in Uganda," remarked President Museveni while speaking to a section of border communities on the Ugandan side.

Ugandan President has been blamed by his neighbour (Rwanda) for shifting positions mainly on the root causes of the severed relations between Rwanda and Uganda since the duo signed the Extradition Treaty on February21 during the Fourth Quadripartite Summit at the Gatuna border post.

President Paul Kagame and his Ugandan counterpart Museveni signed the Extradition Treaty, which binds both parties to release prisoners on their territories within one month. A few steps to implement the Luanda MoU and this treaty were taken as both sides released some of the prisoners.

However, the language used by some leaders in reference to the soaring diplomatic relations insinuates a perpetuated lack of the political will to see reconciliation and unity return to the region in the near future.

Burundian latest speech and attacks by gunmen who retreat into the Burundian territory every attack shows the relations between Rwanda and Burundi are at a low point.

Last November, Burundian Foreign Affairs Minister Amb. Ezechiel Nibigira wrote to Rwanda accusing it of attacking his country.

"The Rwandan Army carried out an attack on a military position of the Burundian army located on the Twinyoni Mountain, precisely in Marura, commune Mabayi, Cibitoke province," said the letter.

Since May, 2020 Rwanda Defence Forces (RDF) twice had to engage the attackers who retreat into Burundi after defeat. On May 8, 2020, Burundian soldiers opened fire at RDF in Rweru Sector of Bugesera District in the Eastern Province after a misunderstanding caused by the Burundian fishermen who had crossed into the Rwandan territory on Lake Rweru. They retreated into Burundi said Rwandan military Spokesperson Lt Col Innocent Munyengango in a press release.

“The borderline between Rwanda and Burundi is a known demarcation line in the middle of Lake Rweru that is easily identifiable using technology like the GPS,” said a statement released by the RDF.

And, on June29, close to 100 unidentified gunmen heavily armed with machine guns, rocket launchers and grenades attacked Rwanda and exchanged fire with the RDF before they retreated into Burundi.

Social and economic analysts now say that the already politically pervious situation is bound to make EAC economy feel COVID-19 impact much longer. There was no common front reached by all the countries in the region to slow down the spread of COVID-19. For example, some EAC partner states like Tanzania were reluctant to declare a lockdown. By and large, movements of people have been restricted since mid-March with great negative impact on the economic activities and trade between partner states.

Aside from that, the Uganda-Rwanda border have closed for more than two years, particularly leading to a drastic reduction in the trade between the two countries.

Thus, economists in the region contend that much as the EAC partner states need to cultivate the political will to end conflicts that are responsible for the growing suspicion, there is need to prepare for the post COVID-19 era because the pandemic will leave the EAC economy struggling with heavy economic and social consequences.