

Cross border trade at Rwanda's western border point locally known as Petite Barrière, literally for 'little border was grossly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic that was declared in country Mid-March 2020. The effects are largely blamed on the measures put in place including restrictions on the movement of people to prevent further spread.

This border point between Rwanda's border city, Rubavu and the eastern city of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Goma was the busiest land border in Africa and one of the busiest worldwide with a daily traffic estimated at 50,000 people before the pandemic.

The Mayor of Rubavu District, Ildephonse Kambogo revealed that statistics now indicate that traffic at this border drastically fell to less than 10,000 people daily, a trend blamed on the effects of the pandemic.



Mayor Ildephonse Kambogo of Rubavu District, briefing journalists under ABASIRWA at Kivu Peace View Hotel in Rubavu

The Rubavu/Goma border crossing at one time recorded traffic estimated at 98,000 people crossing on a single day, becoming only second busiest border crossing after the one with USA and Mexico.

According to Mayor Kambogo, the majority of the informal traders were women (80%), and he expressed concern about the wellbeing of the affected women since his office has not yet established information on any economic activity they are engaged in for a living currently.

As the world slowly recovers from the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, cross border trade in Rubavu has never been the same.

This drop is due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has negatively impacted the trade carried out by people who say that their “pockets have literally been ripped open by the pandemic”. Although the government of Rwanda provided support to the traders to restart their businesses, recovery to some has not yet been possible due to the heavy blow on trade in this part of the region.

Most of the traders along the Rubavu-Goma deal in foodstuffs including bananas, sweet potatoes, potatoes, vegetables, meat and milk.

However, there is a widespread consensus that Covid-19 pandemic was the major cause of the fall of trade but not the only one as there were other natural calamities like the earthquake, Ebola and the recent outbreak of insurgence in the eastern region of Rwanda’s western neighbour.

Traders faced various issues due to transport costs and conditions, availability of the products, exchange rates all due to border closures and other forms of restricted movements.

A study by the Private Sector Federation (PSF) shows that the Rwandan economy and SMEs in particular were negatively impacted by Covid-19 pandemic. In 2019, GDP grew by 9.42%, but when the pandemic unfolded GDP decreased to -3.4% in 2020.

Leon Pierre Rusanganwa, the Health Program Coordinator at PSF said that the health crisis adversely affected Rwanda’s exports to DRC as one of its biggest export market potential in the region.

Trade volumes to DRC have been growing over the years, however, due to the

pandemic, the re-export reduced from \$311,305,436 in 2019 to \$239,055,749 in 2020. The informal exports reduced from \$95,908,016 in 2019 to \$ 23,822,134 in 2020. Also the total import reduced from \$ 17,949,421 in 2019 to \$ 8,285,511 in 2020.

Meanwhile, the cold relations between Rwanda and DRC cannot be ignored as the two have been preoccupied with accusations and counteraccusation. The latter has repeatedly accused its neighbor of supporting the M23 rebels. Rwanda denies all the accusation and instead blames the Kinshasa administration of fighting alongside the FDLR, a rebel outfit linked to the genocide army that has lived in the eastern DRC since they committed the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

Mayor Kambogo stressed that despite the poor relations, they are trying to ensure that trade continues between the two cities. This is evidenced regular exchanges between Goma and Rubavu, aimed at not only stepping up trade but also improve the living conditions of the respective populations.

“Both cities need each other, Goma is supplied with food commodities while Rubavu needs market for its products and services,” said the Mayor.

During the lockdowns, cross-border trade never stopped but after restrictions on movements, Rwandan traders started operating in groups such as cooperatives where they could send products and the Congolese counterparts retails them.

Rubavu, also, provides a safe and secure environment for many Congolese in various categories – tourists and refuge seekers running away from war-ravaged eastern region of DRC.

Mayor Kambogo briefing journalists under the Rwanda media network against HIV/AIDS and for Health promotion (ABASIRWA) underlined that their concern as leaders was to properly maximize business opportunities for the populations, make borders operational 24/7 and adapt to better practices.