

The withdrawal of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is now underway, following its termination in mid-March.

As of today, Tuesday, April 29th, personnel and equipment from the three SAMIDRC troop contributing countries (TCCs) – Malawi, South Africa, and Tanzania – begun moving from their bases in Goma and Sake. The convoys are transiting through Rwanda, specifically the Rubavu District, en route to Kigali and ultimately towards Chato in northwestern Tanzania.

The regional bloc mission was initially deployed to eastern DRC in December 2023 with a 12-month mandate. This was later extended by an additional year before operations were halted in the wake of significant fatalities and casualties experienced in January.

Sources within the South African contingent, as reported by Business Day, indicated that the order to commence packing was issued just before the past weekend. The ongoing movement involves multiple convoys making their way through Rwanda towards the designated staging point.

Chato, a port town situated on Lake Victoria approximately 500 km from Goma and Sake, will serve as the central hub from which the national contingents will then proceed separately for repatriation to their respective home countries.

A South African soldier was quoted stating definitively, “We are leaving nothing behind.” Another soldier indicated the operational plan, saying, “As far as we know, the group’s quick reaction force (QRF) will leave last to provide protection for the tail of the entire convoy.”

At the time of this report, neither SADC, the East African Community (EAC), nor the Directorate Corporate Communication (DCC) of the SA National Defence Force (SANDF) have issued updates regarding the withdrawal.

Adding to the limited official information, an unidentified South African soldier mentioned their expectation of being flown out of Chato to Bloemfontein, while lacking details on the movement of armored vehicles and heavy equipment.

Another soldier conveyed a sense of relief, stating, “Our orders say by May 30 everyone and everything needs to be out of Goma and on its way. It was chaos over

the weekend, but nobody is complaining because we're finally going home."

Rwanda Dispatch confirms that the withdrawal process has commenced, with artillery being transported by trucks through Rwanda as of today, Tuesday, April 29th.

A notable point of friction is the reported inspection of outgoing SAMIDRC equipment by M23 rebels, who maintain control over Goma and Sake. This development has reportedly caused irritation among the departing soldiers.

The current withdrawal plan aligns with the proposal put forth by the defense chiefs of the three SAMIDRC TCCs during an April 11th meeting with SADC representatives in Dar es Salaam. These chiefs had previously expressed their frustration concerning the delays in SADC repairing and preparing the Goma airport runway, which remains under rebel control.

Their proposed road withdrawal, which had secured prior agreement from the M23 senior military leadership, necessitated formal approval for safe passage through Rwanda. Rwandan media subsequently reported that President Paul Kagame had granted this secure passage for the SAMIDRC contingents.

To ensure the safety and efficiency of the withdrawal, a technical advance team, comprising operations, intelligence, and logistics experts from the three troop-contributing nations, was assembled. This team was tasked with identifying the most secure and rapid routes for the convoys and conducting reconnaissance as the withdrawal progresses.

According to sources on the ground, a coordinating contingent of South African and other forces is currently stationed in Chato to oversee the repatriation of both personnel and equipment.

The SAMIDRC mission was marked by tragedy in late January, with seventeen soldiers, including fourteen South Africans, losing their lives in the Battle for Goma. Numerous others sustained serious injuries during the three-day conflict.

The deployment itself had faced criticism from military experts and soldiers, who cited the seemingly unprepared and disorganized manner in which South African forces, as the lead contributor, were deployed to eastern DRC without adequate air support and essential logistical provisions.