

The United Nations peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) has held high-level discussions with rebels in eastern DR Congo, focusing on civilian protection and prospects for peace.

Bintou Keita, the UN Secretary-General's special envoy to DR Congo, led the talks with representatives of the Congo River Alliance, including the M23 rebel group, during a visit to Goma on Friday.

She said the rebels expressed willingness to pursue a non-violent resolution to the ongoing conflict that intensified earlier this year when Goma, a strategic city, fell under their control.

Keita emphasized that the meeting was conducted in a spirit of open dialogue and mutual exchange. Although details remain limited, she confirmed that the talks are part of broader efforts that have been underway for months to support affected communities.

Keita travelled by helicopter into the conflict zone, where she met with rebel leaders seated across from UN officials at a formal setting in Goma.

Despite the UN's long-standing presence in DR Congo, the peacekeeping force has struggled to contain the resurgence of violence. Earlier this year, M23 rebels launched a series of offensives, capturing large areas and even attacking UN peacekeepers.

The violence has displaced hundreds of thousands and claimed thousands of lives.

The humanitarian impact continues to grow. Airports in Goma and Kavumu remain closed, and many public servants have gone without pay as the conflict disrupts daily life and services.

In a related development, nearly 250 South African troops deployed in DR Congo began returning home on Friday as part of a phased withdrawal.

The troops had been sent by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to support the Congolese army, but following the death of 20 soldiers during an M23 offensive, the mission began to scale down.

On Saturday, Keita also met with senior SADC officials to acknowledge their cooperation and solidarity amid ongoing challenges.

UN peacekeepers have been stationed in DR Congo since 1999, making it one of the UN's longest and most complex missions.