

DRC conflict overshadows African summit

AFP- A dramatic escalation of the conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and swingeing US humanitarian aid cuts are set to dominate an African Union summit this week, overshadowing the election of its new chairman.

The 55-nation body meets from Friday in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa with Africa facing devastating conflicts in the DRC and Sudan – as well as US President Donald Trump's cuts to US development aid, which have hit the continent hard.

The African leaders represent some 1.5 billion people in a body long criticised for sluggishness, inefficiency and toothless statements.

Ahead of the main weekend summit, the leaders will hold an emergency session on Friday to discuss the violence in DRC, where the Rwandan-backed M23 armed group has routed the Congolese army to seize parts of the mineral-rich east.

The International Crisis Group says there is a high risk it will “morph into a multi-country confrontation in the Great Lakes recalling the horrors of the 1990s.”

The AU says all heads of state will attend, but it is not clear if Rwandan President Paul Kagame and his Congolese counterpart Felix Tshisekedi will meet in person.

It would be the first time since the recent escalation that has left thousands dead and half a million displaced.

Having captured the key provincial capital of Goma last month, M23 has pushed southwards, nearing the city of Bukavu.

“The AU has the capacity to be at the forefront of peace negotiations and to put pressure on everyone to avoid a new escalation,” said ICG researcher Liesl Louw-Vaudran.

A joint summit of eastern and southern African blocs last week called for a ceasefire but failed to mention Rwanda's involvement, which is widely documented, including by the United Nations.

After a two-day lull, fighting resumed some 70 kilometres (40 miles) from Bukavu on Tuesday.

– New boss –

Angolan President Joao Lourenco, heavily involved for several years in futile mediation between Tshisekedi and Kagame, will take over the rotating presidency of the AU at the weekend – a ceremonial role that changes hands annually.

There will also be a new chairman – the AU's top job, managing operations and policies for four years – which is chosen by vote.

Three candidates are vying to replace Chad's Moussa Faki Mahamat, who has reached the two-term limit.

They are Djibouti's Foreign Minister Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, Kenyan opposition veteran Raila Odinga and Madagascar's ex-foreign minister Richard Randriamandrato.

The position was reserved for an East African this time.

Benjamin Auge, researcher at France's Institute of International Relations, said it was "impossible to say who will win".

Candidates need the backing of two-thirds of member states with the right to vote, excluding countries suspended following coups, including Gabon, Mali and Niger.

– Reparations row –

Also up for discussion is the issue of reparations for colonial-era abuses.

Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo called in 2023 for African leaders to seek damages for the transatlantic slave trade.

While some Western leaders have begun to acknowledge that history, opinions diverge among the continent's leaders on the amount and form of potential reparations.

Paul-Simon Handy, East Africa director at the Institute for Security Studies, said it was a bad time to broach the "divisive" issue.

"It comes at a time of global geopolitics where we need consensus" between African countries and their Western partners, he told AFP.

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