

US freezes Rwanda military assets over support for M23

The US says Rwanda violated last year's Washington Accord by backing M23 rebels in eastern DRC.

BY ANDREW BAGALA

The United States has frozen the assets of the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) and four of its top commanders, imposing sanctions over alleged support for M23 rebels in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The US accuses Rwanda of violating the Washington Accord, a peace deal signed last year, by backing the M23 rebel group.

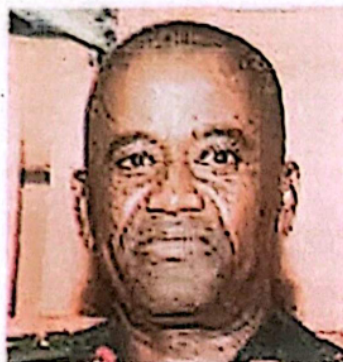
Targeted by the sanctions are RDF Chief of Defence Staff Gen Mubarakh Muganga, Army Chief of Staff Maj Gen Vincent Nyakarundi, RDF 5th Infantry Division Commander Maj Gen Ruki Karusisi and Special Operations Force Commander Maj Gen Stanislas Gashugi.

"...all property and interests in property of the designated or blocked persons described above that are in the United States or in the possession or control of U.S. persons are blocked and must be reported to OFAC. In addition, any entities that are owned, directly or indirectly, individually or in the aggregate, 50 percent or more by one or more blocked persons are also blocked," the US Treasury statement issued on Monday read.

The sanctions bar the RDF and its officers from using US-owned financial systems. Funds held in institutions linked to the US are now inaccessible.

The US warned that non-US nationals who assist the RDF or its officers to evade the sanctions risk civil or criminal penalties.

"Violations of US sanctions may result in the imposition of civil or crim-



Maj Gen Vincent Nyakarundi, Army Chief of Staff



Maj Gen Stanislas Gashugi, Special Operations Commander

inal penalties on US and foreign persons. Non-US persons are also prohibited from causing or conspiring to cause US persons to wittingly or unwittingly violate US sanctions, as well as engaging in conduct that evades US sanctions. OFAC may impose civil penalties for sanctions violations on a strict liability basis," the statement added.

Rwanda condemns sanctions

Rwanda described the sanctions as one-sided and unfair.

"The sanctions issued today [Monday] by the United States unjustly targeting only one party to the peace pro-



Gen Mubarakh Muganga, RDF Chief of Defence Staff



Maj Gen Ruki Karusisi, RDF 5th Infantry Division Commander

cess misrepresent the reality and distort the facts of the conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Consistent and indiscriminate drone attacks and ground offensives constitute clear violations of ceasefire agreements by the DRC, and continue to cost many lives," said the Rwanda Foreign Affairs Ministry.

The ministry added that protecting the country is a "badge of honour" for the RDF.

However, Rwanda reiterated its commitment to the peace process, including the disengagement of its forces in tandem with DRC obligations.

BACKGROUND

The RDF currently has over 5,000 soldiers deployed in United Nations peacekeeping missions, and thousands more in Mozambique assisting local forces to combat insurgents.

"Rwanda welcomes the resumption of the implementation process, including the Joint Oversight Committee, which requires an even-handed approach from all partners. Rwanda remains committed to delivering on all aspects of the Washington Accord, including the Regional Economic Integration Framework," the statement read.

Implications of sanctions

Prof Solomon Asimwe, an international relations and security studies expert at Nkumba University, said the sanctions could severely impact Rwanda's military operations.

"They would complicate defence procurements. Many international companies would see a risk in selling arms and services to the Rwanda Defence Force. It would also affect their logistics and linkages, potentially slowing down military operations in the region and abroad," Prof Asimwe said.

He warned of a ripple effect on neighbouring countries such as Uganda, which has defence cooperation deals with Kigali.

"Uganda might start fearing cooperating with Kigali on defence matters," said.

Prof Asimwe also recalled similar challenges in 1994, when Rwanda faced a UN arms embargo. Uganda was later accused of evading those sanctions by procuring arms on Rwanda's behalf, an allegation Kampala denied.

He noted that Rwanda could also struggle to maintain its commitments to peacekeeping missions unless the US waives related payments.