Insight Report: Congo (DRC)

M23, machine guns and marauders: threats to aviation

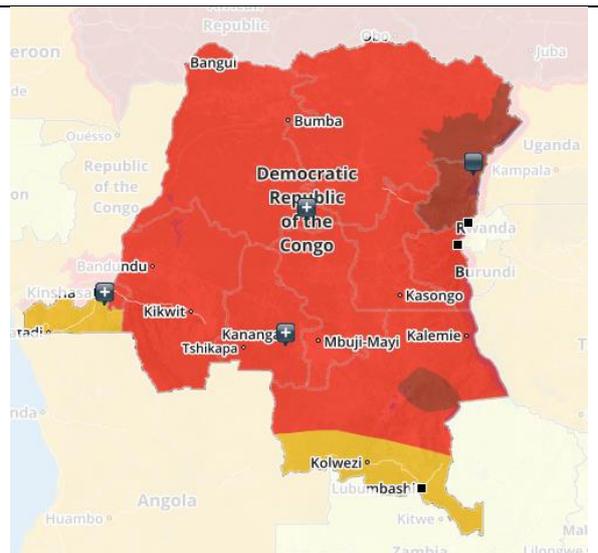### 27 March 2018

Democratic Republic of the Congo Travel Security Risk Rating

M **MEDIUM:** Kinshasa, southern Katanga, Kongo-Central

H **HIGH**

E **EXTREME:** North Kivu, Ituri, central and northern Katanga

Evacuation planning level: **STAND BY**

Key judgements

- **Congolese rebel groups** will continue to pose the greatest threats to aviation assets in Congo (DRC) in the medium to long term. **Aircraft operating at low altitudes** and utilising **ground facilities, such as airstrips and airfields, must** be prepared for possible rebel attack in the coming year. The **January 2017 downing of a contractor-piloted MI-24 Hind gunship in North Kivu province** and the **December 2017 attack on a UN peacekeeping force (MONUSCO) base at Semuliki** highlight the capability and intent of rebel forces. While such incidents typically only target government or military assets, there is a significant incidental risk of civil aviation being misidentified and targeted.

- **The risk to aviation operations in North Kivu province is likely to remain extreme, as rebel activity in this location, as highlighted by the frequency of incidents in 2017, is greatest** due to its proximity to several border regions. However, **eastern DRC as a whole** has a preponderance of rebel groups compared to the rest of the country, and **can be considered a higher risk area for flight operations**. Nevertheless, the situation in the rest of the country remains volatile and, as indicated by the ongoing rebellion in Kasai-Central and neighbouring provinces, **no area of the DRC can be considered immune to rebel operations.**

- **Diversion planning** will remain a concern for operators due to the size of the country, constraints on the security environment, and the lack of accommodation and medical and aviation support infrastructure. **Airfields outside DRC's borders may need to be considered to identify suitable diversion locations**.

- Aviation operators should enact proactive security measures at ground facilities and plan safe contingency diversion locations to ensure safe flight operations.

Latest developments

The witch's brew: Congolese insurgents and prior attacks on aviation

Since gaining independence in 1960, Congo (DRC) has had a chequered history of non-state actors seeking to destabilise the government for political or material gain, with aviation assets often being targeted during such action. Beginning with the death of a Cuban mercenary pilot known as 'El Toro', whose T-6 Harvard fighter was shot down during the Simba Rebellion in 1964, government aviation assets have been a preferred target, with the ability of rebel groups to conduct attacks growing in sophistication over the years. Man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS) and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) have widely proliferated as a result of captures of arms shipments and the supplying of rebel movements by outside interests.

This was shown in the next major attack on an aircraft in October 1998. Rebel forces opposed to then-president Laurent Kabila (in office 1997-2001) used an SA-7 shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile to shoot down a civilian Boeing 727 shortly after it took off from Kindu Airport (KND, FZOA; Maniema province), believing it was carrying government troops. More recently, attacks on air hubs have become a recurring trend. In 2013, a religious militia targeted the capital Kinshasa's N'djili Airport (FIH, FZAA) and in 2016, Kananga Airport (KGA, FZUA) in Kasai-Central province was attacked on three separate occasions by rebels. The security situation in the country remains poor, and two particular incidents described below highlight the continued threats to aviation assets in flight and on the ground.

Rebels resurgent: The return of the M23 group and a gunship down

The rebel March 23 Movement (M23) came to prominence in 2012 after seizing several towns and cities in North Kivu, including the provincial capital Goma. Their success was short-lived: the UN Force Intervention Brigade was able to rout the rebels in late 2013, and M23 accordingly called for a ceasefire, with a view to engaging in peace talks.
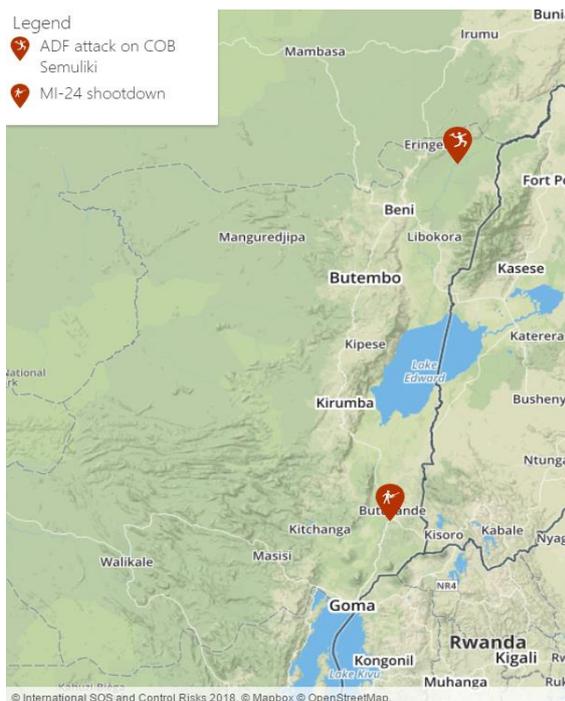
In January 2017, a Georgian-crewed Congolese Air Force MI-24 Hind gunship was shot down over North Kivu, after which at least one crew member was taken prisoner. Reports indicated that the gunship was downed by AAA, likely from either a Browning M2HB .50 calibre machine gun, or a DShK 12.7 mm heavy machine gun. The M23 claimed responsibility for the attack.

The downing of an MI-24 indicates that the group, or its remnants, had been retraining and rearming since the 2013 ceasefire and highlights the capabilities of rebel groups to target slow-flying aircraft at low altitudes. Colloquially known as the 'flying tank', the MI-24's combat record in Africa demonstrates its worth in counterinsurgency operations, though it remains vulnerable to surface to air fire.

Not so democratic: The Allied Democratic Forces' assault on the UN base in Semuliki

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) emerged in Uganda as a radical Islamist group and soon moved into DRC. The group's motivation in time became purely criminal, and it began to carry out attacks as a means of extorting the local populace. A 2016 attack in the city of Beni (North Kivu), in which at least 64 people were killed, was widely blamed on the ADF.

On 7 December 2017, the ADF carried out its highest-profile attack to date. Posing as Congolese soldiers, its members were able to infiltrate a MONUSCO base outside the town of Semuliki (North Kivu), close to the Ugandan border. By the time the attack was repelled, 15 UN peacekeepers had been killed and 53 others injured. Infiltrating and attacking a fortified UN base was beyond anything the ADF had previously attempted and highlighted both the capability and intent of the group and other rebel factions to target better-defended installations, including airports.

Outlook

Manpower and firepower

Despite an ongoing peacekeeping presence, **Congo (DRC) is likely to remain a hotbed of rebel activity**. Organised rebel groups such as the ADF, scattered holdouts from organisations such as M23, and tribal militias (known as the Mai-Mai) have all continued to operate despite continued efforts by the UN and the Congolese armed forces to eradicate them. While most rebel activity has occurred in eastern DRC, incidents have occurred elsewhere, such as in Kasai-Central and neighbouring provinces, which since 2016 have been experiencing an ongoing rebellion.

However, the east of the country **will remain the highest risk area for aviation operations due to the proliferation of weapons and the presence of increasingly confident rebel groups**. Aircraft operating to destinations in this area must have stringent flight planning and security measures. While the full extent of each individual rebel faction's arsenal is unclear, MANPADS and AAA are known to be present. While MANPADS pose the greater threat, due to their simplicity of operation and effectiveness against undefended targets, **AAA attacks are the most likely kinetic threat to aircraft operating at low altitudes.** Although government and UN aircraft are at the highest risk of attack, **there remains a significant incidental risk that civilian aircraft will be misidentified and targeted**, a precedent set by the 1998 incident in Kindu.

Given the December 2017 assault on the UN base, as well as the 2016 Kananga and 2013 Kinshasa airport attacks, airports and airbases must also be considered to be at risk. The ADF is likely to consider its attack on the Semuliki base to be a significant propaganda success, if not a material one, and this is likely to further embolden other rebel groups to execute such operations. A UN peacekeeping base would be expected to hold itself to a higher level of physical security and force protection than a Congolese airbase, and operators should enact proactive security measures to protect assets on the ground.

Recommendations to aviation risk managers

What you should do now

Aviation risk managers should ensure that, prior to all operations to DRC, aircrew are fully briefed on the security situation at their destinations. Flight plans should be checked to ensure that known hotspots of rebel activity are avoided. Diversion airports should be established in the event that a security incident

renders completing the journey impossible. Destinations outside DRC, such as Kigali (KGL, HRYR, Rwanda), may need to be considered depending on flight paths. For domestic flights, Kisangani (FKI, FZIC, Tshopo province), Lubumbashi (FBM, FZQA, Haut-Katanga province) and Kinshasa airports, the three major domestic facilities, can be considered the primary diversion locations, with other, smaller airfields used, as appropriate. We assess Goma (GOM, FZNA), Kinshasa and Lubumbashi to be suitable for overnight operations.
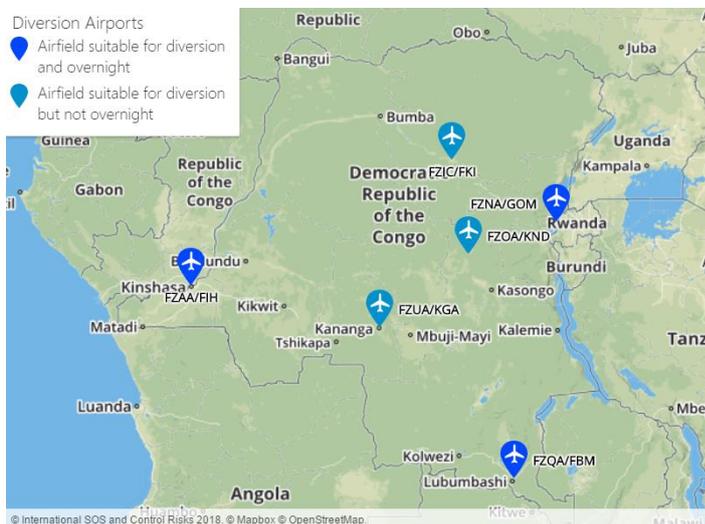
Aviation risk managers should keep abreast of developing security situations via a network of trusted local contacts for granular information, intelligence alerts from internal assets, and MedAire and Control Risks. Sufficient logistical precautions, particularly secure accommodation and transportation for aircrew, should be arranged well in advance if overnight operations are planned.

Operations over eastern DRC airspace, particularly North Kivu, should be avoided, if possible. However, certain operators such as cargo lines working for mining companies might find low Flight Level (FL) operations in this airspace unavoidable. In such a scenario, operators and crew should develop training plans and drills to react to incoming fire, including best practices for ensuring aircrew and aircraft survivability, and emergency landing procedures.

Additional measures should be taken to secure grounded aircraft, besides those installed and maintained by destination airports. These include stringent access control and vetting of personnel allowed to access the aircraft, utilising locks, tags and seals and securing the services of a private security company, if deemed necessary.

What to look for and how to respond

We do not foresee a dramatic deterioration in the aviation security environment in the next six months. Although rebel activity remains a concern, no group has announced or commenced an offensive akin to the M23's 2012 operations.

However, contingency plans must be in place, with the following occurrences representing the worst-case aviation security scenarios. While none of these instances would necessitate deferring all aviation operations to DRC, they would warrant tightening of security precautions and significantly raising thresholds for business-essential operations:

- A co-ordinated offensive by a rebel group/s against 'hard' military targets such as UN or Congolese bases, or a similar offensive targeting valuable commercial infrastructure, particularly airfields.

- Shootdowns of commercial aviation assets, particularly wide-bodied aircraft, similar to the 1998 Kindu incident. Further shootdowns of government aviation assets operated by experienced aircrew.

- Increase in attacks on aviation utilising MANPADS rather than AAA or seizures of MANPADS from rebel prisoners or weapons caches.

- A 'successful' attack by a rebel group on an airport or airfield, causing significant damage to airport infrastructure and grounded air assets.

Aviation security managers should maintain consistent contact with aircrew and embedded assets in DRC and should have logistical details logged and readily available. Contingency measures should be in place for quickly and efficiently withdrawing aircrew and air assets from EXTREME risk areas in the event of localised deterioration in the security situation and relocating them to more relatively stable areas of operation in the country.

For follow-up questions about the assessments or recommendations in this Report, please call your dedicated line and ask to speak with the Regional Security Centre.

Contributor

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