

## Summary

Relations between Rwanda and Burundi have deteriorated in recent weeks. In response to two recent attacks in Burundi by the RED-Tabara rebel group in December, the Burundian government closed its border with Rwanda after accusing Rwandan president of supporting the Red-Tabara and M23 rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Recent attacks in Burundi by the former marks a renewal of attacks on Burundian soil by the group, inactive in the country following a series of attacks in September 2021, including on the Bujumbura airport. The attacks also coincide with the recent withdrawal of the Burundian military forces from DRC.

## Recent events and developments

On December 11, 2023, the RED-Tabara rebel group clashed with the Burundian army in Gihanga, a border town with DRC killing three military officers. On December 22, 2023, the group also killed 20 civilians but claimed in their statement that they had killed 10 members of the security forces. The attack occurred in the town of Vugizo, Burundi, near Burundi's western border with DRC, where rebels are based. The group had launched its first attack in September in Burundi since 2021 near the economic capital Bujumbura in Bubanza province. In response to December attacks, Burundi, a member of the East African Community (EAC), closed its border with Rwanda due to concerns for an increase in attacks on large city hubs. Burundian President Evariste Ndayishimiye, along with DRC, further accused Rwanda of backing the Red-Tabara rebel group, a charge Rwanda denies. DRC President Felix Tshisekedi, also a member of the EAC, stated in December that if Rwanda were to persist in backing rebel groups, such as the RED-Tabara and M23, that continue to cause insecurity through terror attacks in his country and in Burundi, he will "... request parliament and Congress to authorize a declaration of war". The Burundian army, deployed with neighboring countries in eastern DRC since August 2022 as part of a joint EAC military force to counter rebel groups, withdrew its troops as the EAC mandate was not extended by DRC.

## Impact assessment

The recent escalation of tensions between Rwanda and Burundi will not only strain diplomatic relations, but also jeopardize the stability of the region, as it likely prevent future cooperation efforts on security matters. Notably, the recent attacks in Burundi pose a renewed security threat to Burundi as RED-Tabara showed an intention to renew its activities on its soil, which threatens to spread attacks deeper into Burundi. Due to the proximity of the economic capital Bujumbura to the DRC border, there is a higher risk of attacks in Bujumbura. Such attacks are not unthinkable as the rebel group carried out previous attacks in the airport and other civilian hubs in 2021, and most notably a car ambush in September 2023. Moreover, the withdrawal of military forces from the DRC border is likely to create a security void that will likely be capitalized by Red-Tabara to increase its activities. The potential for future attacks creates an inherent risk for travellers and staff based in Burundi, who could risk becoming unintended casualties in the event of an armed attack. Besides, the closure of the Rwandan border by Burundi may motivate rebel groups to increase the frequency of attacks to further deteriorate the relations between the two countries. In light of these developments, travellers operating in key areas such as Bujumbura, Gitega, Bubanza and Cibitoke provinces, and Muramvya are advised to exercise heightened caution.

## Advice from Forth Global

- Ensure all employees travelling to Burundi undertake three-day HEAT training prior to departure.
- Advise staff to abstain from disclosing their personal views on the political situation, in person and via social media.
- Advise staff to avoid large crowds.
- Continuously monitor local news and liaise with local partners to stay up to date with any developments in the region of operations.

## Customized advice

Please contact us for specific advice:

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