

Official claim of calm, admission of Masisi fighting

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GOMA, DR Congo, Sept 18 (AFP) - Calm has been restored to troubled Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the provincial governor said on Thursday, dismissing "lying rumours" aimed at undermining the regime.

Leonard Gafundi, the governor of the northeastern North Kivu province, told AFP that the methods used to restore order, following sporadic gunfire heard since the beginning of the week, were "a matter of military secrecy".

The governor did, however, recognise that fighting had taken place in the nearby Masisi region a month ago between DRC troops and Mai-Mai rebels and "Interahamwe" Hutu militiamen, but he rejected claims that several hundred people had been killed.

He also denied reports of major troop reinforcements coming to the region, where current President

Laurent Kabila late last year launched the rebellion that toppled Zaire's dictator Mobutu Sese Seko.

Tension had perceptibly dropped in Goma, but local residents and foreign sources have directly linked the end of the clashes to the arrival of fresh troops despatched by the authorities in Kinshasa.

Gafundi said that the Goma region - long a nestbed of ethnic hostilities - was calm in "spite of those who spread lying rumours to destabilise the regime".

However, a well-informed source contacted by AFP said that soldiers had been sent from the southern Katanga region to replace Tutsi troops. Previous reports claimed that unpopular Tutsis had been involved in the fighting.

Last Friday, the governor presented the new military authorities in north and south Kivu, on the borders with Tutsi-dominated Rwanda

and Burundi, to local officials.

"He didn't give their 'noms de guerre' but their real names," UN Children's Fund representative in Goma Lauchlan Munro said. "It was a sign of the authorities' willingness to show transparency in their security operations."

Roads to Sake on the way to Masisi were reopened to international agencies on Wednesday for the first time in several weeks, though vehicles had to travel under military escort.

The governor said that Mai-Mai tribesmen who had fought alongside Kabila and then gone their own way were "errant children. They were led astray and are now being integrated into the armed forces."

On Wednesday, aid workers and witnesses attested that uniformed men, variously described as DRC Tutsis or troops from Rwanda, raided Masisi last month and massacred up to 200 people.

The uniformed men set fire to homes in the town centre. Several public buildings including the hospital and school were also damaged, the sources said. Tutsi troops are notoriously unpopular with the local population.

A DRC journalist, who asked not to be identified, said the attack was in retaliation for an attack on Tutsi soldiers a few days earlier by Mai-Mai guerrillas from local tribes who believe in witchcraft practices.

"The authorities admitted that 48 people had been killed, he said. "But some sources have spoken of 200 dead." One soldier contacted by AFP said the toll could be much higher, adding that women, children and old people were believed to have been massacred.

However, governor Gafundi said the death tolls were "completely false" and refused to give any official figures.

He also said : "The liberation army did its job. Tutsis are not a nationality. Some live in Rwanda, others in the DRC and are part of our army," said Gafundi, himself a Tutsi.

Masisi serves as a base for activists of the Hutu extremist "Interahamwe" militia which massacred several hundred thousand Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994, and also for soldiers of the former Hutu nationalist regime ousted by the Tutsi-dominated regime now wielding power in Kigali.

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