

UN says 2,000 peacekeepers to leave eastern Congo in withdrawal's first phase

KINSHASA, Jan 13 (Reuters) - About 2,000 U.N. troops will leave restive eastern areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo by the end of April in the first phase of the peacekeeping mission's planned withdrawal from the country, the head of mission said on Saturday.

The U.N. Security Council approved the end of the mission in December following a request by Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi in September to fast-track the withdrawal of the peacekeepers.

The currently 13,500-strong force, known as MONUSCO, took over from an earlier U.N. operation in 2010 to help quell insecurity in the east of the Central African country, where armed groups fight over territory and resources.

But in recent years, its presence has become increasingly unpopular for what critics say is a failure to protect civilians against militia groups, sparking deadly protests.

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