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Italian firm to provide surveillance drone for UN in Congo

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REUTERS Michelle Nichols August 2, 2013

By Michelle Nichols

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - The United Nations said on Thursday it has procured an unarmed surveillance drone from Italian defense electronics firm Selex ES, a unit of Finmeccanica, that will be deployed in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the coming weeks.

It will be the first time the United Nations has used such equipment and, if the trial use by peacekeepers in eastern Congo is successful, officials and diplomats also hope the drones could be used by missions in Ivory Coast and South Sudan.

"Unarmed UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) will allow our peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo to monitor the movements of armed groups and protect the civilian population more efficiently," U.N. spokesman Martin Nesirky told reporters.

"The selected vendor is the Italian company Selex ES. The UAV is known as the Falco and is designed to be a medium altitude, medium endurance surveillance platform capable of carrying a range of payloads including several types of high resolution sensors," Nesirky said.

Thick forests, rugged terrain and the scarcity of roads on Congo's eastern border with Rwanda and Uganda have complicated U.N. peacekeepers' efforts to control the resource-rich area.

Congo and U.N. peacekeepers have been battling a year-long insurgency by M23 rebels. U.N. experts have accused Rwanda of sending troops and weapons across the border to support the M23. Rwanda denies the accusation.

"The deployment of the UAV is planned in the coming weeks," Nesirky said.

U.N. peacekeeping chief Herve Ladsous, told Reuters earlier this month that the United Nations had signed the commercial contract for the surveillance drone on July 12, but did not initially name the company.

The United Nations has also deployed a 3,000-strong Intervention Brigade as part of its Congo mission. The brigade has been charged with aggressively neutralizing armed groups and is this week carrying out its first operation in eastern Congo.

The U.N. peacekeeping mission, known as MONUSCO, said on Tuesday its troops would disarm, by force if necessary, anyone other than members of the Congolese security forces found carrying weapons within the zone after a 48-hour grace period.

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The United Nations has also set aside money to deploy surveillance drones eventually in Ivory Coast to monitor its border with Liberia following a recommendation by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and a request from the West African country.

Ban has also suggested surveillance drones as an option for the U.N. Security Council to consider to boost the effectiveness of the world body's peacekeeping force in South Sudan.

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