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Shedding Light on the Conflict Between the M23 and the Congolese Army

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Abstract

The conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has intensified significantly, with the Rwandan-backed M23 rebels seizing Goma in January 2025, despite opposition from U.N. peacekeepers, African defense forces, local militias, and European mercenaries. The offensive has resulted in nearly 3,000 deaths, displaced 500,000 people, and threatens to spark a full-scale regional war involving Rwanda, Congo, and neighboring countries. As Rwanda defends its military involvement and Congo responds with cross-border shelling, the crisis poses risks to global supply chains, international stability, and millions of vulnerable civilians. The DRC has become the center of one of the world's deadliest humanitarian crises. This briefing paper examines the M23 rebel group, the Congolese military, active armed groups in the DRC, and the factors behind the recent escalation in fighting.

Introduction

The M23 rebels, backed by Rwanda and led by Tutsis, have escalated their clashes with the Democratic Republic of Congo's military in the eastern region, leading to significant casualties and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. This intensification of violence, rooted in a long-standing conflict, has raised fears of a full-scale war between Congo and Rwanda, with the potential to involve neighboring nations and regional military forces such as South Africa, Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Malawi (Kasongo 2024). In early 2025, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) crisis intensified when M23 rebels, backed by Rwanda, seized Goma—North Kivu's provincial capital and eastern DRC's largest city—despite opposition from UN peacekeepers, African defense forces, local militias, and European mercenaries (International Crisis Group 2025).

The M23 advance resulted in nearly 3,000 deaths, including the provincial military governor, and forced approximately 500,000 people to flee, adding to the over two million already displaced by the ongoing conflict (Peltier 2025). UN experts report that Rwanda has deployed at least 4,000 troops with advanced weaponry in eastern DRC and is heavily involved in M23 operations (Lederer 2024). Rwanda justified its military presence on January 26 as necessary for its security and territorial integrity (MINAFFET 2025). That same day, Congolese forces began shelling Rwandan territory (Serwat 2025). After announcing a February 4 humanitarian ceasefire, M23 instead expanded into South Kivu province the following day and has threatened to continue its offensive toward Kinshasa, the DRC capital (BBC 2025). This escalating conflict risks developing into a regional or continental war, reminiscent of the devastating Congo Wars (1996-2003) that claimed millions of lives (Nantulya 2025). The conflict's impact extends beyond the immediate humanitarian crisis—with one million Congolese refugees abroad and 21 million people requiring urgent aid—to affect global supply chains dependent on DRC's critical minerals and set precedents for international law (United States Institute of Peace (USIP) 2024). The DRC currently represents one of the world's largest and deadliest humanitarian emergencies (Center for Preventive Action 2025). Amid these circumstances, this briefing paper explores the humanitarian impact of the conflict.

The M23 Rebel Group and the Congolese Military

The ethnic Tutsi-led M23 rebel organization says it is fighting to defend the rights of this minority community. They take their name from the March 23, 2009, peace deal, which they claim has been broken time and time again. Its swift conquest of land, notably Goma, following its formation in 2012, led to international censure and charges of war crimes and violations of human rights. Following their expulsion from Goma, they were severely defeated by a combined Congolese army and United Nations forces, and they were eventually forced to leave the Democratic Republic of the Congo. With assurances of Tutsi protection, M23 fighters agreed to join the national army after their defeat. They recommenced hostilities in 2021, arguing that these pledges had not been kept.

In contrast, national defense is the responsibility of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo, or FARDC), the country's military organization. Following the end of the Second Congo War in July 2003, the FARDC was rebuilt as part of the peace process (Wikipedia, 2025). The Congolese military has divisions on the ground, in the air, and at sea. Tanks and armored vehicles are used to help the ground forces, and the maritime division keeps an eye on rivers, lakes, and coastal seas. Protecting the DRC's airspace is the responsibility of the air division. All branches of the Congolese Armed Forces are under the president's ultimate command as the supreme commander (Whika, 2014). The FARDC's total strength is estimated at around 100,000 active personnel as of 2019, with approximately 80,000 serving in the army, 7,000 in the navy, 2,000 in the air force, and 10,000 in the Republican Guard. The military primarily relies on second-hand Russian and Soviet weaponry obtained from Ukraine and other former Warsaw Pact countries, along with some equipment from Brazil and France. The majority of this military hardware was acquired during the period from 1970 to 2000. President Félix Tshisekedi serves as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, while Crispin Atama Tabe holds the position of Minister of Defence (Wikipedia, 2025). The Chief of Staff General is in charge of a Joint Staff, which is part of the Congolese Armed Forces' unified organizational paradigm. At several administrative levels, including national, provincial, district, and territory, each branch of the military upholds its own staff hierarchy.

Armed Groups Active in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

The DRC hosts over 120 armed groups with diverse agendas operating primarily in the eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri. Major longstanding groups since the 1990s include the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and National Liberation Forces (FNL). More recent significant actors include M23 and the Cooperative for Development of the Congo (CODECO). Community-based Mai-Mai militias have been active since the late 1990s and early 2000s, formed to defend local territories against other armed groups. The Mai-Mai Yakutumba represents one such militia recently engaged in significant clashes with the Congolese armed forces (FARDC). These various groups are typically led by warlords, traditional tribal elders, village leaders, or politically motivated resistance fighters, and many sustain their operations by exploiting local grievances and natural resources. (Lea Mehari Redae 2023)

What Caused the Recent Escalation in Fighting?

The current conflict has multiple layers of complexity, triggered by failed peace negotiations and M23's recent offensive. To understand the situation, it's helpful to examine three distinct dimensions: At the local level, conflicts center around Congolese identity politics, ethnic tensions, competition for valuable minerals like gold and coltan, and disputes over fertile land—all creating immediate, ground-level drivers of violence. The national context features President Félix Tshisekedi leading a fundamentally weak government with questionable legitimacy, having initially gained power through a contested process in 2019 and maintaining it after problematic elections in 2023. Congo's security forces contribute to instability by being simultaneously ineffective and exploitative, often harassing the civilians they're meant to protect. Regionally, foreign armed groups (particularly from Rwanda) and the strained relationship between Presidents Tshisekedi and Kagame play crucial roles. The breakdown of peace talks between the two countries in December, followed by canceled leadership negotiations, preceded M23's January advance toward Goma. (Reid and Ferragamo 2025)

What Are the Humanitarian Consequences of the Conflict?

The unending conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has made matters worse in a country that already has more than 6 million displaced people and one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Over 4.6 million internally displaced people live in the eastern regions of North Kivu and South Kivu. The fighting in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has displaced 400,000 people in just this year alone (The Guardian, 2025). The DRC also has a high rate of sexual violence linked to conflicts, which has terrible effects on its people. Gang rape, genital mutilation, torture, and the intentional spread of sexually transmitted diseases are among the serious abuses that are commonly involved in these crimes. The UN Secretary-General's report claims that as political and security problems worsen, sexual assault is being used as a weapon of war, torture, and vengeance. Vivian van de Perre, the deputy head of Monusco, revealed in February 2025 that hundreds of women were raped and burned alive during a huge prison escape purportedly orchestrated by M23. Sexual violence has been widespread in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo since 2020, particularly in the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri, and Tanganyika. MONUSCO reported 701 cases of sexual violence related to conflicts in 2022, including 11 men, 187 girls, and 503 women. Non-state armed groups carried out the majority of these attacks, while state actors from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and its allies carried out the remaining ones.

As per the October 10, 2022, UN Secretary General's Report on Children and Armed Conflict in the DRC, sexual violence remained the most common violation attributed to government forces. The primary perpetrators of this violation were elements of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or FARDC (Mehari Redae 2023). Survivors of pervasive sexual abuse in the Democratic Republic of Congo suffer from long-term trauma and physical and psychological impairments, including HIV infections. Female genital mutilation and assaults with foreign objects, including sticks, knives, and firearms, are reported. Despite some progress, including the prosecution and conviction of 22 members of the Armed Forces, 11 officers of the Congolese National Police, and 18 civilian men for conflict-related sexual violence in December 2022, conviction rates are still shockingly low, which deters victims from reporting these crimes. This is in spite of the increased demands for accountability.

According to data published by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in February 2023, the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has led to an

unprecedented displacement of 6.9 million people. Over 1 million Congolese refugees and asylum seekers have escaped to neighboring nations, while 5.8 million have been displaced within the DRC. Additionally, more than 500,000 refugees and asylum seekers from other countries have sought safety within the DRC's borders. The violence, especially in North Kivu province in the east, has driven people from their homes within the country, leaving many in urgent need of aid. As of October 2023, approximately 5.6 million internally displaced people are concentrated in the eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri, and Tanganyika, with the ongoing conflict—particularly involving M23—identified as the main cause of this displacement. North Kivu alone accounts for over 2.3 million displaced individuals, with at least 410,000 people forced to flee since early 2023. Around 75,000 have sought safety at the Lushagala site near Goma, one of numerous improvised locations and collective centers in the Goma and Nyiragongo areas. Another camp houses over 585,000 displaced people. These spontaneous settlements now shelter 25% of North Kivu's more than 2.3 million internally displaced persons.

Conclusion

The escalating conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between the Congolese army and Rwandan-backed M23 rebels represents not only a dire humanitarian crisis but also a significant threat to regional and global stability. The capture of Goma by M23, despite the presence of international peacekeeping forces, underscores the failure of current strategies to address the root causes of the conflict. The involvement of Rwanda, with its alleged support for M23, has further complicated the situation, risking a broader regional war reminiscent of the devastating Congo Wars of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The humanitarian toll is staggering, with millions displaced, thousands killed, and widespread reports of sexual violence and other atrocities. The conflict has also disrupted global supply chains reliant on the DRC's critical minerals, highlighting the interconnectedness of local instability and global economic systems. The persistence of over 120 armed groups in the region, each with its own agenda, reflects the deep-seated issues of governance, ethnic tensions, and resource exploitation that continue to fuel the violence.

To prevent further escalation and address the crisis, a multifaceted approach is urgently needed. This includes robust diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions between the DRC and Rwanda, accountability for human rights violations, and a renewed commitment to peacebuilding and governance reforms within the DRC. The international community must also prioritize humanitarian aid and support for displaced populations while addressing the economic drivers of conflict, such as the illicit trade in minerals. Without decisive action, the DRC risks descending into further chaos, with catastrophic consequences for its people, the region, and the world. The time to act is now, before the crisis spirals into an even greater catastrophe.

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