



Congolese soldiers drive along the road from Beni to the Ugandan border. The Defense Post Photo: Alexis Huguet/AFP

THE **SECURITY SITUATION** IN EASTERN DRC: 2023 REPORT



A Congolese government soldier looks on in the Masisi, Congo. Picture: Sputnik Africa AP/Themba Hadebe



People displaced by fighting between the M23 armed group and Congolese government forces gather north of Goma, DRC. Picture: AP Photo/Jerome Delay

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADF:	Allied Democratic Forces
AFDL:	Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire
APCLS:	Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo
CMC:	Coalition for Movements of Change
CODECO:	Cooperative for the Development of Congo
DRC:	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EAC:	Eastern African Community
FARDC:	Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
FDLR:	Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda
FNL:	National Liberation Front (Burundi)
FPIC:	Front for Patriotic and Integrationist Congolese
FRPI:	Patriotic Resistance Front in Ituri
IDP:	Internally displaced person
M23:	March 23 Movement
MONUSCO:	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
MP:	Member of Parliament
NAR:	Never Again Rwanda
NGO:	Non-governmental organization
RCD:	Rally for Congolese Democracy
UN:	United Nations
UPDF:	Uganda People's Defense Force
USD:	United States dollar
WASH:	Water, sanitation, and hygiene
WFP:	World Food Programme

ABSTRACT

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the complex and multilayered security and humanitarian crisis in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) as of 2023. Drawing on a wide range of sources, it traces the historical roots of the conflict from the colonial era through the turbulent post-independence period, marked by regional upheavals, proxy wars, and the proliferation of domestic and foreign armed groups.

The resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) rebellion in 2022, following years of dormancy, has dramatically escalated violence and displacement in the North Kivu and Ituri provinces. The Congolese armed forces (FARDC) have launched major operations against the M23, at times in collaboration with local militias, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) rebel group, and foreign mercenaries. This has triggered a spiral of retaliatory attacks and civilian abuses by all sides.

Meanwhile, the region remains beset by a patchwork of other armed groups vying for control over territory and resources. In Ituri, the Cooperative for the Development of Congo (CODECO) militia has intensified its assaults on civilians, while the Allied Democratic Force (ADF) has taken advantage of the security vacuum to escalate attacks. In South Kivu, a toxic brew of communal tensions, foreign rebels, and Burundian meddling has sparked a new wave of violence and displacement.

A unifying thread across these conflicts is the surge in hate speech, ethnic scapegoating, and

targeted violence against specific communities, particularly the Tutsi and Banyamulenge. This rhetoric—at times echoed by the Congolese authorities and fueled by the perceived links between Tutsi communities and the M23—has translated into alarming levels of persecution, massacres, and economic blockades against these vulnerable groups.

The report delves into the complex interplay of factors driving the violence, from the illicit exploitation of natural resources and weapons trafficking to regional power struggles and the perverse incentives created by a war economy. It highlights the Congolese state's glaring incapacity to protect civilians, assert control over armed groups, and implement governance reforms.

On the humanitarian front, the report paints a devastating picture of the human toll of the crisis. As of late 2023, more than 7.2 million people were internally displaced in eastern DRC, while nearly one million had fled to neighboring countries. Food insecurity, disease outbreaks, and attacks on aid workers have compounded the suffering. Despite soaring needs, donor funding for the humanitarian response has fallen woefully short.

The report argues that breaking the cycle of violence will require concerted action to address the interlocking drivers of conflict at the local, national, and regional levels. Key recommendations include:

1. Protecting civilians and ensuring accountability for grave abuses through strengthened justice

mechanisms and security sector reform;

2. Disarming and demobilizing armed groups through community-based reintegration programs and local peacebuilding initiatives;
3. Promoting inclusive political dialogue between the government, opposition, civil society, and marginalized communities to address legitimate grievances;
4. Investing in the region's socioeconomic recovery and providing alternative livelihoods for youth and the displaced;
5. Formalizing the mining sector to cut off armed group financing and criminal networks;
6. Enhancing regional diplomacy to ease tensions between the DRC and its neighbors, and end cross-border meddling;
7. Scaling up humanitarian assistance and ensuring unfettered access to aid in conflict zones.

Ultimately, this report stresses that while external support has a vital role to play, the primary impetus for peace must come from within the DRC itself. Courageous Congolese leadership, sustained citizen engagement, and a renewal of the social contract will be indispensable to the long and arduous process of stitching back together a nation torn asunder by decades of conflict. The international community must not abandon the DRC at this critical juncture—but it is the Congolese people who hold the key to a brighter, more peaceful future.

FOREWORD

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has endured decades of unrelenting conflict, with its eastern provinces bearing the brunt of violence and instability. This annual report, titled “The Security Situation in Eastern DRC: 2023 Report,” seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted security and humanitarian crises that have plagued this region. Our examination delves into the historical roots of the conflict, tracing its genesis from the colonial era through post-independence turmoil, regional tensions, and proxy wars, to the persistent instability that characterizes the present day.

The resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) rebellion in 2022 has significantly exacerbated the violence and displacement in North Kivu province, prompting major military operations by the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) and their allies. This report meticulously documents the ensuing cycle of retaliatory attacks and civilian abuses. Additionally, it addresses the pervasive presence of numerous armed groups, each vying for control over the region’s valuable resources, which further complicates the security landscape.

One of the gravest concerns highlighted in this report is the alarming rise in hate speech, ethnic scapegoating, and targeted violence against specific communities, notably the Tutsi and Banyamulenge. These dynamics, often fueled by inflammatory rhetoric from various quarters, have led to severe persecution and human rights abuses. The report also underscores the intricate interplay of factors driving the conflict, including illicit resource exploitation, arms trafficking, and the pernicious incentives created by a war economy.

The humanitarian impact of the crisis is profound. As of late 2023, over 7.2 million people have been internally displaced within eastern DRC, with nearly one million seeking refuge in neighboring countries. The report provides a stark depiction of the human suffering caused by food insecurity, disease outbreaks, and attacks on aid workers, compounded by insufficient donor funding for the humanitarian response.

Breaking the cycle of violence in eastern DRC necessitates a multifaceted approach, addressing local, national, and regional drivers of conflict. This report

offers key recommendations, including strengthened justice mechanisms, security sector reform, disarmament and demobilization of armed groups, inclusive political dialogue, investment in socioeconomic recovery, formalization of the mining sector, and enhanced regional diplomacy.

Ultimately, while external support is crucial, the report emphasizes that the primary impetus for peace must originate from within the DRC. It calls for courageous Congolese leadership, sustained citizen engagement, and a renewed social contract to navigate the arduous path toward a peaceful future. The international community’s role remains indispensable, yet the Congolese people hold the key to realizing lasting stability and prosperity.

This report is an urgent call to action, urging all stakeholders to redouble their efforts in addressing the complex and deeply entrenched challenges facing eastern DRC. Through collective resolve and coordinated action, we can aspire to build a more secure and hopeful future for the people of this beleaguered region.

BACKGROUND

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been mired in conflict and instability for decades, with the eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri bearing the brunt of the violence. The roots of this protracted crisis are complex and multifaceted, stretching back to the colonial era and intertwined with the turbulent history of the wider Great Lakes region.

Colonial legacy and post-independence turmoil

The origins of the DRC's woes can be traced to its brutal colonization by Belgium's King Leopold II in the late 19th century. The Congo Free State, as it was then known, was ruled as Leopold's private fiefdom, with the Congolese people suffering forced labor, torture, and mass killings. They were victims of the ruthless extraction of rubber and ivory, with millions perishing in one of the worst atrocities of the colonial age.

Belgium took over the administration of the territory in 1908. Its rule was characterized by systemic racism, economic exploitation, and divide-and-rule tactics that pitted different ethnic groups against each other.

When the Congo gained independence in 1960, it was ill-prepared for self-rule. The country quickly descended into chaos, with the attempted secession of mineral-rich Katanga province, the assassination of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, and a series of coups that brought dictator Mobutu Sese Seko to power in 1965.

Mobutu's 32-year kleptocratic reign, supported by the United States (US) and other Western powers as a Cold War bulwark against communism, entrenched a venal political culture and left the Congolese state hollowed out. Mobutu stoked ethnic nationalism while privatizing key institutions for personal gain. By the 1990s, the country, then known as Zaire, was a de-facto failed state, with a shattered economy and largely collapsed infrastructure.¹

Regional upheaval and the Congo wars

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in neighboring Rwanda was a critical inflection point for eastern Zaire. More than a million mostly Hutu refugees, including many genocidaires, flooded across the border into the Kivus, drastically reshaping the region's demography and power dynamics. The refugee camps soon became militarized, with the Hutu extremists, the Interahamwe, and Zairian Hutu militias, launching attacks into Rwanda.

In 1996, Rwanda and Uganda backed the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL), a rebel group led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, to overthrow Mobutu, citing his support for the genocidaires. As the AFDL swept across the country, elements within it allegedly carried out massacres of Hutu refugees. Mobutu fled and Kabila declared himself president in 1997, renaming the country the 'Democratic Republic of the Congo.'

¹ N'Gbanda Nzambo Ko Atumba, H. (1998). *Ainsi sonne la Glas! Les derniers jours du maréchal Mobutu*. Paris: Gideppe Editions.

However, relations between Kabila and his Rwandan and Ugandan backers quickly soured. In 1998, they sponsored another rebellion, the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), touching off the cataclysmic Second Congo War. The conflict, often dubbed 'Africa's World War,'² drew in eight African countries and dozens of armed groups. Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia intervened to prop up Kabila, while Rwanda and Uganda backed the RCD and a Ugandan proxy, the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC). All sides allegedly committed atrocities and exploited the DRC's mineral wealth to finance their war efforts.

The war formally ended in 2003 after a peace deal and the formation of a transitional government. However, its horrific toll—an estimated five million dead, mostly from war-induced disease and malnutrition—and the fragmentation of the east into a patchwork of armed groups set the stage for endemic conflict. The DRC's weak state, barely able to project authority outside the capital Kinshasa and other urban areas, left a dangerous power vacuum.

The Kivus' intractable conflicts

In the aftermath of the war, the Kivus remained a tinderbox of local, national, and regional conflicts. A toxic brew of long-standing communal tensions, land disputes, struggles over resources, foreign insurgents, and

² Prunier, G. (2009). *Africa's world war: Congo, the Rwandan genocide, and the making of a continental catastrophe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

foreign-sponsored proxy forces perpetuated cycles of violence.

The Hutu-dominated Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), formed by Rwandan genocidaires who fled to Congo after 1994, emerged as one of the main armed groups in the east. The FDLR's presence in the DRC, its stated goal of overthrowing Rwanda's post-genocide government, and its reported links to some elements of the Congolese army have compelled Rwanda to closely monitor developments in the Kivus. Given the FDLR's record of attacks inside Rwanda, including a deadly 2019 incursion, and the threat it poses to Rwanda's security and economy, including its vital tourism facilities, Rwanda has a legitimate stake in countering the group.

The extent and impact of Rwanda's direct involvement in the Kivus remain a matter of debate among analysts and regional actors. Other major armed groups included the Congolese Tutsi-led National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), the Ugandan Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Burundian Red Tabara, and various Mai-Mai community militias. These armed actors, at times allied and at times opposed to the Congolese state, have vied for control over the region's mineral riches, including gold, tin, tantalum, and tungsten. The illicit mineral trade, often facilitated by the DRC's lack of control over its borders and abetted by neighboring countries, criminal networks, and multinational corporations, is said to be a key driver of conflict.³

³ *There are, however, analysts who question this contention. See, for example: Vogel, C.N. (2022). Conflict minerals, inc. War, profit and white saviourism in eastern Congo. London: Hurst Publishers.*

Communal violence among the Tutsi, Hutu, Hunde, and other ethnic groups, often manipulated by political and military elites, added another layer of complexity. Massacres, rapes, and displacement became grimly routine, with civilians bearing the brunt of all the mayhem. The 2004 Bukavu crisis saw fierce clashes between the Congolese army and Tutsi-led dissidents, displacing more than 100,000 people. Similar flare-ups occurred periodically over the next decade.

Regional tensions and proxy wars

The eastern DRC's conflicts have been inextricable from wider regional dynamics, especially the fraught relations among the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda. Uganda and Rwanda have repeatedly intervened in the region overtly and covertly, citing the presence of hostile armed groups, the FDLR for Rwanda, and the ADF for Uganda, as justification.

In turn, Congolese leaders have often stoked anti-Rwandan and anti-Tutsi sentiment for political gain, casting their country as a victim of foreign aggression. This has fueled a vicious circle of suspicion, mistrust, and proxy warfare. The 2008 Goma Conference brought Rwanda and the DRC together to address the FDLR threat. However, its provisions remain largely unimplemented.

The 2012–2013 March 23 Movement (M23) rebellion, allegedly backed by Rwanda and to a lesser extent Uganda, underscored the region's incendiary potential. The Tutsi-led group routed the Congolese army and briefly seized Goma

before being defeated by a robust UN force.

The M23 crisis triggered a rift between Kigali and Kinshasa that persists to this day.

Chronic instability and elusive solutions

The DRC's continued volatility in the decade since, reflects the elusiveness of lasting solutions. Numerous peace agreements, United Nations (UN) resolutions, and regional initiatives have failed to break the cycle of violence. Internationally supported efforts to reform the Congolese security sector and extend state authority have faltered.

Elected presidents Joseph Kabila and Felix Tshisekedi promised new eras, only for their governments to remain hobbled by weak institutions, rampant corruption, and an inability or unwillingness to address the underlying grievances of the people of the east. The UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has been criticized for failing to protect civilians and at times abetting armed groups.

A dangerous undercurrent of xenophobia and ethnic hatred continues to permeate the region's politics. Hate speech demonizing the Tutsi and other minorities is rife on Congolese social media and at times in official discourse. The government of Rwanda has repeatedly accused Kinshasa of stoking anti-Rwandan sentiment and collaborating with Hutu extremists.

More broadly, competition for the DRC's extraordinary natural wealth remains arguably the biggest driver of conflict. The

Congolese state's inability to marshal these resources for the public good, and their continued hijacking by armed groups and their local and foreign business partners, perpetuates a rapacious war economy.

Hundreds of thousands of Congolese languish in squalid displaced people's camps as violence ebbs and flows. Most ex-combatants, lacking livelihoods and social support, drift back into militias. With millions of unemployed youths and a state incapable of imposing order, the east offers fertile ground for armed mobilization.

Compounding the crisis is the erosion of traditional peacebuilding methods in many communities torn apart by decades of conflict. The unraveling of customary dispute resolution mechanisms and the fraying of communal bonds render mediation and reconciliation efforts more difficult. Climate shocks in this ecologically fragile region add another layer of stress.

The path forward

Reversing eastern DRC's spiral of violence will require concerted action to address the interconnected local, national, and regional drivers of conflict. Key priorities include:

- Protecting civilians and ending impunity for serious crimes via strengthened local and international justice mechanisms;
- Comprehensive security sector reform to create an accountable, rights-respecting Congolese military and police;
- Demobilizing armed groups and reintegrating ex-combatants into civilian life through community-based programs;
- Promoting inclusive political dialogue between the government, its political rivals, civil society, and marginalized communities to address legitimate grievances;
- Investing in the east's social and economic reconstruction to create opportunities for youth and the displaced;
- Formalizing and regulating the mining sector to cut off armed groups and criminal networks;
- Regional diplomacy to ease tensions between the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda and commit to non-interference;
- Empowering local mediators, women peacebuilders, and traditional authorities to rebuild communal trust.

None of these efforts will be easy or yield results overnight. Eastern DRC's conflicts are among the world's most complex, and the country's tragic history will continue to shape its trajectory. But with enlightened Congolese leadership, support from regional actors (including neighbors), sustained international engagement, and, most importantly, the resilience and determination of the Congolese people, a gradual pathway out of the abyss can materialize. The region's breathtaking human and natural potential offer hope for a brighter future—if the world does not look away.

INTRODUCTION

The security situation in the eastern DRC remained extremely volatile throughout 2023. Numerous armed groups operated in the region, clashing frequently with each other and Congolese government forces. This violence was particularly acute in the eastern provinces of North Kivu and Ituri, where the resurgence of the M23 in 2022 after years of dormancy amplified the long-running crisis.

The eastern DRC holds vast reserves of valuable natural resources, including gold, diamonds, and coltan. Control over and exploitation of these resources are a key driver of conflict, with armed groups fighting to capture mining sites and trade routes. Many of these groups use the profits from illicit resource trade to fund their activities. They also frequently extort the local population through illegal ‘taxation,’ such as taking cuts of agricultural yields or imposing fees at checkpoints. Recruitment tactics range from offering better livelihoods or cash incentives, to outright forcible conscription.

Despite the succession of different political regimes over the years, the Congolese government has consistently failed to resolve the entrenched intercommunal and ethnic conflicts in the east. Cycles of appeasement and temporary calm have always given way to a resurgence of violence.

The characteristics of armed groups causing insecurity are highly perplexing. Many of the groups claim that they are defending their lands against foreign occupants,

implying Kinyarwanda-speaking populations, particularly the Tutsis. Some others claim they seek to protect their lands from invaders, and in specific cases, ensure the return of their families who were driven into exile in especially Rwanda and Uganda. Other groups are foreign insurgents that have turned some areas in the Kivus into their headquarters, from where they seek to topple some of the political regimes of bordering countries. These include Red Tabara, the National Forces of Liberation (FNL), Popular Forces of Burundi (FOREBU), FDLR, and Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). The ADF, with a terrorist element that distinguishes it from the others, no longer has the same political struggles as it claimed in the 1990s due to its collaboration with the Islamic State. Today, they are seeking to Islamize and radicalize the populations in the areas where they operate.

This report provides an overview of the major security incidents and dynamics that affected eastern DRC throughout 2023. First, it outlines the general security situation and the evolving activities of key armed groups in the main conflict-affected provinces. It examines the dynamics of the conflicts since the resurgence of the M23, their evolution and management mechanisms in North Kivu, the ongoing violence in Ituri, and the re-emergence of intercommunal conflicts in South Kivu between the Barundi and Bafuliro communities. The conclusion recaps the key trends and issues that must be addressed to break the cycles of violence and instability.

Never Again Rwanda’s (NAR’s) mission to advance human rights, conflict resolution, and good governance is inseparable from addressing the long-standing drivers of instability in eastern DRC. This report, grounded in a clear-eyed historical analysis, provides an invaluable foundation for that vital work. It is a resource that can shape NAR’s advocacy, programming, and partnerships in service of a more peaceful and prosperous future for this long-suffering region.

Overview of the security situation

Since the M23 armed group re-emerged in March 2022, intense violence has convulsed North Kivu and Ituri provinces. Congolese government forces (FARDC) have launched major military operations against the M23 in Rutshuru, Masisi, Nyiragongo, and Lubero territories, at times in collaboration with local militias, the Rwandan FDLR rebel group, and foreign mercenaries. The M23 has responded with its offensives, capturing key towns and strategic areas. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been displaced by the back-and-forth fighting, which has been marked by widespread abuses against local populations.

Meanwhile, in Ituri province, the Cooperative for the Development of Congo (CODECO) Front for Patriotic and Integrationist Congolese (FPIC)-Chini ya Kilima militia has escalated its attacks on civilians, especially those from the Hema community. The CODECO has long conflicted with the Zaire militia, which it accuses of association with the

Hema. FPIC-Chini ya Kilima is a more recently formed group that appears to be collaborating closely with the CODECO in its anti-Hema violence. The attacks have taken on an increasingly ethnic dimension.

North Kivu

The security situation in Masisi and Rutshuru territories remains highly unstable, with frequent clashes between the M23, FDLR, and local militias such as the Mai-Mai. In Rutshuru, these groups are fighting for control of lucrative cross-border smuggling routes into Rwanda and Uganda. In Masisi, much of the violence targets the Tutsi community, which is regularly accused of supporting the M23 rebellion. The FDLR and Mai-Mai groups have burned villages, abducted and killed civilians, and looted large numbers of cattle from Tutsi herders.

In Lubero territory, local Mai-Mai militias, now rebranded as 'Wazalendo' (patriot) groups, are imposing a reign of terror on civilians through arbitrary arrests, kidnappings for ransom, and illegal checkpoints. These militias claim to be protecting the local population from the M23 and other foreign threats, but they prey upon civilians and engage in criminal rackets.

The situation in Beni territory also remains perilous. The ADF, a Ugandan Islamist armed group with ties to the Islamic State, continues to attack civilians and ambush military patrols despite the ongoing joint operations against them by the FARDC and Ugandan army (UPDF). The dense forests of Virunga National Park provide cover for the group to evade its pursuers and

maintain its bases. The ADF has been implicated in several recent mass killings and prison breaks in the area.

South Kivu

In the highlands of South Kivu province, the situation has taken an alarming turn. Banyamulenge civilians, another Congolese Tutsi community, are facing a surge in attacks and persecution by Mai-Mai groups and their allies in the Burundian Red Tabara and FNL militias. Mai-Mai forces have mobilized in response to the perceived threat from the Banyamulenge Twirwaneho and Gumino 'self-defense' militias.

In June, suspected Mai-Mai fighters attacked Banyamulenge displaced person camps in Minembwe, looting livestock and killing civilians. Several community leaders have reported receiving death threats. Hundreds of villages in Fizi, Uvira, and Mwenga territories have been burned to the ground by Mai-Mai, FNL, and Red Tabara fighters, displacing thousands of Banyamulenge who have fled to urban centers such as Uvira and Bukavu.

The Mai-Mai militias justify their actions by claiming the Banyamulenge are Rwandan proxies, painting the entire community as a dangerous fifth column threatening the integrity of the DRC. This rhetoric has been echoed by some local political and civil society leaders.

Ituri

The CODECO has stepped up its attacks on civilians and security forces in Djugu and Mahagi territories, forcing thousands to flee their villages. The fighters

killed more than 60 people and burned hundreds of homes in a series of raids in January alone. The group has been implicated in several massacres, including one in which 22 people were burned alive in a hospital. The FARDC had touted a ceasefire agreement with the CODECO in 2022, but the militia never fully disarmed and has since fractured into rival factions that continue the violence.

The CODECO has established illegal checkpoints and 'taxed' civilians throughout Djugu, especially in gold mining areas, which it uses to fund its operations. The group often clashes with the FARDC over control of mining sites. It mainly targets Hema civilians, as well as the Alur and Ndo-Okebo communities, forcing them off their land. The mysterious killing of a prominent Lendu priest in Djugu in 2022 further inflamed tensions and triggered revenge attacks on Hema villages.

The FPIC-Chini ya Kilima militia emerged more recently and appears to coordinate closely with the CODECO. On several occasions, FPIC has supported CODECO fighters with ammunition and medical supplies. The group has political links to the Lendu community and has stoked anti-Hema hate speech.

In southern Irumu territory, the Patriotic Resistance Front in Ituri (FRPI) rebel group has also increased its activities after fracturing into two main factions. The FRPI had signed a peace agreement with the government in 2020, but the demobilization process has largely collapsed. Current leader Germain Katanga, a former International Criminal

Court (ICC) indictee, is pushing to transform the FRPI into a political party, while another faction wants to resume full-scale rebellion. This split has triggered new waves of recruitment in the Walendu Bindi area.

FRPI fighters have staged incursions into Tchabi and Gety areas, abducting civilians and clashing with the FARDC. In May 2023, suspected FRPI assailants massacred 14 civilians in a camp for displaced persons outside Komanda. The group has attacked several mining sites in the region, both to pillage and to pressure the government into new negotiations.

At the same time, the ADF has stepped up its raids in northern Ituri in areas bordering North Kivu, taking advantage of the FARDC's focus on the M23 insurgency. The group killed more than 30 civilians in Irumu and Mambasa territories from March to April 2023, forcing thousands to flee to Mambasa town and surrounding forests. The UPDF's joint operations with the FARDC, launched in late 2021, have dislodged the ADF from some of its main bases in Ituri, but the group's command and control structure remain intact, and it continues to recruit and train in its new sanctuaries.

According to the UN, various conflicts and attacks displaced more than 300,000 people just in areas neighboring Goma in North Kivu from January to March 2023. This included 188,475 internally displaced persons (IDPs) registered in Nyiragongo territory; 50,675 in Goma city; 27,316 in Masisi territory; and 56,820 in Rutshuru territory. The vast majority fled following the fall of the strategic towns of

Kitchanga and Kibirizi to the M23 in February. Thousands more civilians fled insecurity in Lubero, where the FARDC is battling the M23 on one side and Mai-Mai groups on the other.

The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that there are currently more than 6.2 million IDPs in the DRC, with North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri hosting the largest populations. The newly displaced are adding pressure to already overcrowded and under-serviced IDP sites across the east.

In the latter half of 2023, the security situation remained dire despite some M23 withdrawals from captured territory under regional pressure. In July, heavy fighting erupted again between the M23, FARDC, and allied militias in Masisi and Rutshuru territories. The FARDC continued to mobilize local youth into Wazalendo militias to fight the M23, leading to abuses against Tutsi civilians accused of rebel sympathies. Hate speech and ethnic targeting of Tutsis surged.

Clashes occurred on the edge of Masisi territory, with the M23 fighting pro-government Wazalendo and FDLR forces allied with mercenaries in Tongo and Bwito, former Nyatura and FDLR headquarters. The annihilation of 11 Nyatura and FDLR combatants in Bukombo in mid-July sparked controversy, with some claiming they were civilians forcibly conscripted by the M23.

The Congolese government has continued mass recruitment and armament of young untrained fighters, inciting them with anti-Tutsi and anti-Rwandan ideology to fight the M23. This has led to abuses and casualties among

these youth, which are then exploited diplomatically against the M23.

Over the last months of 2023, the M23 made further territorial gains, capturing the strategic town of Kitshanga cutting off the Goma-Masisi Road, and advancing into Masisi and Nyiragongo territories. This triggered new waves of displacement and regional tensions, with the DRC accusing Rwanda of aggression. Regional mediation efforts struggled to secure a lasting ceasefire.

Meanwhile, Burundi's contingent in the East African Community (EAC) regional force, initially deployed as a neutral buffer, increasingly sided with Congolese forces, and allied militias against the M23. Burundian troops repeatedly clashed with M23 fighters in violation of regional agreements. This stoked border friction between Rwanda and Burundi.

In North Kivu's Grand Nord area, the ADF sharply escalated its attacks, massacring more than 100 civilians in several gruesome attacks in Beni and southern Ituri in November–December. The ADF exploited the security vacuum as FARDC units redeployed south to fight M23. The FARDC-UPDF joint operations disrupted some ADF bases, but the group's adaptability and ties to local networks helped it regroup.

Across Ituri, the CODECO militia continued large-scale attacks on Hema and other communities despite government declarations of a state of siege. The CODECO also fought the rival Zaire militia, displacing hundreds of thousands. The FARDC's diversion of forces south, corruption, and in some cases collusion with militias, enabled the violence. Ituri's

humanitarian crisis verged on catastrophe.

And in South Kivu's highlands and Ruzizi plains, a toxic mix of communal tensions, foreign armed mobilization, and Burundian meddling fueled a worsening crisis. Mai-Mai militias and the Burundian Red Tabara rebels clashed with Banyamulenge groups over land, resources, and identity. Congolese

Tutsi herders faced systemic attacks and expulsion, while Banyamulenge IDPs languished in besieged camps. Cross-border incursions and hate speech rose sharply.

Overall, by the end of 2023, eastern DRC faced its worst violence in years, with more than seven million people displaced. The overlapping conflicts, rooted in deep socioeconomic and

political challenges, defied easy resolution. Protecting civilians, demobilizing armed groups, and addressing underlying grievances and regional tensions would all be key to breaking the cycle. But the waning global attention and investment threatens to make an already nightmarish situation even worse.

HATRED, HOSTILITY, AND VIOLENCE AGAINST SPECIFIC GROUPS

The resurgence of conflict has further escalated identity-based violence and hate speech against specific communities in eastern DRC, in particular the Tutsi and Banyamulenge populations. The M23 insurgency, due to the group's perceived links to Rwanda and its previous rebellions, has revived dangerous narratives painting Congolese Tutsis as a traitorous fifth column that threatens the nation. This rhetoric has translated directly into surging violence against Tutsi civilians by armed groups and, at times, government security forces.

Banyamulenge

The persecution of the Banyamulenge in South Kivu is emblematic of these dynamics. The Banyamulenge are a minority community of Tutsi origins that migrated to the high plateaus of South Kivu over a century ago. In the 1960s, nationalist politicians and youth militias first mobilized to expel Tutsis from the Kivus on the grounds they were outsiders and proxies for foreign interests. Pogroms in 1965–66 and the early

1990s displaced thousands of Banyamulenge into neighboring countries, where many remained due to continuing insecurity.

Laws passed in the 1980s and 1990s stripped many Tutsis and Banyamulenge of their Congolese citizenship, declaring them refugees or illegal immigrants. Hate speech by politicians and in some media consistently depicted Tutsis as “invaders,” or “snakes,” to be cleansed. This language eerily echoed the rhetoric in Rwanda before and during the 1994 genocide. Nevertheless, Congolese Tutsi militias were key participants in the AFDL rebellion that toppled the Mobutu regime in 1997, and subsequently the RCD rebellion against Laurent Kabila from 1998 to 2003. This history, however distorted, continues to provide fodder for the anti-Tutsi narratives that help fuel violence today.

Since 2017, a coalition of Mai-Mai militias, Burundian RED-Tabara and FNL rebels, and allied local armed groups have burned, pillaged, or otherwise destroyed more than 400 Banyamulenge villages across the highlands

of Fizi, Uvira, and Mwenga territories. The waves of attacks have displaced more than 150,000 Banyamulenge into squalid camps in Minembwe or urban areas. Rather than finding safety, the IDPs have been subjected to continuing attacks, blockades, and occupation of their land. Dozens of IDP sites have been raided, with militias abducting or killing civilians, burning shelters, and looting the remnants of their cattle and harvests.

In the Bijombo IDP site, which hosted 12,000 Banyamulenge at its peak, residents have been subjected to a devastating economic blockade by surrounding militias who accuse them of loyalty to the M23. Aid organizations have been unable to access the camp, and its population is on the brink of starvation. In the Mikenge IDP site outside Minembwe town, Twirwaneho and Mai-Mai forces clashed directly in February, killing six civilians caught in the crossfire. Mai-Mai attacks on the site over the last year have killed dozens of Banyamulenge IDPs and led to looting of almost all their cattle.

Most of the armed groups justify their attacks on the Banyamulenge as a response to alleged crimes by the Twirwaneho or Gumino militias, which have indeed committed abuses. However, the nature and scale of the attacks on civilians, and the hate speech that has accompanied them, points to the intent to collectively punish and displace the Banyamulenge from their home areas.

In a May 2023 massacre in Rusankuku village, 18 Banyamulenge civilians were burned alive in their homes by FNL and Mai-Mai fighters. The victims included women, children, and elderly people who had no connection to any armed group. Similar mass killings of Banyamulenge occurred in Kalingi and Kabingo villages in June, leaving 15 dead, again mostly women and children. In Rugezi village, a Banyamulenge civil society activist was dragged from his home and beheaded by Mai-Mai militants, who then paraded his head around neighboring villages as a warning to his community.

Senior military commanders in the region have turned a blind eye or given tacit approval to the violence. In some cases, FARDC units have actively collaborated with militias attacking the Banyamulenge or carried out abuses themselves. In July 2022, FARDC soldiers arrested 23 Banyamulenge civilians in Bijombo on accusations of supporting the Twirwaneho.

The victims were detained at the notorious 'Kazaroho' military base in Uvira, where several were tortured and executed. Kazaroho has long been a site for the persecution of Banyamulenge by the military, going back to the wars of the 1990s. To date,

no soldiers have been held accountable.

The violence has decimated the Banyamulenge's economic base and left them increasingly reliant on humanitarian aid. More than 100,000 head of cattle belonging to the community, their main form of wealth and livelihood, have been systematically looted by armed groups. Their ancestral villages and farms are now occupied by militias and civilians from other communities, who exploit their lands freely. This displacement is rapidly erasing the Banyamulenge's long history in the region.

Tutsi

Identity-based violence against Tutsi communities has also surged in North Kivu, in tandem with the M23 conflict. The FDLR and Mai-Mai militias have repeatedly targeted Tutsi civilians, accusing them of being 'Rwandan sympathizers' or M23 members. The attacks have involved killings, sexual violence, village burnings, mass livestock looting, and hate-filled threats. Hundreds of Tutsi families have been forcibly displaced from Masisi and Rutshuru territories into IDP camps around Goma, where they remain vulnerable to militias.

Some of the worst violence occurred as the FARDC ceded ground to M23 advances in early 2023. In late January, Mai-Mai militants allied to FDLR forces killed 18 Tutsi civilians in Tongo and Muvunyi-Shanga villages in Masisi, looting all their cattle in the process. The attacks occurred just days after an FDLR-linked militia beheaded a Tutsi community leader in Kitchanga and dumped his body in the

village square. The same week, six Tutsi businessmen from Mudja locality were ambushed and killed while transporting goods to the Kitchanga market.

In early February, as the M23 advanced on Kitchanga town, the FDLR and Mai-Mai staged retaliatory attacks on Tutsi IDP sites in nearby Katoyi, Muheto, and Ikobo villages. The militias burned down more than 100 IDP shelters, and killed more than 20 Tutsi civilians and abducted 15 others whose whereabouts remain unknown. Another 2,000 people were forced to flee again, this time to Goma. Local sources reported that some FARDC soldiers collaborated with the militias during and after the attacks or stood by as they occurred.

The violence has instilled a deep sense of fear among Tutsi communities. Many people report facing regular harassment from soldiers and police due to their perceived association with the M23. There have been widespread arbitrary arrests, torture in military camps, and disappearances of Tutsi community members. Thousands have fled to neighboring Rwanda and Uganda, citing the ever-present threat of persecution. Yet Congolese Tutsi refugees are now facing mounting political pressure to return, even as the violence continues. The Congolese authorities have accused Rwanda of 'weaponizing' refugees and questioned the 'true nationality' of those who fled. This rhetoric has further inflamed tensions and put Tutsi returnees at risk.

The violence has taken a particularly heavy toll on Tutsi civilians, who face widespread abuses from armed groups and

sometimes security forces. These incidents are often justified through hateful rhetoric accusing all Tutsis of supporting the M23 rebellion.

Witness reports from February 2023 alone paint a harrowing picture:

- On February 9, in Mweso center, a girl named Umutoni Yvonne was kidnapped by members of the Abazungu coalition. She was released later that night following death threats for being Tutsi.
- On February 10, 60 displaced Tutsi herdsman, including five from the same family, were arrested in Bihambwe by intelligence agents and taken to Sake for detention on accusations of being M23 members.
- On February 11, Claude Nshizurungu, a Tutsi herdsman, was killed in Kumuyanze village by Nyatura-FDLR militias a week after his abduction.
- On February 12, Uwera Grace, arrested on January 31, by FARDC in Kilolirwe while she was fleeing the fighting, was found dead in a toilet pit in Shangi. Uwera Grace was arrested because she was assimilated into an M23 combatant. She was with a young Tutsi herdsman named Kiruta whose whereabouts remain unknown. Also on the same day, the decomposing body of Mukamusoni Nyiramataza was found in the bush around Kitshanga. She was kidnapped on January 27 by the FDLR.
- On February 13, Gasore Bon-Coeur, a young Tutsi was kidnapped in Bihambwe

center by the Abazungu coalition, who took him to an unknown destination.

- On February 14, all farms in Bihambwe and Nyagatare were looted by the Coalition for Movements of Change (CMC)/Nyatura combatants. On the same day, Faustin Ndayambaje, a Tutsi herdsman was arrested in Bihambwe by FDLR members, who killed him two days later.
- On February 15, in Muhato, 15-year-old Omba Mbembeleza was killed by Nyatura militiamen from Domi. On the same day, Bimenyimana Paluku was also killed by the same militiamen in Mushwa.
- On February 20, FARDC soldiers took Muzungu Confiance, with her 2-month-old baby, as well as Murisa Rosette, from Sake to Kanyaruchina, where they were all detained. Their families had not heard from them for more than two weeks, because they disappeared when they fled the fights of Kitshanga for Sake aiming at joining their families in Goma.
- On February 22, eight young Tutsis were arrested in Bihambwe, despite the payment of USD 1,400 for their release. They were all transferred to be detained in Goma. On the same day, anti-Tutsi youths took a young boy by the name of Janvier, a motorcyclist, and beat him, stealing all his belongings in Sake. This was because of his Tutsi face.
- On February 23, Kabera Saidi, a 28-year-old Tutsi herdsman was arrested in Bihambwe by the FDLR, who killed him

despite USD 500 being paid to his killers. He left a widow and a baby aged less than six months old.

- On February 24, five young Tutsis (Byiringiro Kennedy, Irumva Steve, Banze Mudari, Zirimwabagabo Sambibe, and Nizeyimana Callixte) who work at a water treatment plant owned by a member of parliament (MP), Mwanza, were arrested by FARDC officers on the basis of being “M23 combatants.” They were robbed of their property and tortured before being taken to Sake where they were put into a FARDC jeep headed for Goma.
- On February 25, after being killed on his farm in Bihambwe by FDLR combatants, 500 cows of the herdsman Kazungu were looted. On the same day, the Nyatura/CMC of Domi with the FARDC looted the Acogenoki dairy in Luhonga, killing a few cows. Nzayisenga Ziragora was killed after being raped by FDLR members on her farm in Ngungu, and a dozen of her cows were looted.
- On February 26, Jean-Pierre Kalia was killed in the SMB mining site at Rubaya because he was a Tutsi. He was a technician in the mining company of Mwangacuchu. All the materials of the mentioned company were destroyed and others were burned by members of the Abazungu coalition (FDLR and Nyatura).
- On February 27, 40 cows, nine goats, and a pig were killed by combatants of the Nduma Defense of Congo (NDC)/Rénové commanded by the self-proclaimed

general Guidon Shimiyari in Mweso. His combatants looted, destroyed, and damaged all the shops in the area.

- On February 28, in Kaniro, the Tutsi herdsman Jimmy Rwamakuba was killed by the members of the Abazungu coalition who took away all his properties. On the same day, another Tutsi herdsman, 39-year-old Mpumuje Eugène, was killed by the same combatants, who cut his throat and testicles beforehand. In the same locality, Nyatura combatants cut off the penis of farmer Amini Mbarushimana Hubert before killing him, saying that they do not want an “uncircumcised Tutsis in their territory of Masisi.”
- On February 29, in Kaniro, more than 1,500 cows were looted by Nyatura members. During the fights, some cows were taken back by M23 combatants who gave them back to the owners.

These incidents offer a small window into the much wider pattern of brutality facing Tutsi communities. Investigators from the UN and human rights groups have documented hundreds of killings, rapes, abductions, and other grave abuses against Tutsi civilians by armed groups and security forces in the past year. Survivors describe harrowing ordeals of torture, sexual slavery, and seeing loved ones hacked to death.

The hate speech and scapegoating driving these abuses have come from official sources as well as armed groups. In March 2023, several national MPs made public statements calling Congolese Tutsis “enemies of the nation”

and “terrorists” siding with foreign aggressors. One MP, in a video that circulated widely on social media, declared that “Tutsis are a virus, a disease to be eliminated,” and suggested forming local self-defense groups to “protect the nation” from them. His colleague referred to Tutsis as “cockroaches,” harkening back to the hate media before the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

Congolese Tutsi civil society organizations have tried to forewarn about the escalating persecution. In April 2023, a group of 45 Tutsi community leaders and activists from across the Kivus wrote to the UN Secretary-General warning of a “slow genocide” targeting their people. The signatories reported 165 verified incidents of killings, rapes, or abductions of Tutsi civilians by militias or state security forces in the first three months of the year. This included several massacres of displaced Tutsi families by FDLR and Mai-Mai groups in Rutshuru territory in March.

The Congolese government has not only failed to protect Tutsi civilians but has arguably enabled violence against them through its rhetoric and alliances with militias. In May 2023, President Felix Tshisekedi dismissed the concerns over ethnic persecution as “alarmist propaganda.” He insinuated that Tutsi civil society groups were “mouthpieces of the Rwandan enemy.” Several of the Tutsi leaders who spoke out subsequently received death threats from military intelligence agents and militias.

In a troubling move, the National Assembly passed new legislation in June that appears to strip Congolese nationality from many

Tutsis and Rwandophones in the Kivus. The law, allegedly aimed at combating foreign armed groups, stipulates that only those who can prove that their ancestors resided in the DRC before 1950 are “true Congolese.” It calls for a nationwide census and the expulsion of “aliens.” Tutsi leaders feared this would be used to disenfranchise their community prior to the 2023 elections and cement their status as outsiders.

Hema

Other ethnic communities have also come under threat as hate narratives spread. The Hema community in Ituri is increasingly targeted by the CODECO and FPIC militias, which portray them as ‘invaders’ who usurped ancestral lands. From January to March 2023, CODECO fighters killed at least 150 Hema civilians in Djugu and Irumu territories, often with shocking cruelty. On January 15, CODECO militants hacked to death with machetes more than 20 Hema IDPs, mostly women and children, at a church in Banyali-Kilo village where they had sought refuge.

The CODECO’s spiritual leader ‘Ngudjolo’ gave a sermon around this time calling for a “crusade” to expel the Hema and their “FARDC puppets” from Djugu. Such rhetoric from the CODECO and FPIC has driven thousands of Hema to flee to Uganda, where some have been subjected to forcible return by Ugandan security forces. Other Hema IDPs are concentrated in increasingly desperate camps in Ituri, which militias have attacked on several occasions. Djugu’s Hema population has declined by as much as a third since 2017 due to displacement and violence.

Communities as ‘others’ and the proliferation of hate speech

The toxic climate of hate and impunity, which extends well beyond these examples, is a fundamental driver of the crisis in eastern DRC. Widespread rhetoric portraying entire communities as dangerous ‘others’ provides a rallying cry and justification for violence by armed groups and their political allies. The ethnic dimension makes the conflicts even more difficult to resolve, as the violence destroys inter-communal trust and hardens grievances. Regional tensions, such as between the DRC and Rwanda or Uganda, are also enflamed by accusations of support to co-ethnic armed groups. Countering hate speech and ensuring accountability for ethnic violence must be priorities for any effort to de-escalate the conflicts. As speech inciting hate against Tutsis has gone unpunished, they continue to be targeted throughout eastern DRC. Media and social networks are amplifying messages of hatred and dehumanization, serving as motivation for armed groups to commit abuses against Tutsi communities wherever they are present.

Anti-Tutsi rhetoric has grown increasingly virulent and explicit. In mid-July 2023, a senior officer of the CMC/Nyatura militia released a song titled “Tutsis are dogs,” congratulating attacks on Tutsis in Masisi and Rutshuru. The same individual reportedly murdered a Tutsi herdsman in Masisi due to his identity.

In areas under their control, militias and the FDLR are indoctrinating children with anti-Tutsi ideology reminiscent of

rhetoric in Rwanda in the 1990s. A July 2023 video shows Nyatura and FDLR members training children to kill Tutsis, calling them “cockroaches.” Other propaganda characterizing all Tutsis as “criminals” or “bloodthirsty” is rampant in Congolese media and online, spurring attacks on Tutsi civilians and their property.

Specific incidents in July 2023 included:

- The looting of more than 150 cows from Tutsi herders in Masisi by Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS) militia.
- The killing of FARDC Captain Munyangabe’s family, including his young daughter, by Wazalendo fighters in Sake because they were Tutsi.
- The stabbing of a 16-year-old Munyamulenge girl in Uvira by Mai-Mai who called her “Rwandan.”
- The murder of Tutsi civilians in Kabati by Nyatura and the FDLR, including a woman who was abducted and killed after her family paid a large ransom.
- Widespread cattle looting targeting Tutsi owners by the FDLR in Masisi and Rutshuru.
- Many Tutsi families are now trapped in areas surrounded by militias, unable to flee due to threats of violence and accusations of joining the M23.
- Numerous incidents targeted Tutsis throughout the year, including killings, sexual violence, looting, and destruction of villages. Attacks spiked each time M23 made battlefield gains. In November massacres, more than 50 Tutsi civilians were

killed in Rutshuru territory alone as militias retaliated.

Many Tutsi families were trapped in areas surrounded by militias, subjected to severe movement restrictions, extortion, and violence. Thousands fled to neighboring countries. Others crowded into urban centers such as Goma, where they faced rampant discrimination and threats. Tutsi security force members were increasingly targeted for attack by militias.

As the 2023 elections approached, Tutsis feared political exclusion and scapegoating escalated. Many were systematically blocked by armed youth from registering to vote. Tutsi candidates were threatened and barred from campaigning freely in militia-dominated areas. Veiled calls for their expulsion and allegations of “Rwandan allegiance” circulated widely.

Targeted violence

Other communities also suffered ethnically targeted violence. The Banyamulenge in South Kivu faced some of the worst abuses, with a surge in militia attacks, massacres, and village burnings in Fizi, Mwenga, and Uvira territories. Thousands of Banyamulenge languished in besieged IDP camps deliberately cut off from aid and subjected to blockades and attacks. Leaders warned of a looming “slow genocide.”

In Ituri, Lendu militias under the CODECO banner unleashed increasingly brutal violence against the Hema and Alur communities. The attacks destroyed the social fabric in areas such as Djugu and Mahagi. Thousands of Hema were forced

into desperate IDP settlements repeatedly raided by the CODECO.

And in North Kivu, Hutu communities suffered militia attacks, abductions, and looting, especially around Rutshuru. Militias and the FDLR harassed villagers as “M23 collaborators.”

The government fueled these divisions through its rhetoric and actions. President Tshisekedi and senior officials regularly scapegoated Tutsis and Rwandophones. The state armed militias such as the FDLR commit ethnic violence rather than protecting minorities. And Kinshasa pushed laws to strip many Tutsis and Banyamulenge of citizenship.

The climate of normalized hate, impunity, and existential threats to Tutsi and other communities is a central driver of conflict. It spurred armed mobilization, deepened communal mistrust, and enabled the worst abusers. Reversing these trends through accountability, inclusion, and reconciliation is essential.

Complexity of violence in key areas

The violence in eastern DRC is marked by a complex interplay between armed group activity, inter-ethnic hostilities, and illicit economic interests. Entrenched armed groups have built power bases and revenue streams deeply enmeshed with the wider political and social fabric of the region. Parsing their varied motives and relationships is key to understanding the drivers of conflict.

The situation in the Masisi and Rutshuru territories of North

Kivu is illustrative. Since 2022, a shifting coalition of Mai-Mai militias, FDLR rebels, and aligned Hutu groups have fought the M23’s advances there. While these armed groups claim to be resisting “Rwandan aggression” and occupation, they also have long-standing economic and political agendas in which anti-Tutsi violence serves multiple functions.

Many of the militias, now rebranded as ‘Wazalendo’ (patriotic) groups, assert control over parts of Masisi and Rutshuru, running parallel taxation and administration. They profit from illegal checkpoints on trade routes, charcoal production in Virunga Park, cannabis cultivation, timber trade, and small-scale mining. Controlling territory allows them to extract rents from these industries. As the M23 has taken over some of these areas, it has cut into these militias’ economic lifelines, incentivizing them to fight back.

At the same time, the militias exploit local Hutu and Nande communities’ fears of Tutsi political and economic domination to boost their legitimacy and recruitment. The FDLR, while much weaker than at its height in the 2000s, retains support among some Congolese Hutus who share its hostility to the Rwandan government. These tensions make the local Tutsi population an easy and politically expedient target for retaliatory violence.

Several prominent local businessmen and politicians in Masisi territory have links to Mai-Mai groups, supplying them with funds and weapons. This includes owners of large plantations who hire militias as security and

others involved in smuggling rackets. Provincial politicians have publicly called to “arm the youth for self-defense” against Tutsi “infiltration,” which the militias use as a green light for attacks. The speeches boosted the politicians’ popularity with some Hutu and Nande constituents who feared M23 control would sideline them prior to the 2023 elections.

The result is a vicious cycle in which Tutsi civilians face growing persecution from all sides as the M23 insurgency continues. The FDLR and Mai-Mai have staged sweeping cattle raids against Tutsi owners in Masisi, both to punish them and to eat the looted cows while the militias are under pressure from the M23. This in turn spurs angry reactions and revenge attacks from Tutsi youth, further escalating tensions. Moderate voices calling for dialogue are drowned out and risk being labeled ‘traitors.’

In Ituri province, the CODECO has a similar model of exploiting ethnic resentments while pursuing its own political and economic agenda. Originally a loose network of Lendu self-defense groups, the CODECO emerged in 2017 in opposition to what it claimed was Hema’s domination of land, resources, and local institutions in Djugu territory. Its rhetoric resonates with aggrieved Lendu youth and displaced populations who lost land and power during the 1999–2003 Ituri war.

However, the CODECO has since morphed far beyond community protection, establishing control over a string of gold mining sites and trade routes across Djugu. It has forcibly dislodged Hema artisanal miners and traders,

as well as those from other communities, and ‘taxed’ gold production to fund its insurgency. The CODECO attacks on Hema villages have often occurred around newly discovered gold deposits that it wanted to capture from local landowners. Control of mining also allows the group to buy more sophisticated weapons and communications equipment, while attracting recruits with the promise of wealth.

The CODECO uses its financial clout to buy protection from some FARDC officers and political figures who benefit from the gold trade. These relationships help shield the group from military pressure and legal consequences. In turn, CODECO’s backers use its violence to weaken their Hema political opponents and business rivals. The gold rackets have spawned internal rivalries as well, causing the group to splinter into competing factions that fight each other as much as the FARDC and Hema militias.

The ethnic hatred and massacres instigated by the CODECO have caused massive displacement of Hema civilians into squalid camps, where they remain vulnerable to disease and militia predation. This humanitarian crisis, along with the disruption to agriculture caused by the violence, has further immiserated and marginalized the Hema. With their land under occupation and their livelihoods destroyed, some Hema youth have joined the FARDC or formed their militias to fight back. This has upped the death toll and muddied the waters between the military, militias, and wider communities.

In Beni territory, the ADF has skillfully tapped into communal tensions and illicit economies to

expand its insurgency over the last five years. While the group has recruited some fighters from the local Muslim population, stigmatizing this community, it also has ties to elements of the Mai-Mai, business cartels, and the FARDC involved in Beni’s timber and gold smuggling networks. These relationships allow the ADF to access trade routes, information, and corrupt security officials.

At times the ADF has paid Mai-Mai groups for passage through their territory or staged joint attacks on FARDC and MONUSCO positions. It has provided other militias with weapons and training. The ADF’s affiliation with the Islamic State has brought it new prestige and resources, attracting recruits from across East and Central Africa. These foreigners sometimes serve as trainers, bomb-makers, and agents to infiltrate other armed groups. This has made North Kivu and southern Ituri an increasingly attractive rear base and operational zone.

However, the ADF’s atrocities and its perceived foreign character have also turned some communities decisively against it, including the Muslim minority. Since 2021, several local Mai-Mai groups have allied with the FARDC against the ADF, viewing it as a threat to their power and an easy rhetorical foe. The ADF has reacted with vicious reprisals against civilians it sees as collaborating with the government, including gruesome massacres. It has also ramped up attacks on prisons, freeing hundreds of its fighters.

Some Mai-Mai still maintains murky ties to the ADF, seeing it as leverage against the Congolese government or an

ally in controlling the shadow economies. These shifting relationships, as much as the ADF’s military strength, have stymied the FARDC-UPDF operations meant to decapitate the group. Instead, they have splintered into smaller, agile cells dispersed across a vast zone of forests, plantations, and mines. Within this complex ecosystem of violence, the ADF has demonstrated its resilience.

The perverse incentives created by illegal mining and other illicit trades are an overarching challenge. Various armed groups, and factions of the FARDC, have long fought for control of the Kivus’ and Ituri’s mineral wealth, which is worth hundreds of millions per year. These riches undercut efforts to demobilize armed groups, as warlords and their patronage networks have too much to lose from peace. Modest gains from the formalization of the mining sector have been reversed as conflict flared anew.

In a positive step, the government suspended several mining permits held by politically connected businessmen in South Kivu in 2022, citing their links to armed groups and smuggling. However, officials have so far lacked the capacity and will to disrupt the deeper criminal networks in which armed groups thrive. Recent studies have shown these networks often span the region, with gold, timber, and other contraband flowing to East Africa, the Gulf, and beyond. More robust financial investigations and multinational cooperation are needed.

The local arms trafficking industry is also a key enabler of armed groups. Weapons from Congolese military stocks are openly sold



The Mugunga displacement site near Goma, eastern DR Congo, has been receiving new arrivals fleeing surging violence in Sake, North Kivu. Picture: UNHCR/Blaise Sanyila

in markets in Butembo, Bukavu, and other cities. Regional governments and armed groups channel more sophisticated arms to their proxies. Several large arms shipments from Europe and the Middle East to the Great Lakes have been intercepted in recent years, but others are likely to continue reaching the DRC. Cutting these supply lines requires tighter end-user controls and more rigorous monitoring.

The sprawling humanitarian crisis in the east also risks further fueling conflict. Millions of displaced civilians languish in camps that become recruiting grounds for armed groups, who exploit their anger, desperation, and lack of opportunity. The competition for scarce aid resources has sometimes overlapped with inter-communal tensions, creating a logic that controlling territory by force is the only way to access

help. Breaking these dynamics will require scaling up assistance and providing alternative livelihoods for the displaced.

Resolving conflict in eastern DRC requires addressing this nesting doll of local, national, and regional interests that incentivize violence. Military operations, while necessary, are not sufficient on their own. They must be coupled with political dialogue, accountability, demobilization, and a more strategic approach to long-term peacebuilding. This starts with providing justice and protection to victimized communities, and charting a new vision of inclusive governance and shared prosperity in the region. So far, that has been elusive.

In the territories of Masisi and Rutshuru, local militias allied with the FDLR under the ‘Wazalendo’ umbrella, which have

been rebranded as government reservists, continue to fight the M23. However, they are also responsible for widespread abuses against civilians through harassment, killings, illegal taxation, and incursions into areas theoretically under the control of EAC forces.

The proliferation of these Wazalendo groups and their antagonistic relationship with the national army has created a volatile and complex security environment. Some observers believe the government is strategically pitting these groups against each other to justify sidelining them and bringing in other foreign forces to fight the M23, rather than engaging in negotiations as regional mediators have urged.

Meanwhile, foreign forces such as the Burundians have been

accused by locals of collaborating with militias attacking Tutsi communities rather than protecting civilians. This led some Tutsis to relocate, seeing areas under Kenyan and Ugandan control as safer before the East African Force was forced to depart.

The concentration of armed groups including the FDLR near the border with Rwanda in Nyiragongo territory is also raising risks of cross-border incidents. Rwandan officials have accused Congo of enabling FDLR infiltration and attacks on Rwanda. While Kinshasa denies this, the FDLR and allies are openly threatening to attack Rwanda from their bases in Nyiragongo.

In Masisi and Rutshuru, the situation grew more volatile as the year progressed. Local Mai-Mai militias and the FDLR sustained their offensives against the M23 and Tutsi civilians.

The proliferation of these groups and their abusive behavior generated massive displacement and a worsening humanitarian crisis. Militia roadblocks, illegal taxation, forced recruitment, and sexual violence were rampant. Internal power struggles over territory and resources led to escalating clashes between Nyatura, the APCLS, and other factions, destabilizing communities.

The deployment of the Burundian contingent as part of the East African regional force in the DRC has been marred by controversy and an apparent betrayal of the mission's original mandate. Rather than serving as a neutral buffer between the warring factions, Burundian troops have actively fought alongside the

Congolese army and allied militias against the M23 rebellion. This blatant violation of the regional force's objectives, which included facilitating the withdrawal of M23 from occupied areas and the peaceful resolution of the conflict, has undermined the credibility of the EAC's efforts to stabilize eastern DRC.

Burundian soldiers have been repeatedly accused of directly participating in offensives against M23 positions, occupying territory vacated by the rebel group, and even donning FARDC uniforms to blur the lines between the regional force and the Congolese military. This shift in posture, likely driven by bilateral security agreements between Bujumbura and Kinshasa, has not only derailed the regional peace process but also dangerously inflamed tensions along ethnic lines.

The Burundian intervention is particularly egregious given the country's leadership role within the EAC. As the current chair of the regional bloc, President Évariste Ndayishimiye has a special responsibility to uphold and advance the EAC's diplomatic initiatives, including the Nairobi and Luanda peace processes. By allowing Burundian forces to openly side with the Congolese government and engage in hostilities, President Ndayishimiye betrayed the spirit of regional cooperation and compromise that underpins the EAC's approach to resolving the crisis in eastern DRC.

Moreover, the deployment of Burundian troops risks further entrenching the toxic cycle of tribal polarization and score-settling that has long fueled violence in the Great Lakes region.

The perception that Burundian Hutus have intervened to support their Congolese Hutu allies against the predominantly Tutsi M23 rebellion, with echoes of the region's tragic history of genocide and communal bloodletting, is deeply alarming. This ethnically charged dynamic threatens to unravel the delicate social fabric of the region and undermine prospects for sustainable peace.

To salvage the EAC's peacemaking efforts and prevent a wider regional conflagration, it is imperative that the Burundian government immediately withdraw its forces from eastern DRC or, at a minimum, compels them to adhere strictly to their original mandate as neutral peacekeepers. The EAC should also strongly condemn any violations of its agreements and consider appropriate sanctions against member states that undermine regional stability. Ultimately, the success of any peace process in eastern DRC will depend on the good faith and impartiality of all regional actors and the scrupulous avoidance of inflammatory ethnic rhetoric and alignments. Burundi's conduct has severely damaged these prospects and must be urgently reversed.

Meanwhile, ADF rebels escalated attacks on civilians while exploiting the security vacuum as Congolese troops redeployed to fight M23. The ADF killed more than 300 people in Beni and southern Ituri in the latter months of 2023—its worst massacres in years. The group demonstrated its resilience by dispersing into smaller, agile units across a vast forested zone, where it drew on cross-border trafficking networks and ties to corrupt security officials.

Some Mai-Mai militias collaborated with the ADF even while fighting it, profiting from lucrative rackets in timber, charcoal, and gold in ADF areas. Several Mai-Mai factions also clashed with the FARDC and UPDF, undermining counter-ADF operations. These complex shifting relationships helped the ADF survive and sow chaos despite military pressure. Uprooting the insurgency would require tackling the wider ecosystem of armed mobilization and illicit economies.

In Ituri, the CODECO continued its brutal ethnic attacks and expansionist insurgency. The group killed hundreds of Hema, Alur, and Ndo-Okebo civilians in increasingly nihilistic violence. Gold rackets, kidnap-for-ransom, and arms trafficking fueled its rise. The CODECO also fought the rival Zaire militia in a ruthless tit-for-tat conflict that displaced more than 200,000 people.

The FARDC's diversion of troops and resources to the M23 front lines left a security void in the Djugu and Mahagi territories that the CODECO exploited. Disarmament efforts floundered as warlords reconstituted their forces and feuded over gold mines. Certain FARDC units actively colluded with the CODECO, selling weapons and intelligence, though the militia also attacked the military when it suited its interests. Government policy seesawed between cooptation and offensives.

South Kivu's security and humanitarian situation deteriorated sharply. In the highlands, Mai-Mai militias joined by Burundian Red Tabara rebels staged sweeping attacks on Banyamulenge civilians.

Hundreds were killed in massacres in Bibokoboko, Mikenge, and other areas. Thousands more languished in besieged IDP sites cut off from aid, and subjected to blockades, kidnappings, and periodic raids.

Hate speech and exclusionary mobilization against the Banyamulenge surged around the elections. Mai-Mai and allied youth groups blocked many from registering to vote while threatening Banyamulenge leaders and candidates. Calls for their expulsion or forced relocation spread on social media. Incursions from the Burundian military and Imbonerakure intensified.

Meanwhile, in the Ruzizi Plains, Fulero and Barundi youth fought in an escalating pattern of attacks and reprisals over land, identity, and power. The violence displaced more than 50,000 people, disrupted farming and trade, and sharpened communal tensions to a knife's edge. Elites on both sides exploited the volatility for political and economic gain.

Across the East, these hyper-local conflicts intersected in explosive ways with national and regional power struggles. The approaching elections, jockeying for control of resources, and spillover from tensions between the DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi all sharpened armed groups' incentives for violence. Disentangling these factors through local mediation and political dialogue alongside demobilization became increasingly urgent.

Humanitarian crisis

The surge in violence since late 2022 has dramatically worsened

an already dire humanitarian emergency in the eastern DRC. Across North and South Kivu, Ituri, and Tanganyika provinces, more than 6.2 million people are now internally displaced, while 515,000 have fled to neighboring countries as refugees. This represents a 30% increase in displacement over the previous year. In total, 27 million Congolese need humanitarian assistance and protection, more than half of them children.

The pace and scale of new displacement have overwhelmed the humanitarian response. In the first three months of 2023 alone, more than 800,000 people were forcibly uprooted in North Kivu and Ituri due to armed group violence and military operations. Many were already living as IDPs, displaced multiple times as the frontlines shifted. The most affected have been women, children, and the elderly, who make up 80% of the displaced population.

Waves of the newly displaced are crowding into already stressed host communities or informal camps, which lack basic shelter, clean water, sanitation, or health facilities. In the Kanyaruchinya IDP site outside Goma, the population tripled to more than 90,000 from February to April 2023 as fighting escalated in Masisi and Rutshuru territories. More than half of the new arrivals had no access to shelter and resorted to sleeping in the open or in crowded public buildings. Thousands more set up makeshift tents using sticks and tarpaulins.

Other IDPs are trapped behind armed group lines or are blocked from fleeing by ethnic tensions. In Djugu territory's Drodoro area, CODECO militias imposed a siege

on a string of IDP sites hosting 12,000 Hema civilians in March 2023. The militants cut off access to food, water, and medical supplies, demanding that the IDPs leave or starve. At least 25 people died of hunger and disease before community leaders negotiated a partial lifting of the blockade. Hundreds of displaced children in Drodro are now suffering severe acute malnutrition.

In South Kivu's highlands, more than 150,000 Banyamulenge IDPs are concentrated in a handful of overburdened sites in Fizi and Uvira territories. Mai-Mai and allied militias have obstructed humanitarian access to these areas, attacking aid convoys and abducting relief workers. In April 2023, four local staff of an international non-governmental organization (NGO) providing food assistance were ambushed and killed outside the Bibokoboko IDP site by suspected Mai-Mai. Several international aid organizations have since suspended operations in the region due to insecurity, exacerbating already alarming food gaps.

Across the Kivus and Ituri, 6.1 million people now face 'crisis' or 'emergency' levels of hunger. Global acute malnutrition rates have surpassed 10% in most displacement sites, well above the emergency threshold. Severe food insecurity has hit children hardest: 2.4 million are acutely malnourished, while 380,000 could die without urgent therapeutic feeding. Waterborne and infectious diseases are spreading rapidly in congested IDP camps, with weekly measles, cholera, and malaria caseloads all doubling since January. Sexual and reproductive health needs

have spiked due to widespread rape as a weapon of war.

The humanitarian funding gap remains vast. As of July 2023, aid agencies had received just 22% of the \$2.25 billion requested in the 2023 DRC Humanitarian Response Plan. Most IDP sites depend on stop-gap rations from the World Food Programme (WFP) and other overstretched aid groups to stave off famine. Inadequate funding has hampered efforts to decongest camps, improve water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure, and provide education, protection, and mental health support to IDPs. The shortfalls are especially acute for gender-based violence programming and the reintegration of child soldiers.

Amid the funding crunch, the government has restricted humanitarian access in conflict areas, citing insecurity. In April 2023, authorities suspended all aid activities outside major towns in Rutshuru, Masisi, and Lubero territories of North Kivu, as well as in much of southern Ituri. Several NGOs have accused the government of misusing these restrictions to block assistance to communities it accuses of supporting the M23 or other armed groups. Local officials have also interfered in aid delivery, diverting relief supplies to their political supporters or militias.

The government's failure to ensure safe humanitarian access is costing lives. In May 2023 alone, at least 60 IDP children died of cholera, malaria, and diarrhea in camps in Nyiragongo territory, while a similar number perished from malnutrition and measles in western Masisi. These areas had been cut off from health services and vaccinations for

months due to the M23 conflict and government blockade. Aid workers fear the true toll is far higher, as many deaths go unreported in rural zones.

At the same time, the M23 and other armed groups have also attacked hospitals, looted health centers, and occupied schools, depriving local communities of critical services. In February 2023, M23 fighters shelled the main IDP site in Kitchanga, striking a makeshift clinic and killing four patients. That same month, Mai-Mai militants torched a hospital in Lubero territory after its staff treated several wounded FARDC soldiers. Dozens of health facilities across the Kivus have been forced to close due to similar incidents.

Even as humanitarian needs soar, the Congolese government has moved to further restrict civic space and target aid groups it perceives as too critical. In March 2023, authorities suspended the operations of 17 Congolese NGOs in North Kivu, accusing them of "spreading false information" and "destabilizing the region." Most of the organizations worked on human rights and protection issues and had raised concerns about abuses by the FARDC in its campaign against the M23.

In this increasingly hostile operating environment, providing principled humanitarian assistance has become a complex challenge. The UN has tried to scale up its response through the MONUSCO and agencies on the ground, but it has also faced violent demonstrations and disinformation campaigns accusing it of bias. In July 2023, protesters attacked a WFP warehouse in Goma, destroying a month's worth of food aid for 100,000 IDPs. The government

has exploited this unrest to justify further rollbacks of the MONUSCO's mandate and threatened to expel the mission entirely.

Averting a worse humanitarian catastrophe in eastern DRC will require concerted international pressure on all parties to respect international humanitarian law, protect civilians, and allow unhindered humanitarian access. It will also require donors to dig deeper in a difficult global aid climate. In the short term, rapidly scaling up flexible funding for emergency health, food, shelter, and WASH interventions is vital to saving lives in displacement sites. Mobilizing a strong, coordinated response to sexual violence and supporting local women-led organizations must be a priority.

In the longer term, only a concerted push for political solutions to the regional crisis can create the stability needed to rebuild shattered communities. This will require addressing the root causes of violence, improving governance and access to justice, and expanding development investments to create alternatives to conflict. Strengthening local civil society networks, youth associations, and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms can help heal communal divides. Building more inclusive institutions that give all groups a stake will be key to a durable social contract. So far, those remain distant goals.

The withdrawal of many aid organizations in the face of rising insecurity has left displaced populations increasingly desperate. This is particularly acute in Ituri, where attacks by the CODECO and lack of aid access have left IDPs facing catastrophic

food and medical shortages. In Djugu, CODECO sieges of IDP sites in early 2023 aimed to starve Hema communities, leading to dozens of deaths before local mediation allowed some supplies through.

Attacks on humanitarians and looting of aid supplies have become disturbingly common. The CODECO has targeted aid convoys and facilities serving Hema IDPs. In one incident in January, the CODECO massacred 22 displaced Hema, mostly women and children, who had sought shelter at a church in Banyali-Kilo.

Health facilities have also come under repeated attack by armed groups. In Ituri, the CODECO has occupied numerous health centers, depriving local populations of care. Diseases like measles and cholera are spreading rapidly in overcrowded, unsanitary displacement sites. Aid organizations say they are overwhelmed and under-resourced for the scale of needs.

The humanitarian emergency in the east spiraled in the latter months of 2023 as conflict surged. By year's end, more than 7.2 million people were internally displaced in the Kivus and Ituri, while nearly one million had fled to neighboring countries as refugees. In total, 29 million Congolese needed humanitarian aid, most of them in the eastern provinces.

The fall of several major towns to M23 forces in November triggered sudden mass displacement. More than 300,000 people fled clashes in Masisi and Rutshuru in a matter of weeks, flooding already overfull IDP sites around Goma, Sake, and Minova. Tens of thousands slept in the open or

crowded into schools, markets, and churches. Local solidarity was admirable but overstretched.

In Ituri, CODECO attacks and government operations uprooted another 400,000 people in the last quarter of 2023. Civilians fled in all directions, many ending up trapped behind militia lines or stranded in remote areas. In Djugu, the CODECO raids systematically destroyed fields, food stocks, clinics, and wells, plunging displaced Hema communities into famine-like conditions.

South Kivu's IDP population swelled to more than two million, driven by Mai-Mai and Red Tabara offensives against Banyamulenge areas. Dozens of IDP sites were raided, looted, and torched. In Mikenge and Bibokoboko, Mai-Mai blockades of IDP camps caused dozens of deaths from hunger and lack of medical care. Relief convoys faced frequent ambushes. Most aid groups had reduced or suspended operations.

Across the east, the needs were staggering. More than seven million people faced 'crisis' or 'emergency' levels of food insecurity. Nearly half of all children under five—1.2 million—who were screened were acutely malnourished. Epidemics of cholera, measles, and malaria ravaged IDP settlements. Hospitals overflowed with war wounded, while attacks on medical facilities proliferated. Rape as a weapon of war affected thousands.

Despite these increasing needs, the 2023 DRC humanitarian appeal ended the year with only 38% funded. Most IDP sites were slashing rations, water trucking, and health services. Education and protection activities for

displaced children were skeletal. Aid workers warned that without a major cash injection excess mortality could soar.

Bureaucratic impediments and insecurity continued to hamper aid delivery. The government suspended the movement of humanitarians and their activities in M23-controlled areas. Mai-Mai and CODECO militias ambushed

relief convoys and abducted aid workers for ransom. These armed actors deliberately blocked aid as a tactic to punish communities seen as hostile. Many of the worst-affected areas were inaccessible for months. Yet donor funding was nowhere near commensurate to the spiraling needs. Aid groups said more sophisticated assessments and targeting were vital to stretch limited resources.

Humanitarians stressed that relief alone could not solve the crisis. Determined political efforts were needed to protect civilians, demobilize armed groups, improve governance, and address the root grievances driving conflict. But such progress remained elusive as violence metastasized.

CONCLUSION

The security and humanitarian crises in the eastern DRC reached new depths of tragedy in 2023. Resurgent armed groups, communal violence, and regional tensions fueled a maelstrom of conflict that uprooted more than seven million people by year's end. Civilians bore the brunt of the violence, with all sides complicit in atrocities. The M23 insurgency and the government's heavy-handed response dramatically escalated regional tensions and abuses against Tutsi communities.

As hunger, disease, and physical threats stalked desperate IDPs, aid groups struggled to keep pace. Global economic shocks and competing emergencies saw DRC funding plummet when it was needed most. Even as Congolese suffered, the world's attention strayed, with the DRC threatening to become a neglected crisis.

Ethnic persecution surged to alarming levels, with Tutsi and Hema communities scapegoated as 'enemies' by armed groups and, at times, government forces. Political elites enflamed tensions and enabled militias to target minorities. Fears grew of communal violence and exclusion

around the 2023 elections, with hate speech reaching frightening levels.

The humanitarian catastrophe was inextricable from the DRC's political morass. The devastation destroyed local economies and services, fueling grievances that armed groups exploit. Ethnic militias and demagogues manipulated this misery, locking eastern Congo in a doom loop of ever-more fragmented conflicts. Extricating eastern DRC from chronic violence will require concerted, sustained action by the Congolese government. This must include strengthening the military's capacity and professionalism, pursuing negotiated solutions with armed groups to address legitimate grievances, and extending state authority and services to neglected areas. While increased aid and regional diplomacy can support these efforts, they are no substitute for resolute Congolese leadership. The quantum leap needed is primarily one of political will in Kinshasa.

Much depends on the government showing genuine will to protect civilians, demobilize militias, and implement long-promised

governance reforms. So far military offensives and desultory demobilization schemes have failed to yield peace. Tshisekedi's bellicose rhetoric toward Rwanda, while popular, continued to stoke regional tensions. Reliance on predatory security forces and militias did not bode well for stability.

Despite the gravity of the abuses attributed to the M23 rebellion, there is limited specific evidence of war crimes or crimes against humanity by the group relative to the more extensive documentation implicating the FDLR, ADF, the CODECO, and various Mai-Mai militias. This disparity may reflect the challenges of investigating and verifying abuses in areas of M23 control, or the relative paucity of such incidents compared to other armed actors. Further inquiry is needed to establish a clearer picture of M23's human rights record and avoid false moral equivalencies between the parties to the conflict that enflamed communal animosities. The group's (alleged?) ties to Rwanda gave Kinshasa a pretext to dodge reforms. Disarming rebels was essential but insufficient;

the marginalization fueling the insurgency also requires meaningful dialogue.

Accusations of ‘meddling’ by the DRC’s neighbors risk oversimplifying the complex regional dynamics fueling violence in the Kivus. While external military interference has undoubtedly exacerbated instability, a key driver remains the DRC’s inability to contain foreign and domestic armed groups operating from its territory. The presence of FDLR rebels’ hostile to Rwanda, and ADF militants targeting Uganda, has often invited involvement by those countries’ forces. Constructive cooperation between the DRC and its neighbors, including joint military operations to combat and expel insurgent groups, offers a potential path to de-escalation. However, such efforts have been undermined by mistrust and the DRC government’s own links to some rebel factions. Addressing rebel threats collaboratively while respecting each other’s

sovereignty will require a reset in regional diplomacy. The scale of foreign interference and Congolese elites’ failures can obscure the reality that for most civilians, the key threats are homegrown. Communal rivalries, resource conflicts, state predation, and broken governance are the tinderbox in which outside powers light matches. The region’s mineral wealth fuels more violence than development. Connecting the east’s promise to its people is a generational challenge.

Investing hopes for the DRC’s stabilization primarily in the international community is misguided.

Time and again, countries emerging from protracted conflicts—from Uganda and Rwanda to the Sahel—have underscored the indispensable role of internal efforts, not foreign intervention, in achieving peace. The record of UN peacekeeping and aid in delivering sustainable

security in the DRC is mixed at best. While the international community should not abandon the Congolese, it must recognize the limits of its influence. Durable solutions will depend principally on resolute Congolese action to reform the security sector, dismantle armed groups, extend governance, and heal societal divisions. International support can supplement, but not substitute, the hard work of domestic peace building.

The path ahead is arduous. However, there is no ethical alternative to sustained engagement. The Congolese are resilient; their courage in the face of staggering odds must be met with equal resolve from the world. For this tortured region to break free of the cycle of violence, the international community cannot look away again. The people of eastern Congo deserve a brighter future. The world must not fail them.

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