

Briefing Paper

Committee: Special Commission

Topic: The Question of the Operations of Paramilitary Groups in the DRC

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Summary

Since its independence from Belgian colonialism in 1960, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has faced mass political and military strife as well as frequently violent periods of war and rebellion. The rise of over 120 militia groups, particularly in the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu, remains largely due to ethno-political tensions between the Tutsi and Hutu groups following the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Since 2021, after emerging from a near decade long dormancy, the M23 militia group (led by ethnic Tutsis) has captured significant eastern regions and in 2025 took the major cities of Goma and Bukavu, the provincial capitals of North and South Kivu respectively. Geopolitical tensions have risen as a result as UN experts have alleged that M23 is primarily backed by Rwanda, as the DRC accuses its neighbouring country of attempting to steal its mineral-rich territory. The UNHCR estimates that there are over 1.1 million Congolese refugees in Africa, a number spurred by the militia conflict, and Amnesty International raises the severe sexual abuses on women and children in conflict regions within the country. While UN peacekeeping forces remain active in the DRC, President Tshisekedi of the DRC has openly condemned their inaction to prevent the M23 coups.

Definition of Key Terms

ADF – the Allied Defence Force, a Ugandan rebel group affiliated with the Islamic State founded in the 1990s to use its base in the DRC to launch attacks on Uganda. More recently active in the North Kivu province near the border to Uganda, and their main interests lie in gold mining, logging and timber trafficking within the DRC. According to UN experts, they committed the highest number of killings in the DRC in 2023, causing the deaths of over 1000 people who were mainly civilians.

Banyamulenge – A Tutsi minority group residing in South Kivu, originally of Rwandan descent. M23 have used the group as a reason for their advances against the DRC, citing their need to protect them against Wazalendo and FARDC fighters yet their conflicts have also caused mass strife and upheaval in cities such as Uvira in 2025. While mostly unaffiliated with M23, certain Banyamulenge rebel groups have backed their cause.

Goma – A key city in the east of the DRC, in North Kivu. Served as a base for major UN peacekeeping operations as well as for militia groups backing the Congolese government. Captured by M23 rebels in January 2025.

Great Lakes region – the region around central eastern Africa centred around massive lakes such as Victoria, Tanganyika and Kivu. The countries in the region comprise of Rwanda, Burundi, DRC, Uganda, and Tanzania and remain as major players in the paramilitary operations in the DRC.

Hutu – An ethnic group residing in Rwanda and the DRC. Hutu extremist militias were responsible for the Rwandan 1994 genocide of over 800,000 Tutsis – after Paul Kagame’s Tutsi-led rebellion overthrowing the genocide, over a million Hutus fled into the DRC. Of them, a minority were the perpetrators of the genocide, and this has provided Rwanda with reasoning to advance into the DRC since the 1990s to capture such people.

FARDC – the Armed Forces of the DRC is the national military force of the DRC and has been a major force in opposing the M23 offensive. However, the force has reportedly been accused of corruption and human rights violations, as well as allowing massacres to happen in the regions where they have been deployed.

FDLR – the Forces Democratiques De Liberation Du Rwanda is a Hutu militia group active in North Kivu, and some members include those who led the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Rwandan forces as well as Tutsi-led militia groups have engaged in fighting against the FDLR, particularly M23. Rwanda has accused the DRC of financially backing the FDLR, and though the DRC banned any cooperation between its government and the FDLR, UN experts still believe that collaboration continues. They also often partner with local Mai-Mai groups to protect Hutu interests. The UN sanctioned the group in 2012 due to their human rights abuses and assaults against women and children.

M23 – formed after the March 23 2009 peace agreement between the Congolese government and a previous Tutsi-led rebel group was allegedly broken in 2012. In 2012 they seized control of Goma but after a UN-backed offensive by the Force Intervention Brigade, they surrendered and disbanded in 2013. In 2021 they resurfaced and in 2023 launched a political wing, the AFC. They have been rapidly gaining a hold in the North and South Kivu regions, capturing major cities in 2025 such as Goma and Bukavu. It is largely believed that they are financially backed by Rwanda who have reportedly provided equipment and training. Rwanda additionally holds financial stakes in the DRC’s mines. Their main objective is to advance Tutsi interests within the DRC and overthrow the government in order to stop corruption and insecurity.

Mai-Mai – a collective name for local militia nationalist groups across the North and South Kivu regions. Often used by M23 and the FDLR alike to bolster their military strength.

MONUSCO – the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo took over from a previous UN peacekeeping force in the DRC in 1999 with a mandate to protect civilians and humanitarian personnel from violence in the eastern DRC and to support the Congolese government in finding peace. They have been criticised by local officials and the government as ineffective, particularly after the M23 insurgencies in 2025, however in December 2025 their mission was renewed for another year by the Security Council. While consisting of over

10,000 troops, only the UN Force Intervention Brigade (FIS) is allowed to advance offensives against militia.

Tutsi – an ethnic group who were the victims of the 1994 Rwanda genocide. A number of extremist militia groups such as M23, as well as Rwandan military forces back the protection of Tutsis and have used this as a pretext for escalating into violence and conflict in the Kivu regions. This group are often displaced and there are over 80,000 Congolese refugees in Rwanda due to the fighting in the DRC.

Wazalendo – A coalition of Congolese militia groups in the eastern DRC who have been financially backed and used by the Congolese government to fight against M23. After the retreat of the FARDC in 2025 in some areas around South Kivu, Wazalendo fighters have seized control of territory and have conducted roadblocks, restricting access and humanitarian aid to reach civilians. They have been accused of human rights abuses after the Human Rights Watch reported that men and women were being whipped for infractions and the Wazalendo have also ransacked Banyamulenge villages on suspicion of M23 alignment.

Background Information

Much of the current conflicts brought about by paramilitary groups in the DRC stemmed from the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which was perpetrated by Hutu extremists in power, killing over a million people, of whom were largely ethnic Tutsis. Following the success of the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in toppling the genocidal regime, over a million Hutus fled and settled in North and South Kivu, of which included a subset of those who had orchestrated the genocide.

This provided Rwanda a pretext to invade the DRC, stating that Hutu groups were a threat to Rwandan Tutsi groups and that Hutu extremists were being protected by the Congolese government. This sparked the First Congo War in 1996, in which the DRC fought Rwanda (who was backed by Uganda, Angola and Burundi) in a brutal conflict killing thousands of refugees and civilians – it ended with the overthrow of the Mobutu regime by Laurent Kabila assuming power in the DRC, the opposition leader who had coordinated with the Rwandan government (led by Paul Kagame).

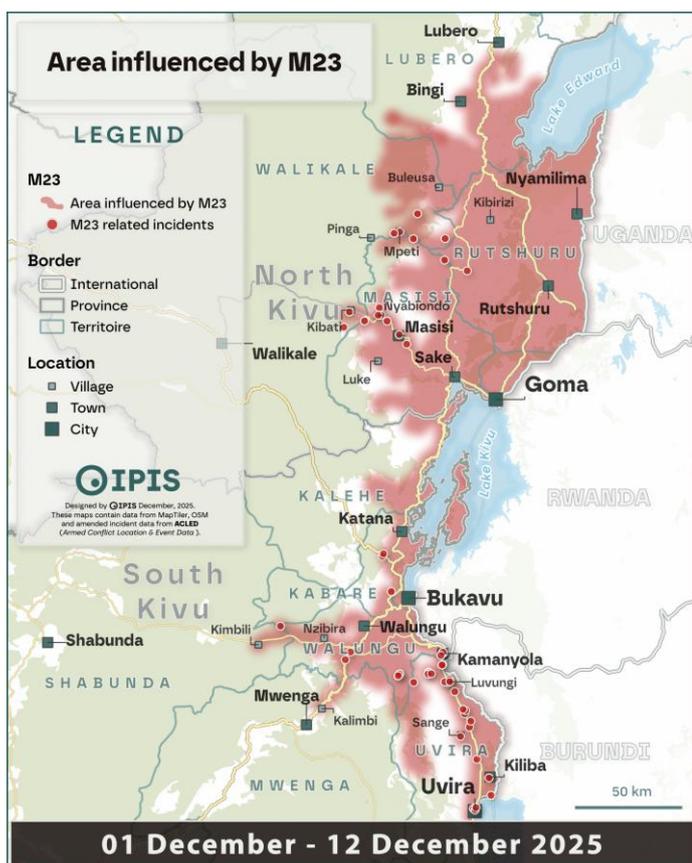
The Second Congo War in 1998 occurred after a breakdown in political relations between the DRC and Rwanda, and after a reversal in alliances, Kabila allowed Hutu militia groups to regather at the border again, which Rwanda responded to with an invasion. The DRC, now backed by Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia fought against the militaries of Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda as well as local Tutsi-led militia groups. The war ended with the assassination of Laurent Kabila and with the ascension of his son Joseph Kabila into power, and over three million people are estimated to have died as a result of the war.

Peace agreements in 2002-3 attempted to implement long-lasting stability between the countries, but the 2000s also coincided with the rise of various militia groups, particularly the Tutsi-led M23

as well as the Hutu-led FDLR, which had been active since the 1990s. Though the launch of MONUSCO helped to quell insurgencies in the eastern DRC, in December 2012 M23 captured Goma with Rwandan backing, leading to a period of fighting in which the UN Security Council finally deployed the FIS as part of MONUSCO in 2013 against M23 – this saw the surrender and disbanding of M23.

However in late 2021, M23 emerged again and established a base in Rutshuru territory (see map below). In 2022, M23 then captured the town of Bunagana in their advances across villages – while in 2023 the Wazalendo and FDLR militia slowed down their offensive, ultimately this did not prove effective and by 2024 M23 had captured the city of Sake. In January 2025, M23 captured Goma, a key trade hub which also served as a base for MONUSCO peacekeepers and later that year captured Bukavu, provincial capital of South Kivu. They reportedly illegally control several mines in these areas as well, and exploit such resources to finance their schemes, having retained a parallel administration in Goma and Bukavu; a report by UN experts in December 2024 estimated about 120 tonnes of coltan sent by the M23 to Rwanda every four weeks.

Currently, violence between militia groups still remains rampant in the affected regions despite various attempts at peace deals, in particular the Washington Peace Deal and Doha Framework Agreement, signed by the DRC and Rwanda in efforts to establish peace – in February 2026 the latter agreement was also signed by M23 which sets out a reference for a ceasefire deal. MONUSCO was renewed for another year in December 2025 and its mission remains to work towards a ceasefire. Rwandan army troops also remain in the DRC, reportedly for defensive measures against militia groups such as the FLDR.



(Source : IPIS, December 2025 [Mapping the M23's territorial influence in eastern DRC](#).)

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Burundi – The capture of Uvira by M23, which lies on the border of Burundi and the DRC, has exacerbated tensions between Rwanda and Burundi as the Burundian government accuses Rwanda of attempting to destabilise the country. Additionally they accuse Rwanda of supporting a Burundian rebel group, Red Tabara, which is based in South Kivu. The Burundi National Defence Force remains stationed in the eastern DRC and has opposed M23 and the Rwandan Defence Force.

China – China seeks to capitalise off the DRC's natural resources, of which contain the largest mineral and metal reserves in the world, in order to further their electronic production. Thus, the DRC remains under numerous contracts to China, who have provided development projects such as the building of railroads in return for access to mineral reserves. They control the majority of foreign-owned cobalt, uranium, and copper mines and Congolese forces have allegedly protected Chinese assets in the east following the M23 offensive. China also provides drones and military equipment to the DRC to fight M23.

DRC – The DRC remains allied with certain military groups such as the Wazalendo in order to fend off M23 and Rwanda accuses them of being affiliated with the FDLR. Félix Tshisekedi is president after re-election in 2024 after an albeit turbulent vote underpinned by the conflicts in the east at the time.

Qatar – A mediator state which hosted talks between Rwanda and the DRC in later 2025 to find a peace deal, resulting in the signing of the Doha Framework Agreement in November.

Rwanda – UN experts allege Rwanda's backing of M23 as well as their deployment of 3000-4000 troops in the DRC to be an attempt to expand their areas of control. However President Paul Kagame has stated that “the remnants of the militias that committed genocide in Rwanda” in the DRC are unacceptable and provide primary reasoning for their perceived offensives.

US – Hosted Rwandan and Congolese presidents in December 2025 to sign the Washington Peace Deal, asking that they stop supporting armed groups, and requires Rwanda to withdraw its “defensive measures” and requests the elimination of the FDLR. The US, particularly under the Trump administration, seeks to bolster US investment in the region to profit from the DRC's natural resources in competition with the current Chinese monopoly.

Timeline of Events

1994 – Rwandan genocide kills over one million people, of which over 800,000 are ethnic Tutsis.

1996-7 – First Congo War

1998-2002 – Second Congo War

1999 – Deployment of MONUSCO, particularly the FIS into eastern Congo

2002-3 – Peace agreements between Rwanda, the DRC and Uganda

March 23rd 2009 – Peace agreement between Congolese government and the CNDP (a Tutsi-led rebel group)

December 2012 – M23 capture Goma for the first time

2013 – M23 disband after being defeated by largely DRC and FIS troops

2021 – M23 re-emerge and establish a base in the Rutshuru territory

January 2025 – M23 capture Goma for the second time

February 2025 – M23 capture Bukavu

November 2025 – DRC and Rwanda sign Doha Framework Agreement

December 2025 – DRC and Rwanda sign Washington Peace Deal

December 2025 – UN Security Council Resolution 2808 renews the mandate of MONUSCO

February 2026 – M23 signs a document with the DRC in accordance with the Doha Framework Agreement, establishing preliminary ceasefire mechanisms

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

- The Nairobi process was established in 2022 by the East African Community and focuses on finding peace via mediation and negotiations between governments and armed groups. It asks for immediate ceasefire, repatriation of foreign military troops, and for local militia to align with a Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme (DDR). However the DRC has so far been reluctant to engage diplomatically with M23, deeming them terrorists.
- The Luanda process in 2022 was created by the African Union, with Angolan President João Lourenço to mediate Rwanda and the DRC which focuses on the rehabilitation of geopolitical relations. While a ceasefire agreement was signed in July 2024, this quickly fell apart due to fracturing relations between Rwanda and the DRC over the question of eliminating the FDLR and in DRC's refusal to engage with M23.
- The Washington and Doha peace deals have further invited more collaboration between the DRC and Rwanda on a larger international stage, however both did not address nor hear from militia representatives, resulting in further M23 offensives even after the signings. While M23 and the DRC have negotiated and the former has very recently signed the Doha agreement, no concrete frameworks have been put in place yet.

Possible Solutions

Implementing the Luanda/Nairobi Process further by calling for UN Member States to support African mediators and implementing regular international dialogues and conferences so that affected states are transparent and up-to-date on matters. This may also encourage further negotiations between militia groups and state governments to see a more stable, long-lasting peace and would likely see the merge of the Luanda and Nairobi process in a more multilateral solution.

Stronger frameworks to prevent government and militia collusion (and corruption) by restricting the collusion and backing of militia groups by governments in order to advance territorial dominance by asking for transparent reviews and reports, as well as withdrawal of support by Member States for countries which implicitly or explicitly perpetrate human rights abuses via militia proxies.

Implementation of DDR programmes which see the demobilisation of militia groups, providing routes for deserters of such groups through government or UN-backed safe havens and infrastructure for disarmament. Further investment into reintegration (while also keeping in mind legal penalties and repercussions) for ex-militants and reconciliation programmes may also be effective.

Improving governance and anti-corruption measures by support UN-backed transparency programs to reduce corruption in the mining sector and public security budgets, encouraging collaboration between MONUSCO and the government in an effort to reform the FARDC.

Humanitarian and civilian protection measures through provision of humanitarian aid to hard-to-reach occupied areas in the North and South Kivu regions with the help of UN and organisations such as Amnesty International. This could be implemented by strengthening MONUSCO presence in conflict zones and providing safe corridors for displaced persons with the help of UNHCR programmes.

Restricting the illicit mineral trade by developing mechanisms to regulate and track trade, particularly overseas, for example by using stronger certification systems in order to prevent the illegal monopoly of militia groups over mines. This would mean that Congolese people would be able to profit and benefit from their country's natural resources rather than allowing for illicit monetary flows to allow for militia groups to further their schemes. (cf. the EU [2023 Great Lakes strategy](#) which addresses this more in depth)

Useful Links

1. ["UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo" OR MONUSCO - Search Results - United Nations Digital Library System](#)
2. [Democratic Republic of the Congo - Central Africa, Conflict, Resources | Britannica](#)
3. [Democratic Republic of Congo | World Bank Group](#)

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