

REPORT

24/08



The Resurgence of the M23

Regional Rivalries, Donor Policy, and a Stalled Peace Process

Ebuteli is a Congolese research institute covering politics, governance and violence. Ebuteli (“staircase”, in Lingala) has made it its mission to promote, through rigorous research, an informed debate to find solutions to the many challenges facing the DRC. In an environment very often clouded by easy-to-spread rumours, Ebuteli hopes its work will contribute to constructive discussions on issues of great national importance.

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Cover photo:

A Kenyan soldier from the East African Community’s regional force and a M23 combattant, during the rebellion’s withdrawal ceremony in Kibumba, some 30 km north of Goma, on December 23, 2022.

Credit: **Glody Murhabazi**

This report was originally published in French on August 6, 2024. Events occurring after that date have therefore not been taken into account in this English translation.



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Glossary of acronyms

ADF	Allied Democratic Forces
AFC	Congo River Alliance (<i>Alliance du fleuve Congo</i>)
AFDL	Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (<i>Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaire</i>)
ANCDH	Alliance of Congolese Nationalists for the Defense of Human Rights (<i>Alliance des nationalistes congolais pour la défense des droits humains</i>)
APCLS	Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (<i>Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain</i>)
AU	African Union
CENI	Independent National Electoral Commission (<i>Commission électorale nationale indépendante</i>)
CMC/FDP	Collective of Movements for Change/Forces for the Defense of the People (<i>Collectif des mouvements pour le changement / Forces de défense du peuple</i>)
CNDP	National Congress for the Defense of the People (<i>Congrès national pour la défense du peuple</i>)
CNRD	National Council for Renewal and Democracy (<i>Conseil national pour le renouveau et la démocratie</i>)
CODECO	Cooperative for the Development of Congo (<i>Coopérative pour le développement du Congo</i>)
CRG	Congo Research Group
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EAC	East African Community
EACRF	East African Community Regional Force
EJVM	Expanded Joint Verification Mechanism of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region
EU	European Union
FARDC	Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (<i>Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo</i>)
FDLR	Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (<i>Forces démocratiques pour la libération du Rwanda</i>)

FIB	United Nations Force Intervention Brigade
GR	Republican Guard (<i>Garde républicaine</i>)
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICC	International Criminal Court
ISSSS	International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy
MVCE	Expanded Joint Verification Mechanism (<i>Mécanisme de vérification conjoint élargi</i>)
KST	Kivu Security Tracker
M23	March 23 Movement (<i>Mouvement du 23 mars</i>)
MLC	Movement for the Liberation of Congo (<i>Mouvement de libération du Congo</i>)
MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (<i>Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo</i>)
NDC-Rénové	Nduma Defence of Congo-Renovated NGO Non-governmental organization
NISS	National Intelligence and Security Service of Rwanda
PARECO	Coalition of Congolese Patriotic Resistance Fighters (<i>Coalition des patriotes résistants congolais</i>)
P-DDRCS	Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Recovery, and Stabilization Program (<i>Programme de désarmement, de démobilisation, de relèvement communautaire et de stabilisation</i>)
PNC	Congolese National Police (<i>Police nationale congolaise</i>)
RCD	Rally for Congolese Democracy (<i>Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie</i>)
RDF	Rwanda Defence Force
RED-Tabara	Resistance for the Rule of Law in Burundi (<i>Résistance pour un État de droit au Burundi</i>)
RNC	Rwanda National Congress
RPA	Rwandan Patriotic Army
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front



RUD	Rally for Unity and Democracy (<i>Rassemblement pour l'unité et la démocratie</i>)
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAKIMA	<i>Société Aurifère du Kivu et du Maniema</i>
SAMIDRC	Southern African Development Community Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo
STAREC	National Stabilization and Reconstruction Program (<i>Programme national de stabilisation et de reconstruction</i>)
UDPS	Union for Democracy and Social Progress (<i>Union pour la démocratie et le progrès social</i>)
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UPDF	Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces
USN	National Sacred Union (<i>Union sacrée de la nation</i>)



Executive summary

In November 2021, the M23 rebellion resurfaced in the province of North Kivu, in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Since then, it has displaced around 1.7 million people, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. Although dozens of other armed groups are fighting in the country, the M23 has become the focus of geopolitical rivalry between the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda, as well as the object of much attention from the Congolese government, so much so that it is difficult to imagine any progress toward peace in the country without dismantling this rebellion.

This report argues that the main impetus for this M23 resurgence lies outside the DRC. The weakness of the Congolese state has aggravated the crisis, which also has deep roots at the local level, but the M23 above all emerged as a means to project its influence against its northern neighbor, Uganda. Even after the two countries resumed relations in early 2022, Rwandan support for the M23 continued as the group grew. The Congolese government's reaction has exacerbated this crisis. Frustrated by its army, which is riddled with clientelist networks, the government has resorted to private security firms and collaboration with foreign and local armed groups. As these groups and the M23 recruit on an ethnic basis, community tensions have risen, and attacks on civilians have multiplied.

Contrary to the narratives put forward by the Rwandan government and the M23, according to which the rebellion emerged in response to anti-Tutsi violence and collaboration between the FDLR and the Congolese government, we argue that it is rather the rise of the M23 that has led to the intensification of these phenomena. This does not excuse these behaviors—it is imperative that the Congolese government tackle and sanction hate speech, including within Tshisekedi's majority USN coalition, and end its support for armed groups—but it suggests that the M23 has exacerbated the ills it cites, not that it has emerged in response to them.

The international response has been lackluster. Although almost all major donors have publicly condemned

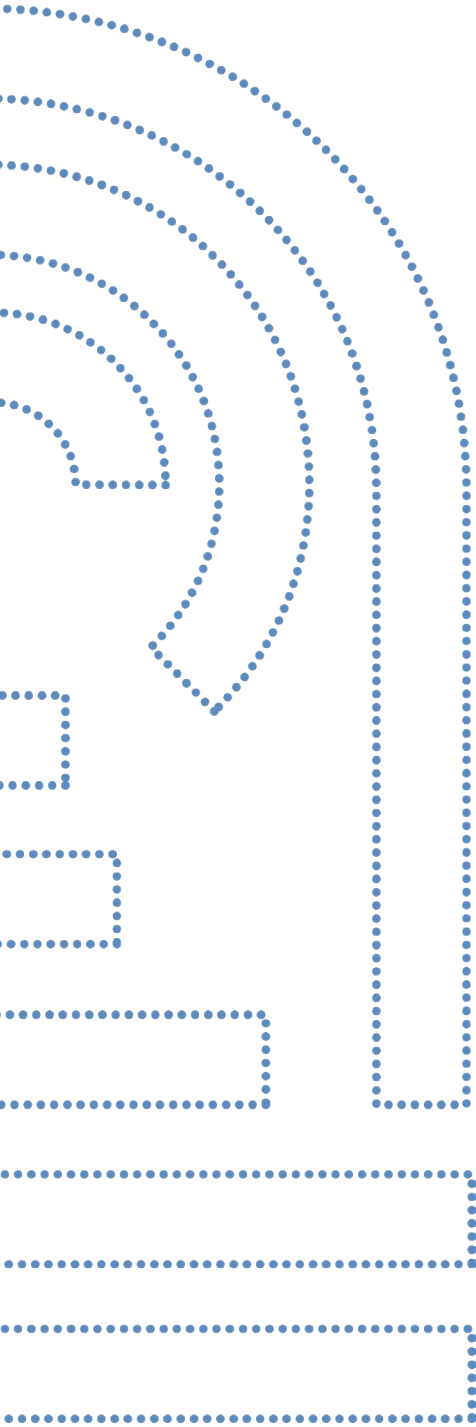
Rwanda's support for the M23, there have been no material consequences. Given that donors provide the equivalent of 74% of Rwanda's budget in foreign aid, their failure to use these levers despite the information at their disposal gives them considerable responsibility for the current crisis. Indeed, in the midst of the rebellion, the United Kingdom (UK) signed a controversial agreement with Rwanda to extradite asylum seekers, the Commonwealth held its bi-annual Heads of State Meeting in Kigali, the EU provided the Rwandan Defense Force with €20 million for its operations in Mozambique, and a series of UN and private sector meetings were held in Rwanda.

Two parallel processes have been set up to deal with the crisis: one is based in Nairobi and chaired by the East African Community (EAC). It focuses on the national dimension and has two components: the facilitation of talks between the belligerents and the deployment—albeit brief—of a military contingent, the EACRF. The second, held under the auspices of the AU, attempts to mitigate the international crisis between the DRC and its neighbors and is hosted in Luanda by the Angolan government. Both have struggled to make progress.

In late 2023, the EACRF withdrew at the request of the Congolese government, which accused it of passivity towards the M23 and was gradually replaced by a Southern African Development Community (SADC) force, the SADC Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC).

Nevertheless, the impasse remains. There is a fundamental disagreement: the Congolese government considers the M23 to be illegitimate and backed by Rwanda, yet the other countries in the region have refrained from putting pressure on Rwanda and are pushing instead for a negotiated compromise between the M23 and the Congolese government, which the DRC continues to refuse.

Getting out of this quagmire will require a new impetus and the same kind of international attention as during the Sun City peace process from 2002 to 2006. Given Rwanda's role in triggering the crisis, increased pressure, including financial pressure, is the most obvious first step in dealing with the M23, forcing it to withdraw from its positions and join a demobilization process.



The Congolese government also bears responsibility, especially as the M23 rebellion is only one element in a much broader crisis. While anti-Tutsi sentiment is not at the root of this new crisis, the demonization of this community is widespread and has intensified since the start of the rebellion. The government should crack down on discrimination and promote the return of the tens of thousands of Tutsis in refugee camps in neighboring countries. More generally, it should invest in communal reconciliation and land reform—since the start of the war in 1993, little has been done to address these issues. More broadly, the government needs to forge something that has not really existed since 2006: a political process for dealing with all the armed groups—they number over a hundred—in Eastern Congo, involving demobilization, community reconciliation, refugee return, economic development, and security sector reform. Without a consensus on this type of political process, the impact of external actors—including MONUSCO—will be limited. Part of this consensus will require agreement between the peacemakers—it makes no sense for the UN and SADC to deploy separate forces in eastern Congo.

It is clear that the current approach to crisis management has not worked and that a new one needs to be adopted with greater determination and political will.



Introduction

After more than eight years of relative inaction, the M23 resurfaced in Eastern DRC in November 2021. Since then, despite diplomatic initiatives, this rebel group has grown considerably in strength, from a group of a few dozen fighters confined to the foothills of Mount Sabyinyo on the border between the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda to a force of hundreds occupying large swathes of North Kivu province.

At the time of writing, the M23 still controls major towns such as Rutshuru and Kitshanga, as well as all road access to the towns of Sake and Goma.

The M23 is not the only armed group present in Eastern DRC. More than a hundred are active, some more deadly than the M23, such as the ADF or CODECO. However, the M23 has become the center of attention. No other group controls and administers such a vast and strategic territory, threatening the important city of Goma. Nor does any other group enjoy such significant support from a foreign government. The M23 also carries a heavy symbolic weight, given its leaders' role in past rebellions.

This analytical note attempts to situate the M23 in its historical, national, political, and regional geopolitical context. In particular, we attempt to understand the factors that led the Rwandan government to support the rebellion, its Congolese counterpart to mount such an ineffectual response, and what shaped the international response to the crisis.

The report is divided into three parts. First, we trace the history of the rebellion from its beginnings in 2012, focusing on the most recent period. In the second part, we analyze the actions and interests of the various players to better understand why the crisis shows few signs of abating. We conclude the report with some political considerations.

Part I: Historical background

1.1. Prologue: the disappearance of the first M23 (2012-2013)

The M23 was born in April 2012 following a mutiny by mainly Rwandophone FARDC officers in North and South Kivu. Many were former members of other Rwandan-backed rebellions based in the Kivus. Bosco Ntaganda, Sultani Makenga, and most of the other senior officers had been members of the RPF, which took power in Rwanda in 1994, then the AFDL (1996-1997), the RCD (1998-2003), and finally the CNDP (2004-2008).¹

Following an agreement between Rwanda and the DRC signed on March 23, 2009—the date which gave the M23 its name—the CNDP was dismantled. Its commander, Laurent Nkunda, was arrested and placed under house arrest in Kigali while his officers were given important positions within the FARDC in North and South Kivu. Bosco Ntaganda became deputy commander of operations in the Eastern DRC, and Sultani Makenga was deputy commander of South Kivu.

Two main factors led to the creation of the M23 three years later. First, the Congolese government was keen to dismantle the ex-CNDP networks that had asserted control over large swathes of the army in the Kivus following the 2009 agreement. In early 2012, Kinshasa began planning the redeployment of many key officers from this region. Second, following the debacle of the 2011 elections, President Joseph Kabila, eager to regain his legitimacy and under international pressure,² took steps to arrest the ex-CNDP's most senior officer, General Bosco Ntaganda,³ for whom the ICC had issued an arrest warrant.

Supported by the Rwandan government,⁴ the rebellion first succeeded in seizing the town of Rutshuru in July 2012 and Goma, the provincial capital, in November 2012. The fall of Goma provoked a strong international reaction and was ultimately the beginning of the end for the rebellion, which withdrew from the city after eight days. Rwanda came under intense diplomatic pressure, which led to the suspension of over \$200 million in aid to Rwanda and the end of Kigali's support for the rebellion.⁵

This crisis also led to the creation of a peace process designed to tackle not only the M23 rebellion but also the root causes of the conflict that had shaken the DRC since 1993. The Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework Agreement, also known as the Addis Ababa Agreement, was signed on February 24, 2013, between the DRC and ten countries in the region, including Rwanda and Uganda. The Congolese government pledged to reform its security sector, prevent armed groups from destabilizing neighboring countries, and promote “national reconciliation, tolerance, and democratization,” while neighboring countries pledged “not to tolerate, or provide assistance or support to any armed group.”⁶ It was the first time since the end of the Sun City peace process (2002–2006) that a comprehensive peace framework for the DRC conflict had been created.

The M23 rebellion also triggered a shift in regional geopolitics. At the instigation of South Africa and Tanzania, two countries that at the time had strained relations with the Kigali government, SADC proposed sending a military force to support the Congolese government. Faced with funding difficulties, this force was finally integrated into MONUSCO in March 2013 under the name of FIB. Comprising 3,000 soldiers from South Africa, Tanzania, and Malawi, the UN Security Council gave it an offensive mandate.

Under military pressure from the FARDC backed by the FIB, deprived of support from Rwanda, and torn by a leadership dispute between Makenga and Ntaganda, the M23 was forced to flee outside Congolese borders and admit defeat on November 5, 2013. Nevertheless, in December 2013, under pressure from countries in the region, the Congolese government signed a declaration—which, according to the government, is not a binding agreement—saying it would grant the group amnesty for acts of war and insurrection and ensure the return of refugees and the restitution of their property.⁷

The Congolese government never implemented this agreement; the military threat had disappeared, and the government saw no need to implement a commitment that could have resulted in politically costly or even dangerous reforms. The M23 split into two factions:

one led by Sultani Makenga, based in Uganda, and the other by Jean-Marie Runiga, based in Rwanda. A large proportion of its troops self-demobilized and returned home to the DRC and Rwanda, while a few hundred remained in army camps in these two countries.

However, in 2016, a group of a few dozen M23 fighters, led by Sultani Makenga, left Uganda to settle in the DRC on the slopes of Mount Sabyinyo. Over the next few years, this group had regular skirmishes with the FARDC, allegedly shooting down two helicopters in 2017, but remained confined to a small area.⁸

1.2. The resurgence of the M23 (2021–2023)

1.2.1. Managing the M23: a missed opportunity

In January 2019, Félix Tshisekedi was inaugurated following controversial presidential elections. Most observers agree that he had come second in the elections but reached an agreement with incumbent president Joseph Kabila.⁹ This agreement gave Tshisekedi the presidency but allowed Kabila's coalition to retain power in parliament and control a large proportion of national and provincial government posts. The early years of the Tshisekedi administration could have been an opportunity to tackle the problem of the M23, which was then a weakened force. However, this lack of threat also left the government with no sense of urgency in the face of the insurgents.

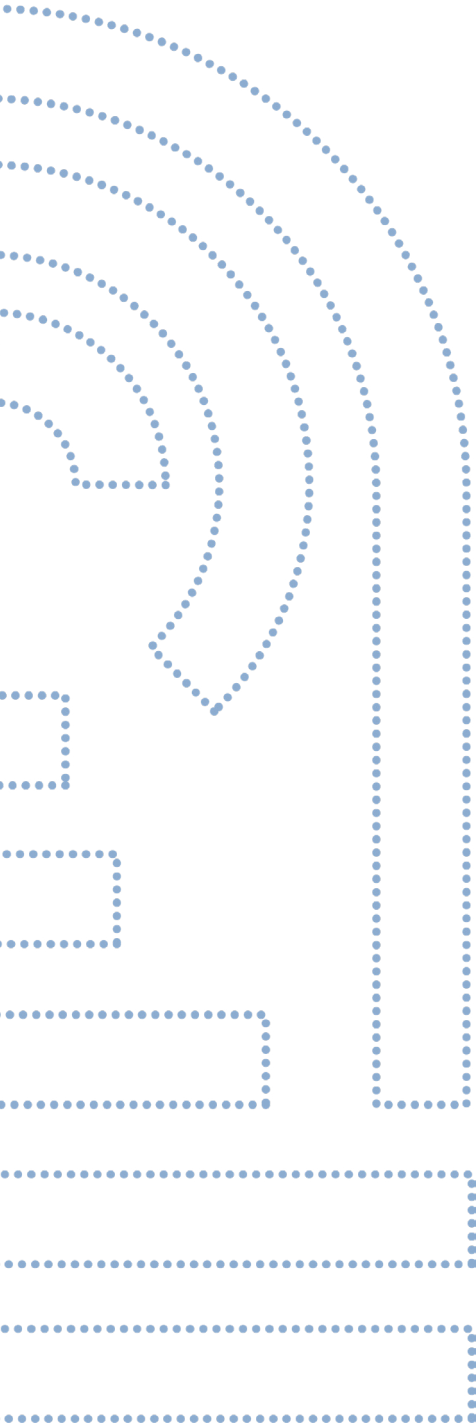
Given that many M23 leaders were in Rwanda and Uganda, it was natural for Kinshasa to reach out to its neighbors. An initial meeting took place in Kigali in October 2019 between Delphin Kahimbi, head of FARDC intelligence, Jean-Marie Runiga, the ex-M23 leader living in Rwanda, and the director of Rwanda's National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), Anaclet Kalibata. They agreed in principle that the M23 could be reintegrated into the army at their former ranks after retraining. At a follow-up meeting in October 2019, they agreed on a roadmap that would lift arrest warrants against M23 leaders, release their members arrested for insurgency, and reintegrate those eligible into the FARDC and the National Park Service.¹⁰

However, the implementation of these agreements was not sufficiently monitored, contributing to tensions on the ground. In July 2020, M23 fighters clashed with the FARDC, killing three people. Then, in October 2020, an M23 delegation visited Kinshasa, comprising Lawrence Kanyuka, the movement's political advisor and spokesman, Bosco Mberabagabo, known as "Castro," in charge of security and intelligence, and Benjamin Mbonimpa, its executive secretary.¹¹ They waited months to meet their counterparts. In the end, they met the interior minister Gilbert Kankonde.¹² According to excerpts from a letter subsequently published by the M23, dated February 2021, Kankonde requested \$1.3 million from the presidency to accompany their "surrender" within nine months. It is unclear whether these funds were disbursed. After spending almost a year in the capital, the M23 delegation left.

1.2.2. The ADF threat, the state of siege, and rapprochement with Uganda

Tshisekedi came to power promising to make ending conflict a priority, declaring that he was "ready to die for peace."¹³ He did not, however, make much progress: in the first two years of his mandate, internal displacement rose from 5,010,000 to 6,100,000 people, and conflict-related killings of civilians rose from an average of 132 to 199 per month in the Kivus and Ituri.¹⁴ The main threat to security in eastern DRC during this initial period was the ADF, an Islamist armed group of Ugandan origin, which repeatedly perpetrated massacres against civilians along the border between the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri.

During these first two years, Tshisekedi was constrained by his coalition with Kabila; key ministries, including defense, were headed by allies of the former President. Tshisekedi began to break his alliance with Kabila in December 2020. A few months later, in April 2021, he succeeded in setting up a new coalition with a majority in parliament, which pushed Kabila and the politicians still allied with him into opposition. The new government made peacemaking its priority, and within weeks President Tshisekedi had declared a state of siege in the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri. Although a few new military operations were launched, the main thrust of the



measure was to restrict civil liberties and replace civilian authorities with military personnel in the administration and judiciary of the provinces, territories, and towns of North Kivu and Ituri.

The state of siege was a response to a problem that did not exist. An excess of civil liberties and popular mobilization were not at the root of the violence. Moreover, the government had not previously hesitated to violate individual liberties in order to gather intelligence. A more effective and accountable army, territorial administration and judiciary, as well as investment in local peacebuilding and job creation programs were essential to progress toward stabilization. The state of siege thwarted progress toward these goals by making the army less accountable and placing it in charge of portfolios in which it had little experience. Initially, the newly-appointed military authorities were also faced with a lack of resources, delaying for several months, for example, the first visit of the Governor of North Kivu to Beni, the then-epicenter of the violence. As we explain below, it is easier to understand the state of siege as a means for Tshisekedi to control the military hierarchy than as a stabilization strategy.

Shortly afterwards, on July 4, 2021, Tshisekedi signed a decree establishing the new Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Recovery, and Stabilization Program (P- DDRCS)¹⁵ and appointed Tommy Tambwe Rudima to coordinate it.¹⁶ This program was supposed to revive the defunct demobilization program and create a new stabilization framework. The DDR strategy ruled out any amnesty for “crimes of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and any other serious violation of human rights,” as well as any collective reintegration of armed groups in the FARDC. These positions would later become important safeguards for negotiations with the M23.¹⁷ These prohibitions can be interpreted as retroactive: any previous agreement between the government and the armed groups that contravened these provisions would become null and void or have to be renegotiated. This, therefore, called into question the 2019 Kigali roadmap, which provided for the wholesale reintegration of the M23.¹⁸



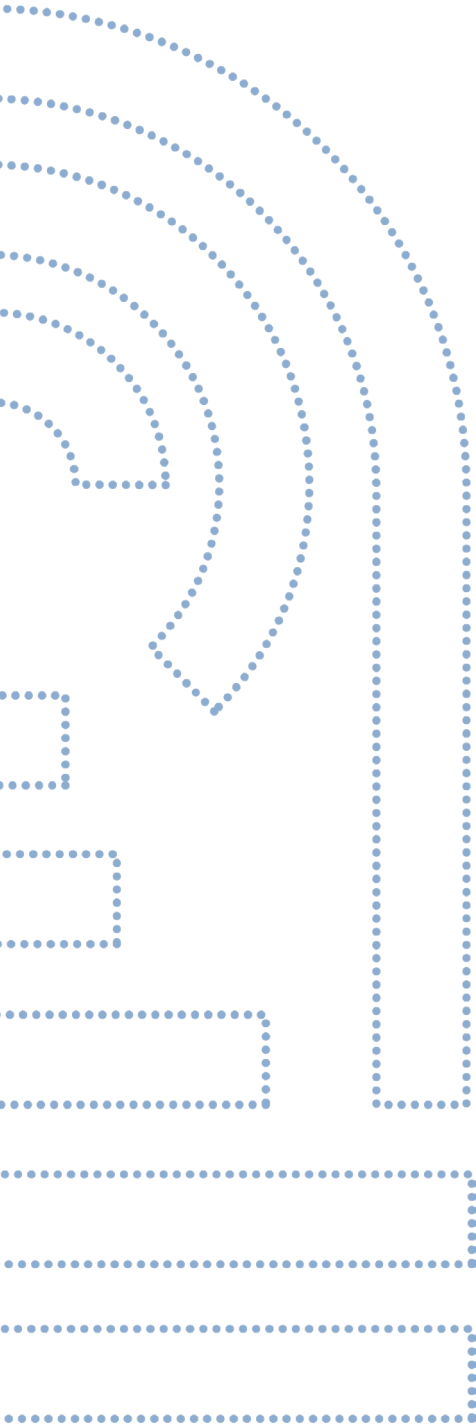
1.2.3. The rebirth of the M23

On November 7, 2021, the M23 attacked the FARDC in the villages of Ndiza, Cyanzu, and Runyoni on the northern and western flanks of Mount Sabyinyo, killing four people in their ranks. The M23 was clearly frustrated by the lack of progress in their negotiations with Kinshasa. According to a source within the movement, their delegation in Kinshasa left the city hurriedly in October 2021 via Brazzaville.

However, the main impetus for this resurgence came from regional geopolitics. The most crucial factor was the tense relationship between the Ugandan and Rwandan governments. For several months, Kampala and Kinshasa had been discussing economic partnerships. On June 16, 2021, the two governments signed a contract for the construction of two roads by Ugandan companies: Kasindi-Beni-Butembo and Bunagana-Goma. The latter was to run just a few kilometers from the Rwandan border.¹⁹ Then, in October 2021, the Ugandan and Congolese governments signed a memorandum of understanding providing for military operations to protect road construction crews.

On November 16, the conflict escalated dramatically. A suicide bomb attack in Kampala killed at least four people and wounded thirty-seven, including twenty-seven police officers. The Ugandan authorities were quick to accuse the ADF;²⁰ the Islamic State, to which the ADF are affiliated, also claimed responsibility for the attack.²¹ A few days after the Kampala attack, Tshisekedi granted the Ugandan government the right to conduct an operation against the ADF on Congolese territory. Launched on November 30, 2021, the operation, dubbed “Shujaa” (“hero” in Swahili), caused a serious deterioration in relations between Uganda and Rwanda. On November 20 and 21, the M23 intensified its attacks: around a hundred heavily armed fighters attacked the Virunga National Park base in Bukima, from where many tourists set off to see the mountain gorillas, and seized stocks of weapons.²²

In December, it was the Burundian army’s turn to deploy its troops in South Kivu to hunt down the RED-Tabara rebellion, with the tacit agreement of Kinshasa.²³ A third deployment of foreign security forces was also planned:



that of the Rwandan police. On December 13, 2021, the Congolese and Rwandan national police forces signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at combating “jihadists, terrorism, drug trafficking and smuggling, among other things.” According to a press release from the Rwandan police, a joint operational unit based in Goma was supposed to be set up.²⁴

This agreement, however, provoked an outcry among the Congolese public.²⁵ On December 20, a demonstration against the Rwandan presence was organized in Goma, killing three demonstrators and one police officer.²⁶ Following this incident, the PNC denied at a press conference that the Rwandan police would intervene on Congolese territory, calling into question the previously signed agreement.²⁷

As we shall see later, these dynamics left the Rwandan government feeling vulnerable and isolated in the region. At the time, senior Rwandan intelligence officials expressed fears that Uganda would use its presence in the DRC to destabilize their country.²⁸ In recent years, the two countries had accused each other of destabilization attempts by supporting opposition forces, kidnapping citizens, and infiltrating intelligence agents. The roots of this hostility go back to the RPF rebellion, which Uganda supported, then the Congo wars from 1996 to 2003, when the two countries fought for influence and resources in the east of the DRC.²⁹

The most recent escalation dates back to early 2019, when Rwanda closed the border with its northern neighbor, accusing it of harassing its citizens. At the time, the Rwandan government claimed that more than 900 of its citizens had been expelled in the previous year, and 106 were in detention. Ugandan officials responded by claiming that the Rwandans had infiltrated their security services and kidnapped dissidents on their territory.

On October 4, 2019, rebels attacked the village of Kinigi in Northwestern Rwanda, killing fourteen people. Rwandan authorities attributed the attack to the FDLR, a rebel group based in the DRC that includes people who helped organize the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The Rwandan government accused Uganda of supporting



the FDLR and claimed that Burundi and Uganda were collaborating with RNC rebels, who were present in South Kivu.³⁰

When Uganda and Burundi began their military operations in the DRC at the end of 2021, it was clear that Rwanda felt under siege. In an interview with *Jeune Afrique* on January 20, 2022, Paul Kagame stated that he had not been informed of the Ugandan operation “either by the DRC or by Uganda.”³¹

On February 8, 2022, in a speech delivered at the inauguration of his government, Paul Kagame seemed to issue a warning to his neighbors:

We don't wish anyone less security or less peace. But if you want us to fight, we will. (...) It's absolutely not a problem. We have professionals who do it well. Either here or elsewhere. (...) Now our doctrine [is]: where the fire comes from, that's where we find it. (...) The reason we're watching the DRC is because of the FDLR and other groups in the DRC who may be mixing with the ADF (...). We will deal with the situation appropriately. We are still at the stage of understanding, of finding a way for us all to agree on the problem.³²

A few weeks later, large-scale M23 operations began, with support from the Rwandan army.

1.2.4. Talk, fight, talk-escalation and diplomacy

The first major battle of this conflict took place in the strategic border town of Bunagana on March 28, 2022, during which the M23 deployed around 400 fighters according to the UN Group of Experts on the DRC.³³ On March 29, a MONUSCO helicopter crashed in the region, killing eight peacekeepers. According to the UN Group of Experts, the aircraft was hit by fire from a hill controlled by the M23.³⁴

Ugandan road-building crews were affected by the fighting and appear to have been one of the targets. Their construction machinery had been deployed to

Bunagana in February to begin work:³⁵ According to several local sources, during the fighting, the Ugandan army intervened on Congolese territory to secure the construction machinery and repelled the M23.³⁶

It was during this offensive that the Congolese government publicly accused Rwanda of supporting the M23 for the first time.³⁷ Nevertheless, pressure mounted on the Congolese government to open negotiations with the rebels. At a meeting between Félix Tshisekedi, Paul Kagame, Yoweri Museveni, and Uhuru Kenyatta in Nairobi on April 8, the principle of negotiations with the M23 was reportedly accepted by the Congolese delegation.³⁸ The Congolese coordinator of the national monitoring mechanism of the Addis Ababa Agreement (Mécanisme national de suivi), Claude Ibalanky, traveled to Kampala on April 20, 2022, to begin these discussions, which were then to continue in Nairobi.³⁹

The new high-level meeting in Nairobi brought together the heads of state of the DRC, Kenya, Burundi, and Uganda, with Rwanda represented by its foreign minister.⁴⁰ They decided on an ambitious two-track process for restoring peace in the Eastern DRC, a carrot and a stick: the Congolese government agreed to initiate peace talks with armed groups, while the region pledged to mount military operations to force insurgents to demobilize.

At the time, the M23 was the only armed group in Nairobi. The Congolese delegation, embarrassed at having to sit at the same table as the insurgents and legitimize them, quickly changed its position, refusing to enter into negotiations with the rebels. On April 22, the Congolese government renamed the negotiations “consultations” and extended them to some 40 other armed groups in order to dilute the importance of the M23, a tactic similar to that used during the 2008 talks with the CNDP.

On the ground, on April 23, fighting resumed between the FARDC and the M23; the Congolese delegation in Nairobi took advantage of this “aggression” to break off talks with the rebels. It was at this time that Tshisekedi transferred the management of the M23 file from Claude Ibalanky, who had initiated discussions with this group, to Serge Tshibangu, one of his advisors and advocate for a more intransigent line.⁴¹

1.2.5. Closer ties between Uganda and Rwanda; FARDC alliances with armed groups

On April 25, 2022, a few days after the Nairobi summit, President Paul Kagame, who had not attended, visited Uganda for the first time since 2018. He met his counterpart, Yoweri Museveni, which seemed to mark the end of a period of tension between the two countries and seal a rapprochement initiated by the visit of Museveni's son, General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, to Kigali the previous month,⁴² as well as by the reopening of the Gatuna border post after three years of closure in January 2022.⁴³

Tensions between Rwanda and Uganda may have contributed to the resurgence of the M23, but their rapprochement did not end the rebellion. On May 28, the Congolese government, for the first time, referred to M23 as a “terrorist” movement, a description that misrepresented its tactics but clearly indicated that it was not prepared to enter into dialogue with it.

Faced with a major military challenge from the M23 and RDF, the FARDC entered into a series of opportunistic alliances with local armed groups.⁴⁴ The first public sign of this development occurred in Pinga, Walikale territory, on May 9, 2022, when several local armed groups signed an agreement: the APCLS, the CMC/FDP, the NDC-R, and the ANCDH. The signatories pledged to stop fighting each other and the Congolese army. Colonel Salomon Tokolonga of the FARDC attended the meeting,⁴⁵ as did representatives of the FDLR.⁴⁶

On May 12, 2022, President Félix Tshisekedi publicly spoke out against this strategy, declaring, “you can't put out a fire by throwing oil on it.”⁴⁷ However, this statement was not followed by any sanctions against those involved. Colonel Tokolonga remains in place and, according to an interim report by the UN Group of Experts, fighters from the CMC/FDP, APCLS, and FDLR fought alongside the FARDC in late May and early June 2022.⁴⁸ Members of armed groups were also reportedly seen by UN experts in the Rumangabo military camp alongside the FARDC on June 9, 2022.⁴⁹ CRG/Ebuteli have also gathered testimonies of ammunition transfers from the FARDC to armed groups.

In addition to these alliances, and given the weaknesses of the national army, the government has begun to call on private military companies. Agemira, a relatively unknown company based in Bulgaria and registered locally as Agemira RDC, began working with the FARDC in 2022 to supply and maintain Sukhoi Su-25 fighter jets and subsequently expanded its services. Romanian company Asociatia RALF, working with local company Congo Protection, also began operating around Goma in December 2022.⁵⁰

1.2.6. The international response: the Nairobi and Luanda processes

Although the Congolese government stepped up its military response, it remained committed to diplomacy. Discussions continued in Nairobi to set up the EACRF, the first military intervention in this regional community's history, which had focused largely on economic integration and trade. On June 19, 2022, the EAC chiefs of staff adopted a concept of operations, assigning each member state an area of operation in Eastern DRC, in which they were to dismantle armed groups refusing to lay down their arms. Burundi and Tanzania (the latter, however, did not confirm its participation) were allocated South Kivu and Maniema; Kenya was given responsibility for the southern part of North Kivu, where the M23 is based; Uganda was given the northern part of North Kivu and Ituri; and South Sudan was given responsibility for the Uélé provinces. Each country was to finance its own operations.

The document also stated that Rwanda was supposed to deploy troops in North and South Kivu but added that the DRC refused their participation. This rejection of Rwandan troops once again irritated Kigali.⁵¹

The Nairobi process faced a fundamental contradiction between the interests of the participating states. The Congolese government initially saw the process as a forum through which it could galvanize its regional allies to support them militarily and exert financial and diplomatic pressure on Rwanda—much as SADC had done during the previous M23 rebellion in 2012–2013. Few other member states saw things this way. After Kampala restored relations with Kigali, it was less inclined to exert pressure on its southern neighbor. Similarly, the Kenyan elections of August 2022 saw Raila Odinga, the chosen successor of President Uhuru Kenyatta, with

whom Tshisekedi had close relations, lose to William Ruto, who was perceived as closer to Kampala.⁵²

Meanwhile, Tanzania and South Sudan expressed little interest in the process, while Burundi, although closer to Tshisekedi, was too small to play a leading role.

As the EAC struggled to make progress, the AU entered the fray in July 2022, appointing Angolan President João Lourenço as mediator in the crisis. A first summit was held in Luanda on July 8. While the EAC process was intended to facilitate discussions between the Congolese parties to the conflict, the parallel Luanda process was reserved for dialogue between states. It resulted in the adoption of a roadmap providing for the withdrawal of the M23 and, somewhat ambiguously, the “revision and implementation” of the “2019 joint roadmap of activities relating to the repatriation to the DRC of M23 fighters,” which provided for the reintegration of some M23 fighters into the FARDC and national park rangers.

In September 2022, the French government also became involved. The heads of the intelligence services of the DRC and Rwanda, Jean-Hervé Mbelu Biosha and Joseph Nzabamwita, met for talks in Paris on September 16, 2022.⁵³ On September 21, French President Emmanuel Macron organized a meeting between Félix Tshisekedi and Paul Kagame on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. According to several diplomatic sources, and confirmed in part by subsequent statements by Macron himself,⁵⁴ the contours of their agreement were as follows: an end to collaboration between the FARDC and the FDLR, and the withdrawal of the M23 to its positions prior to April 2022, including Bunagana. The Kenyan component of the EAC force would then occupy these abandoned positions, after which discussions would be initiated between the Congolese government and M23.

The regional force gradually became a reality. On August 15, 2022, the FARDC spokesman in South Kivu announced the arrival of a Burundian contingent within the EAC force, although this was merely the formalization of the presence of these troops who had been deployed in the DRC since December 2021.⁵⁵ On September 8, the member states signed an agreement in Kinshasa legalizing the deployment of the EACRF.⁵⁶

1.2.7. New FARDC offensive and defeat (October 2022–March 2023)

Despite the progress made and these formal agreements, there was still no consensus on what form a peace process should take, let alone what solution should be found to the conflict. The East African countries were pushing for a political solution, privately arguing that the military stalemate on the ground left no alternative. For the DRC government, this impasse was the result of an illegitimate Rwandan intervention; there would be “no negotiation with the M23” and the only acceptable outcome was for M23 to withdraw to its original positions on the slopes of Mount Sabyinyo.⁵⁷

Given this divergence, it is unsurprising that the next move occurred on the battlefield. On October 4, 2022, President Félix Tshisekedi made a new series of army appointments, placing commanders of the Republican Guard (GR), responsible for presidential protection, in key army posts. The commander of the GR, General Christian Tshiwewe, was appointed chief of staff of the FARDC—its highest post—while the deputy commander of the GR, Jérôme Chico Tshitambwe, was appointed deputy chief of staff in charge of operations.


On October 20, 2022, fighting between the FARDC and M23 resumed in Rutshuru territory. The FARDC offensive quickly collapsed, and the M23 rapidly gained ground. Over the following month, the rebels more than tripled the territory they controlled. They conquered the towns of Rutshuru and Kiwanja on October 29 and took control of a section of Route Nationale 2, cutting off the main road between Goma and the northern towns of Beni and Butembo, making Goma more dependent on its trade with Rwanda. The rebels then advanced along three axes: to the south, towards Goma, stopping some 20 km from the town; to the north, towards the Ishasha border post, where the Rwandan RUD rebels were based; and to the west, through the Virunga National Park, towards Tongo, an FDLR stronghold.

The expansion of M23 has benefited from significant external support. The Ugandan authorities provided at least passive support, allowing M23 to cross their border to recruit more troops and treat their wounded. But once again, it was Rwandan support that was decisive. Drone images, seen by CRG and Ebuteli, taken during the fighting at Rugari on October 30, show several soldiers with equipment similar to that of the RDF. At least one RDF soldier defected to the MONUSCO base in Kiwanja on October 24. The UN Group of Experts on the DRC has independently corroborated this support in two consecutive reports.⁵⁸ The US government has repeatedly denounced the presence of RDF troops on Congolese soil and, in August 2023, imposed sanctions against Rwandan General Andrew Nyamvumba for this support.⁵⁹

The FARDC have been unable to put up much resistance to M23 and have resorted to allying with several local armed groups. These groups recruit from the local population, usually along ethnic lines. This situation has given rise to a brutal conflict dynamic, with M23 targeting civilians in reprisal for ambushes by armed groups. For example, in Rushovu (November 14) and Kanaba (November 17),⁶⁰ a local group attacked M23, killing several of its troops. In revenge, on November 29 and 30, the M23 entered the villages of Kishishe and Bambu, killing several dozen people.⁶¹

M23's expansion undermined efforts to resolve the crisis and prompted renewed diplomatic and military efforts on the part of Kinshasa. On October 29, 2022, the Congolese government announced the expulsion of the Rwandan ambassador to Kinshasa.⁶² A few days later, the Congolese president called on young Congolese to enroll en masse in the FARDC. On November 7, two Su-25 fighter jets, operated under an agreement with the private military company Agemira, began bombing M23 positions, reigniting tensions with Rwanda over the alleged violation of its airspace.⁶³

On November 8, 2022, the DRC's national assembly, controlled by the president's coalition, passed a resolution prohibiting the government from "any negotiations aimed at integrating elements from armed groups into the armed forces, the national police or any other security service."⁶⁴



At the same time, regional initiatives gathered pace. The deployment of the Kenyan contingent of the EACRF, tasked with tackling M23, began on November 12 in Goma.⁶⁵ However, its relatively small size—a maximum of 900 according to the authorization of the Kenyan parliament⁶⁶—and ambiguous mandate did not make it a credible deterrent force in the eyes of M23, which continued to advance.

A new regional summit was held in Luanda on November 23. Its outcome was more forceful than the Nairobi declarations, urging M23 to withdraw to its “initial positions,” apparently on Mount Sabyinyo, failing which “the EAC heads of states shall authorize use of force to compel the group to comply.”⁶⁷ However, the Kenyan government, whose army was likely to implement this operation, was not present at the meeting. The ultimatum given to M23 expired on November 27, with no immediate diplomatic or military reaction from the regional body.

On December 4, 2022, President Tshisekedi continued the escalation by publicly asserting that “the Rwandan regime, with Paul Kagame at its head [...] is the enemy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo” and that the Rwandans were “brothers who need our solidarity to rid us and Africa of this kind of backward leader.”⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the FARDC empowered officers with close links to armed groups, including the FDLR. This was the case of Generals Hassan Mugabo Baguma and Janvier Mayanga Wabishuba, both former leaders of Hutu armed groups linked to the FDLR.⁶⁹ According to HRW, General Mayanga met with members of armed groups in Kitchanga on December 10, 2022, ostensibly to coordinate the fight against M23.

On December 23, M23 handed over some of its positions in Kibumba, a village just north of the town of Goma, to the Kenyan contingent of the EACRF. But this transfer was only partial: M23 maintained its positions there, as subsequently reported by the joint verification team of the EACRF and the Expanded Joint Verification Mechanism (MCVE).⁷⁰ Elsewhere, the rebels continued their expansion, taking control of the strategic town of Kitchanga on January 26, 2023.

The escalation continued between the DRC and Rwanda; one of the Congolese fighter jets was hit by artillery

fire from Rwanda on January 24, 2023. The Rwandan authorities justified their action by claiming that this was the third violation of their airspace by these aircraft.⁷¹ On January 30, the Congolese army announced the expulsion of Rwandan officers from the EACRF, prompting a request for clarification from the EAC secretary general, who considered this a violation of the EACRF Status of Forces Agreement.⁷²

The Nairobi process became increasingly frayed. A new summit of EAC heads of state was held in Bujumbura on February 4, 2023, as M23 continued to gain ground. Its final declaration observed that “the situation in eastern DRC is a regional matter that can only be sustainably solved through a political process” and called for “enhanced dialogue between all parties.”⁷³ The following day, Congolese Foreign Minister Christophe Lutundula issued a statement disagreeing with this declaration, asserting that “the mandate of the regional force is unequivocally offensive.”⁷⁴

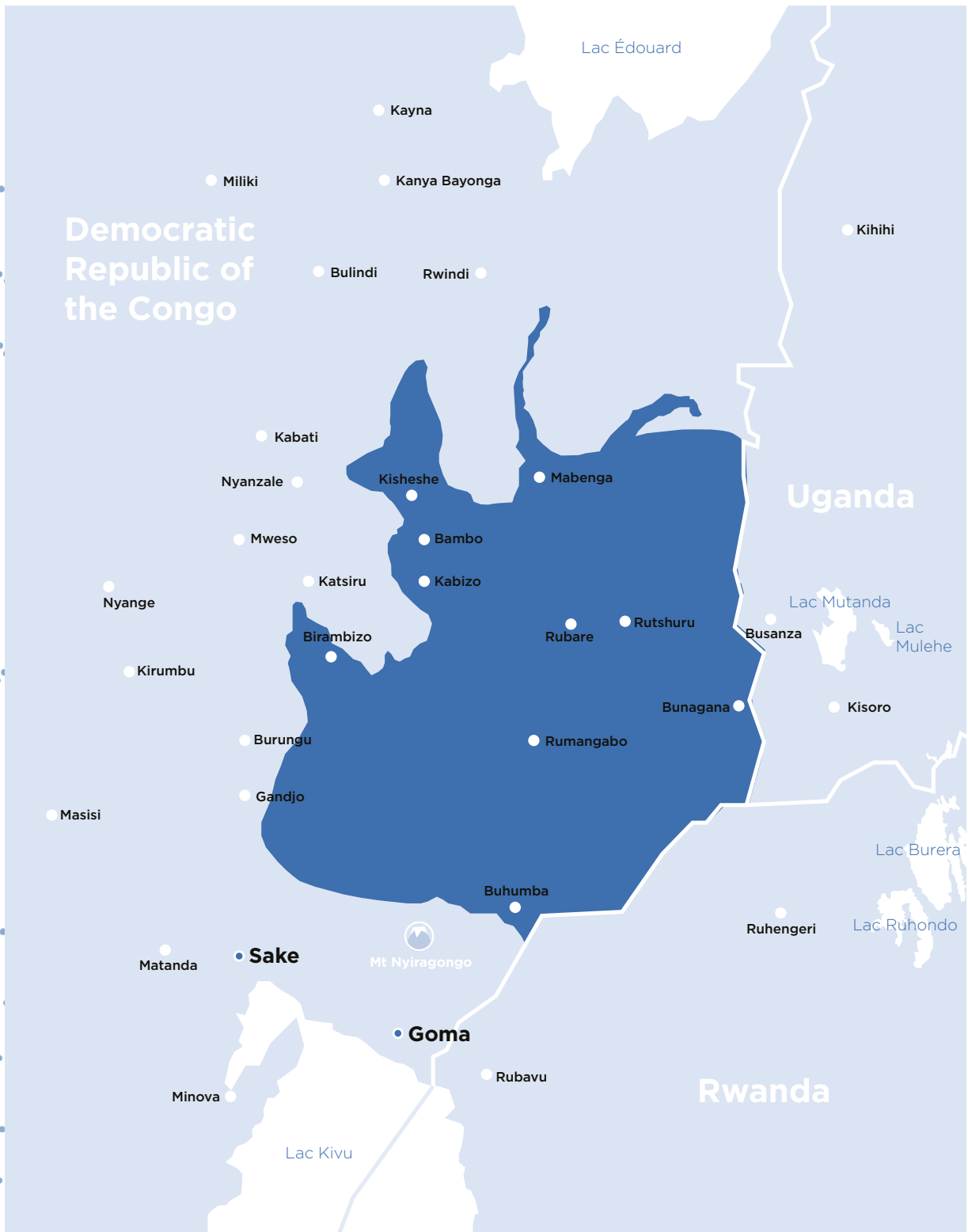
Demonstrations against the EACRF’s inaction took place the following day in Goma.⁷⁵ The EAC Chiefs of Staff, meeting in Nairobi on February 9, 2023, proposed a reconfiguration of the of the EACRF. From now on, all the force’s contingents, not just Kenyan troops Kenyan troops, were to be deployed in the M23 area of operation.⁷⁶

1.2.8. Stalemate and escalation (since April 2023)

The first Burundian forces began their deployment on March 4,⁷⁷ taking up positions on the western flank of the M23-controlled zone; the Ugandans entered on March 31⁷⁸ from the Bunagana border post on the northeastern flank, and the South Sudanese deployed on April 8⁷⁹ to take up positions in the Rumangabo camp, located in the M23-controlled zone.

The deployment of the EACRF had the effect of temporarily freezing the conflict between the FARDC and M23: the front lines moved very little between April and October 2023.

On March 13, M23 temporarily withdrew from some of its positions, such as those in Mweso.⁸⁰ But it was far from withdrawing to its original positions on Mount Sabyinyo,



Area controlled by the M23 between March 29 and April 15, 2023.

Data from the United Nations Group of Experts on the DRC and Ryan O'Farrell.



as required by the Luanda roadmap. In some EACRF deployment zones, M23 maintained troops and its own administration; in others, notably those under Burundian control, it was prevented from doing so.

Regardless of the slightly different positions adopted by these contingents, the EACRF did not seek to “fight M23 or anyone else,” as Kenyan Foreign Minister Alfred Mutua explained, but to give a “sense of security [to] the groups fighting the DRC,” so that they could negotiate.⁸¹ However, the Congolese government still refused to negotiate.

Exasperated by the EAC process, the Congolese government turned to SADC for support. On May 8, 2023, SADC announced that it had approved the deployment of a force “in support of the DRC to restore peace and stability in Eastern DRC,”⁸² following a summit of heads of state in Windhoek.

Meanwhile, looking for other ways to gain military advantage, the Congolese government continued to support armed groups against M23. On March 6, 2023, Minister of Higher Education Butondo Muhindo Nzangi announced that local armed groups would be mobilized as reservists for the Congolese army and that they should benefit from the same resources as the army.⁸³ Finally, a law creating a reserve corps was passed by parliament on May 4, 2023.⁸⁴ The law and various speeches by government officials encouraged the formation of new militias under the generic term *wazalendo* (“patriots” in Swahili). Many of these groups emerged close to M23 positions, but others were located in the Beni and Lubero territories, far from the front lines.

The term has also been used to designate existing armed groups fighting alongside the FARDC, such as the Hutu militias of Dominique Ndaruhutse’s CMC, or Guidon Shimiray’s NDC-R, the latter heading the coalition known as the “Réseau des patriotes résistants congolais.”

Meanwhile, private military companies continued their deployment. According to a source within one of them, they collectively had around 900 men in North Kivu at the end of May 2023 and were training Congolese soldiers at the Mubambiro military base near Goma.⁸⁵ The Congolese government also purchased at least three Chinese-made combat drones during this period, which

were based at Kavumu airport, near Bukavu.⁸⁶ Of these, two were shot down, and the third crashed.

Angolan diplomacy tried to revive talks between the DRC and Rwanda after the two presidents failed to meet in Addis Ababa in February 2024 on the sidelines of an AU leaders' summit. The Angolan president saw the two leaders separately, and Luanda hosted the ministerial meeting in March to precede a summit between heads of state. Following this meeting, and under pressure from donors, especially the United States, the DRC announced that it would develop a plan to neutralize the FDLR. Only once this plan had been implemented would Kigali "review the measures and arrangements it has taken for its defense and security." The Rwandan and Congolese presidents were also supposed to meet in Luanda for a new summit. Prior to that, modest progress had been made on the issue of refugee return. Discussions between the Congolese and Rwandan governments took place in Geneva on May 15, 2023, under the aegis of the UNHCR. The two parties undertook to "engage in constructive dialogue in order to create conditions conducive to the sustainable return of refugee populations in both countries."⁸⁷ This addresses one of M23's demands, the return of Congolese refugees from Rwanda and Uganda. However, this dialogue seems to have stagnated since then.

In the meantime, and following the failures of diplomacy, the situation on the ground has evolved. In December 2023, shortly before the presidential election, the former president of the Congolese Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), Corneille Nangaa, announced the creation of the Congo River Alliance (AFC), a political platform formed around M23, whose goal seems to be to broaden the movement by integrating other armed groups and political players. Former cadres of former President Joseph Kabila's party, such as Adam Chalwe, Yannick Tshisola, and Henry Maggi, have joined it, as has former Movement of Liberation of the Congo (MLC) member of parliament Jean-Jacques Mamba.

At the end of 2023, EACRF forces left the DRC at the request of the Congolese government, which refused to renew their mandate. The Congolese government accused the EACRF of passivity and even complicity

with M23 despite the latter's failure to comply with the Luanda roadmap.

In the meantime, the SADC, with which the Congolese government was already in discussion, deployed the SAMIDRC, made up of Tanzanian, Malawian, and South African contingents. Rwanda denounced this mission and complained to the AU, arguing that it was working with the FDLR. The SAMIDRC was deployed against a backdrop of heavy fighting around the town of Sake, where the Rwandan army played an active role.

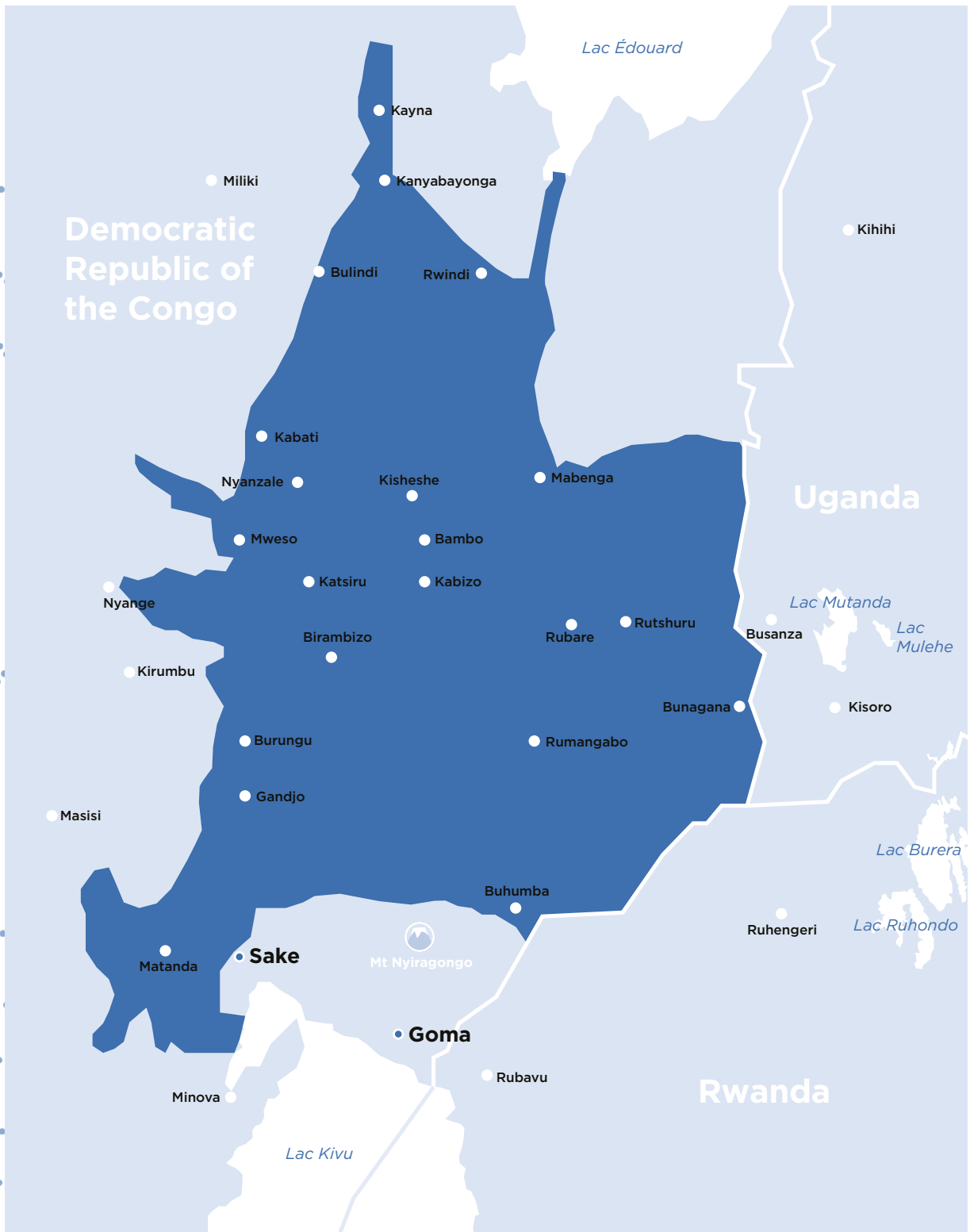
Government forces and their allies have nevertheless retained control of Sake, while M23 and RDF are said to be holding positions on the hills overlooking Sake, as well as the town of Sasha on the shores of Lake Kivu, controlling sections of the roads linking Sake and Goma to the rest of the country.

In March 2024, M23 pushed north into Rutshuru territory without much difficulty. The rebels took Rwindi and the Vitshumbi fishery on the shores of Lake Edward. The FARDC had retreated to Kanyabayonga even before the rebels arrived. General Chico Tshitambwe, who led the northern front, was recalled to Kinshasa, along with other officers suspected of fleeing in the face of the enemy.

In this context, the minister of justice has announced the suspension of the moratorium on the death penalty. Among her reasons for doing so, she cited the need to punish treason on the battlefield.

According to the latest report by the UN Group of Experts on the DRC, drawn up in April 2024, there were at least 3,000 and 4,000 RDF soldiers on Congolese territory, numbers that could be higher than the 3,000 members of the M23 according to the same source.⁸⁸

At the end of June 2024, the M23 and RDF once again made a brutal advance northwards, taking control of the towns of Kanyabayonga and Kirumba, and entering Lubero territory for the first time in the movement's history.



Area controlled by the M23. July 4, 2024.

Data from Ryan O'Farrell and Ebuteli.



Part II: Analysis

This historical context leaves many questions unanswered. Why were the FARDC so ineffective on the battlefield, forced to resort to private security companies and armed groups? What are the main motives behind the Rwandan intervention? And how should we assess the involvement of regional and donor countries? This analytical section attempts to answer these questions.

2.1. Eastern DRC: a theater of regional rivalries


2.1.1. Understanding the Rwandan intervention

According to diplomatic sources corroborated by the latest report of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC,⁸⁹ the Rwandan army has between 3,000 and 4,000 soldiers deployed in the DRC.⁹⁰ The nature of the Rwandan intervention makes it difficult to analyze. The Rwandan government denies its involvement, and its closed, authoritarian character makes obtaining information on its motives or intentions difficult. Here, we assess government statements concerning the persecution of Congolese Tutsi communities and collusion between the FARDC and the FDLR. We then examine a popular view that the extraction of natural resources is the main objective of Rwanda and Uganda.

A. Regional competition and Rwanda

Unlike other regional economic communities, the EAC has long been characterized by the absence of a hegemonic power driving it—which has made it difficult to implement economic integration projects. The arrival of the DRC means that each member has sought to leverage that country’s enormous potential to increase its influence within the community and gain the upper hand over the others.

At the time of the DRC’s accession, Rwanda had problems with virtually all the other members. After the 2015 coup attempt in Burundi, a long and bitter rift developed with its northern neighbor, which it accused of supporting dissidents. Similarly, relations between Tanzania and Rwanda were strained under Jakaya



Kikwete, although this has changed under Presidents John Magufuli and Samia Suluhu Hassan. For many of these countries, intervening in the current crisis is as much (if not more) about weakening Rwanda as it is about pacifying Eastern Congo. All this has led to a situation of isolation or encirclement of Rwanda.

By the end of 2021, Burundi, Uganda, and Kenya had troops deployed in the DRC, while the deployment of Rwandan police had failed, as described above. Ugandan road-building crews were beginning work to link North Kivu and Ituri to Kampala, potentially excluding Rwanda from the lucrative trade between Eastern Congo and the East African coast. In January 2022, Tanzania and Burundi signed an agreement to build the final stretch of railroad that could link the two countries, forming another potential trade route bypassing Rwanda. This isolation has been a key driver of its backing of M23.

B. The Rwandophone question

Since 2022, while denying its own involvement, the Rwandan government has partly attributed the resurgence of M23 to discrimination against Rwandophones—the Hutu and Tutsi communities—in the DRC. In an interview in January 2023, Kagame declared:

“Put yourself in the shoes of these people, born and raised in the Congo, whose parents and grandparents were born on Congolese soil, and who are being asked to go back to where they came from, before colonization and before borders even existed! [...] Add to this the hate speech emanating from the Congolese government, administration and politicians, and the similarity between this situation and that which prevailed in Rwanda in 1994.”⁹¹

The persecution of the Tutsi community is said to have been aggravated by the Congolese government’s collusion with the FDLR. An opinion piece in a Rwandan government newspaper explains:


“The resurgence of the M23 rebellion must be blamed primarily on the DRC government’s inability to implement the agreements signed with the group, whose members are denied the right to Congolese citizenship [...] The DRC government has further disseminated a discourse of hatred aimed at both Rwanda and Congolese Tutsis, while its army, the FARDC, has forged a sinister alliance with genocidal forces, in particular the FDLR.”⁹²

There is no doubt that the Congolese Tutsi community

has long been the victim of abuse and hate speech and that this persecution has increased since the resurgence of the M23 rebellion in November 2021. Probably the most extreme example of this was former member of parliament and Minister Justin Bitakwira, who, in a broadcast on Bosolo TV, said: “They’re all the same. When you see a Tutsi (...) a born criminal! I always wonder if their creator isn’t the same one who created the devil. (...) I’ve never seen such a wicked race.”⁹³ Martin Fayulu, one of the main opposition leaders, often repeats that the Banyamulenge have no right to Congolese nationality, claiming that this group was not present in the DRC before independence.⁹⁴

However, it would be misleading and a reversal of causality to suggest that this tendency triggered the rebellion in the first place.

The stigmatization of the Congolese Tutsi community has deep roots. In North Kivu, the divide between the Hutu and Tutsi communities and those who describe themselves as Indigenous dates back to the Belgian colonial administration, which encouraged mass immigration of Rwandans and manipulated ethnic power structures. After independence, the Tutsi community of North Kivu,⁹⁵ from which the leaders of the CNDP and then M23 come, was alternately favored and discriminated against by the ruling elites of Kinshasa and the provinces. Its leaders are among the region’s wealthiest landowners and entrepreneurs, and successive rebellions supported by Rwanda since 1996 have recruited massively from this community. On the other hand, since independence, and particularly since the early 1990s, the denial (or re-establishment) of their Congolese nationality has been used as a political tool, and this community has always faced subtle and violent persecution. As we have seen above, during periods of armed conflict, rebellions that justified their existence by defending the Tutsi community committed frequent abuses against civilians, thus contributing significantly to these communal tensions. It is also important to stress that other communities, particularly rural areas where many militias recruit, feel deeply marginalized socio-economically.



In the three years leading up to the resurgence of M23, Félix Tshisekedi's government certainly didn't do enough to resolve communal conflicts in eastern DRC, fight discrimination, and allow the return of refugees. Although he has publicly stated that the "Banyamulenge are Congolese,"⁹⁶ this remark provoked an outcry, and he has not repeated it. Like that of his predecessor, his government has not launched any major initiatives to promote reconciliation. And while President Tshisekedi has warned against hate speech,⁹⁷ a number of army and police officers close to armed groups or who have made inflammatory speeches have not been punished.⁹⁸

However, there is little evidence of an upsurge in anti-Tutsi violence in North Kivu prior to the resurgence of M23. In recent years, the main violence perpetrated against a Rwandophone community in Eastern DRC has been against the Banyamulenge, in the context of the conflict in the South Kivu highlands, from 2016 onwards. However, the Rwandan government hardly commented on this situation in the years that preceded the resurgence of the M23, and few Banyamulenge joined M23.⁹⁹ On the contrary, Kigali has sometimes harshly repressed protests by Banyamulenge refugees on its soil concerning their living conditions in their camps, as was the case in 2018.¹⁰⁰

The incidents documented by researchers—including an escalation in anti-Tutsi rhetoric and violence in May and June 2022—post-date M23's return to the battlefield in November 2021, confirming that the rise in anti-Tutsi rhetoric was exacerbated by M23 rebellion.¹⁰¹ This does not justify these abuses but suggests that the M23's resurgence was not a response to them.

While it is true that the Congolese government has done little to encourage reconciliation or the return of refugees, it is hard to see how reconciliation and cohabitation can be imposed by arms, as the previous rebellions of the CNDP (2004-2009) and the M23 (2012-2013), as well as to some extent the AFDL (1996-1997) and RCD (1998-2003) rebellions, have clearly shown.

The return of refugees is often presented as a crucial issue for M23. It is indeed an important issue: many Congolese Tutsis from North and South Kivu have been

forced to flee the violence over the years. Rwanda currently hosts around 84,000 Congolese refugees.¹⁰²

almost all of them Tutsis, in five camps, many of whom have been there for thirty years. Most of them are unable to return home due to the security situation in their home villages.¹⁰³


There have been a number of refugee returns in the past, raising questions about the sincerity of some of the people now involved in the M23 rebellion. For example, in 2011, the UN Group of Experts documented attempts by former CNDP leaders to relocate around 2,400 families—over 10,000 people—from refugee camps in Rwanda to the village of Bibwe in Masisi. According to their report: “While some of these new arrivals claimed to have owned land in Bibwe in the past, many told the Group that they had never lived there before, and some refused to say where they came from...According to local and provincial authorities, none of these returnees ever owned land in Bibwe.”¹⁰⁴

None of this should be seen as minimizing the importance of communal tensions—in particular, the “politics of indigeneity”—in M23 crisis. The status of Congolese Rwandophone populations, the Tutsis in particular, needs to be addressed, as it has continually surfaced over the decades and has been the cause of numerous acts of violence. This means tackling thorny issues such as access to land and past abuses. This will not be easy. In a recent GEC/Ebuteli poll conducted with BERCI in the DRC, only 25% of respondents also thought that Tutsis could be Congolese (27% for Hutus), a proportion that has more or less remained the same since 2016.¹⁰⁵

C. The FDLR

The other claim made by the Rwandan government and the M23 is that the rebellion protects the Congolese Tutsi population against the FDLR. Here, too, the facts are misleading.

The FDLR are indeed a threat to civilians in Eastern DRC, but not primarily to the Tutsi population, which has dwindled in rural areas due to insecurity there. According to the UN Group of Experts, there were probably around 1,400-1,600 FDLR fighters in 2016, a figure that dropped



to 600-700 in 2018 due to deaths and defections.¹⁰⁶ It is also true that the FDLR has once again formed an alliance with the FARDC. According to the UN Group of Experts and the GEC/Ebuteli interviews, the national army has coordinated military operations with the FDLR and provided them with support.

However, it is unlikely that an increased threat from the FDLR prompted Rwanda to support M23. On the contrary, as we saw earlier, it was most likely Ugandan military operations and roadworks that were perceived as a threat by the Kigali government, which then reacted by supporting M23. In Paul Kagame's interviews and speeches in early 2022, he discusses Rwanda's security concerns in Eastern DRC but only mentions the FDLR in connection with a possible alliance with the ADF.

In fact, Tshisekedi's arrival in power in 2019 had marked the start of a period of intense collaboration between the FARDC and RDF against the FDLR. Targeted strikes led to the assassination of several FDLR leaders, including Commander-in-Chief Sylvestre Mudacumura and Juvénal Musabimana (alias Jean-Michel Africa), between September and November 2019.¹⁰⁷ Another Rwandan rebellion present in South Kivu, the CNRD, was the subject of intense RDF operations for several weeks in late 2019 alongside the FARDC.¹⁰⁸ President Tshisekedi praised the success of these operations during his state of the nation address at the end of 2019, without mentioning the active role of the Rwandan army.¹⁰⁹

Even after this period, the FARDC continued its operations against the Rwandan rebels. In January 2021, the FARDC was still supporting the Nduma Defense of Congo—Rénové (Bwira faction) in operations against the FDLR in the Rutshuru territory.¹¹⁰ For the rest of the year, until November, this part of the country—the territories of Rutshuru, Masisi, and Nyiragongo—was fairly calm, with relatively little violence and no reports of FDLR attacks against Rwanda. The first reports of RDF involvement date back to November 2021, according to two separate M23 prisoners.¹¹⁰ The UN Group of Experts also showed images and screenshots of a video which, it claimed, showed RDF presence in an M23 camp on November 21, 2021. The date of resumption of collaboration between the FARDC and the FDLR is less clear. The FDLR were present at a coordination meeting between the

armed groups and the FARDC on May 8, 2022. While MONUSCO sources suggest that this collaboration could have begun as early as November 2021, even before the RDF intervention, when given the opportunity to detail FARDC support for the FDLR, neither the Rwandan government nor M23 mentioned any incidents prior to May 2022. This chronology is also supported by the UN Group of Experts and diplomats based in Kinshasa.

This is also in line with a historical pattern: since the creation of the FARDC in 2003, the army has opportunistically collaborated with the FDLR when threatened by Rwandan-backed rebellions, but when not threatened, it has also launched numerous operations against the armed group. Like the allegations of Tutsi persecution, the intensification of collaboration appears to be due to RDF intervention rather than the other way around.

2.1.2. The economic interests of the DRC's eastern neighbors

The crisis in Eastern DRC is often described as a struggle for “conflict minerals,”¹¹² with armed groups fighting for control of strategic resources such as tin, tantalum, gold, and tungsten. This led diplomats to look for solutions to the current crisis in the economic sphere, with those from the EU, France, and the United States debating the possibility of encouraging Rwanda to invest in stability through economic investment. As we suggest below, donors appear to have resorted to this “carrot” approach since the “stick” of sanctions or aid cuts to Rwanda runs counter to what they see as their national interests. However, any such economic agreement will be difficult to implement due to the nature of the mineral trade.

Gold is by far the most important mineral in this conflict. The DRC is one of the main gold producers on the African continent, with thirty-one tonnes in 2021.¹¹³ By contrast, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi have only small gold mining operations. However, the vast majority of Congolese gold is smuggled via these neighboring countries, depriving the Congolese government of vital revenue.

These are considerable sums for these economies. Since 2015, gold has been Rwanda's top export—gold exports have more than doubled in the last three years, from \$363 million in 2021 to \$882 million in 2023.¹¹⁴ For Uganda, it has been the main export product since 2016,



reaching its peak of 59% of exports in 2020. In Burundi, gold has been the main source of foreign exchange since 2011, peaking at 63% of all exports in 2014. In total, in 2022, these three countries exported around \$2.5 billion worth of gold.¹¹⁵

The various countries in the region are increasingly competing for Congolese resources. Uganda and Rwanda each opened gold refineries in 2017 and 2019, respectively, with the aim of adding value to these important gold flows. In addition, politically connected companies in each country have secured mining contracts in the DRC. This is the case of the Ugandan company Dott Services in 2020 and the Rwandan company Dither in 2021.¹¹⁶

Since the start of the M23 crisis, the Congolese government has attempted to increase its control over the gold sector by creating a new company, Primera Gold, with Emirati partners.¹¹⁷ The contract gives the Primera group the exclusive right to export gold that was mined artisanally with a customs tariff of 0.25% for twenty-five years, well below the 10% that other operators have to pay. This has led to criticism that this approach only benefits a small group and does not contribute to job growth or government revenue. In 2023, Primera reported that it had exported \$300 million worth of gold, a marked increase on previous years but still very modest compared with exports from neighboring countries.¹¹⁸

The trade is complex. None of these neighboring countries directly controls the Congo's gold mines. Instead, traders smuggle large quantities of gold across the border, sometimes with the complicity of Congolese security officials. The trade benefits from a Congolese state with high taxes and weak control; neighboring states profit from Congolese disorder. Although the link between these rackets and the escalation of the M23 rebellion is not entirely clear, this type of economic engagement benefits from the political protection and ability of neighboring countries to project their power and influence.

2.1.3. Uganda and M23: duplicity or multiplicity?

One aspect of the conflict seems particularly incoherent. Why did the Ugandan authorities facilitate the M23 attacks on the FARDC when they were collaborating with

the Congolese army on Operation Shujaa? This seems all the more surprising given that Rwanda appears to have initially supported M23 to oppose Ugandan interests in the DRC.

Congolese officials have explained these contradictions through Ugandan “duplicity” in the words of Christophe Mbosso, president of the national assembly.¹¹⁹ However, this does not explain why the UPDF intervened in March 2022 against M23 to protect road-building equipment in Bunagana. Part of the explanation probably lies in the sequence of events: M23 acted against Uganda’s interests during a period (November 2021–March 2022) when relations between Uganda and Rwanda were still strained before these countries found common ground and gradually began to jointly support M23 from April 2022 onwards.

In addition, the Ugandan state should not be seen as a single, coherent entity. Since the beginning of the crisis, the Ugandan government has shown internal contradictions. For example, according to the UN Group of Experts, recruitment for M23 began both in the Bihanga refugee camp, managed by the Ugandan government, and in Rwanda in early November 2021, suggesting a degree of complicity on the part of the two governments since the beginning.¹²⁰

The memory of brutal clashes with Rwanda on Congolese soil, particularly in Kisangani in 2000,¹²¹ and the proxy battles waged by rival rebel groups in Ituri from 2001 to 2004 still arouse the resentment of a significant part of the UPDF.¹²² Conversely, General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, son of the Ugandan president and commander of the defense forces, makes no secret of his admiration for Paul Kagame, whom he publicly refers to as “uncle.”¹²³ It was through him, and following a first trip to Kigali on January 22, 2022, that relations between the two countries thawed.¹²⁴ Kagame’s next trip to Uganda was on Muhoozi’s birthday, April 26, 2022.¹²⁵

Muhoozi positions himself as a potential successor to his father,¹²⁶ which has created tensions with other members of the elite, who oppose the principle of dynastic succession, want the position themselves, or deem him unfit for the position. Muhoozi has also made no secret of his sympathy for M23, notably via his account on X (formerly Twitter).¹²⁷ These competing networks within

the Ugandan security apparatus could explain the apparent contradictions in Ugandan involvement.

The internal political situation is also an important factor. The government is trying to focus public and military attention on the ADF, whom they blame for much of the insecurity during this period. General elections were held in Uganda in January 2021, leading to major unrest and the repeated arrest of Bobi Wine, the main opposition candidate. Prior to Operation Shujaa, the country was plagued by growing insecurity targeting political and military figures, and that authorities were quick to blame the ADF.

In early June, for example, unidentified gunmen fired on the car of the minister of transport and former UPDF leader, General Edward Katumba Wamala, seriously wounding him and killing his daughter and driver.¹²⁷ A month after the attack, for which no one claimed responsibility, the police announced that they had caught the perpetrators, who they identified as members of the ADF.¹²⁹ The death in August 2021 of another UPDF officer, General Paul Lokech, was also linked to the ADF, contrary to medical reports, which suggested it was a natural death.¹³⁰ President Museveni announced that the security services had foiled an ADF plan to carry out an attack on the thousands of people who had come to General Paul Lokech's funeral in Pader, northern Uganda. His eulogy for the occasion presented the Eastern DRC as a desperate security situation and an existential threat to Uganda.¹³¹

2.1.4. Rwanda and the international community

The two precursors of today's M23—the M23 of 2012-2013 and the CNDP—were dismantled when Rwanda took decisive action in response to international pressure. In 2009, the Rwandan government arrested Laurent Nkunda and forced the CNDP to integrate the FARDC; in 2013, it abruptly withdrew its support and allowed M23 to collapse under pressure from the FARDC and the UN Force Intervention Brigade.


Strikingly, although all major Western donors have publicly condemned Rwanda's support for M23—except for the UK—this time, little other pressure has been brought to bear on the Rwandan government. In

contrast, in 2013, donors suspended \$240 million in aid, contributing to Rwanda's loss of three points of GDP growth that year.¹³²

This lack of concrete measures is surprising, given that Rwanda is highly dependent on aid and therefore, vulnerable to foreign pressure. According to the World Bank, Rwanda received \$1.25 billion in official development assistance in 2021, equivalent to 74% of central government spending.¹³³

And yet, despite the denunciations, Rwanda's position in world affairs and diplomacy remained unaffected. Numerous prestigious events were held in Kigali during the M23 escalation, attended by heads of state and business leaders, including the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (June 2022), the African Philanthropy Forum Conference (October 2022,¹³⁴) and the FIFA World Congress (March 2023). Meanwhile, Paul Kagame has been named one of the most influential Africans by New African Magazine and has been invited to speak at the Qatar Economic Forum (May 2023) and the G20 summit in Bali (November 2022). Tourism receipts and foreign direct investment reached record levels in 2022.¹³⁵

How has Rwanda managed to avoid the impact of foreign pressure, despite its dependence on aid? The degree to which Rwanda has been able to leverage its military power to become an important ally in Africa is certainly among the reasons. In Mozambique, RDF deployment helped dislodge a local jihadist group from the strategic town of Mocímboa da Praia. This region is home to some of Africa's largest liquefied natural gas projects. By March 2021, TotalEnergies, France's largest company in terms of sales, had had to suspend operations in the region. Other major fossil fuel companies, including Eni and BP, have also made major investments in the region. These projects have taken on even greater importance due to the Ukrainian crisis, which has forced European countries to replace Russian gas with other sources.¹³⁶ In November 2022, amid the M23 crisis, the EU announced that it would fund the deployment of RDF in Mozambique to the tune of €20 million; at the time of publication, it was discussing further funding of the same size. In April 2024, on the eve of the thirtieth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, the French government announced



funding of €400 million for health, the environment, and education.¹³⁷

RDF has also been deployed in the Central African Republic, both as part of the UN mission since 2014 and as part of a bilateral mission since December 2020.¹³⁸ They have proved important in supporting its fragile government, protecting civilians, and counterbalancing Russian private security companies.¹³⁹ This last point is important for Western countries worried about Moscow's influence in Africa. In April 2023, Rwanda also promised to send soldiers to Benin as part of an agreement with that country's government.¹⁴⁰

In addition to these bilateral deployments, Rwanda is also the world's fourth-largest supplier of peacekeepers, despite being one of the poorest and smallest countries, and has deployed troops on peacekeeping missions in South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Sudan.

For the UK, other considerations also come into play. Leaders of both major parties have close personal ties with Paul Kagame—the current minister of state for development and africa, Andrew Mitchell, has long-standing links with Rwanda.¹⁴¹ In 2012, on his last day as secretary of state for international development, he had taken the controversial decision to restore \$24 million in aid to Rwanda, despite its support for M23.¹⁴²

More important than these personal links, a 2022 agreement allowed asylum seekers in the UK to be sent to Rwanda for processing. The UK paid Rwanda \$310 million for the project¹⁴³ and undertook to cover the costs of processing and detaining the asylum seekers. A court has blocked the agreement, but the government is attempting to circumvent the ruling by passing a law in parliament.¹⁴⁴

Ultimately, the crisis in the DRC isn't serious or public enough, and Rwanda's importance is too great for donors to take decisive action. While US government and congressional leaders have been particularly firm in their condemnation of Rwandan support, US officials told CRG/Ebuteli that without European support, and in the face of refusal from members of US aid and defense agencies, they can hardly impose material costs on Rwanda. They also argue that, despite its negative role in Eastern DRC, Rwanda is perceived by

their government as efficient and achieving results, in contrast to the Congolese state, which suffers from a credibility deficit.¹⁴⁵

Nonetheless, on August 24, 2023, the US government imposed sanctions against Brigadier General Andrew Nyamvumba, who was in charge of operations for the 3rd Division of the RDF. A week later, the same general was promoted by President Kagame. General James Kabarebe, who the UN Group of Experts had cited for his role in Rwandan support for M23, is in a similar situation. On September 27, 2023, he was appointed minister of state for foreign affairs, responsible for regional cooperation. The EU sanctioned lower-ranking Rwandan military officers: Captain Jean-Pierre Niragire, alias Gasasira, who commanded RDF special forces in the North Kivu region, in July 2023, then Colonel Augustin Migabo, in July 2024.¹⁴⁶

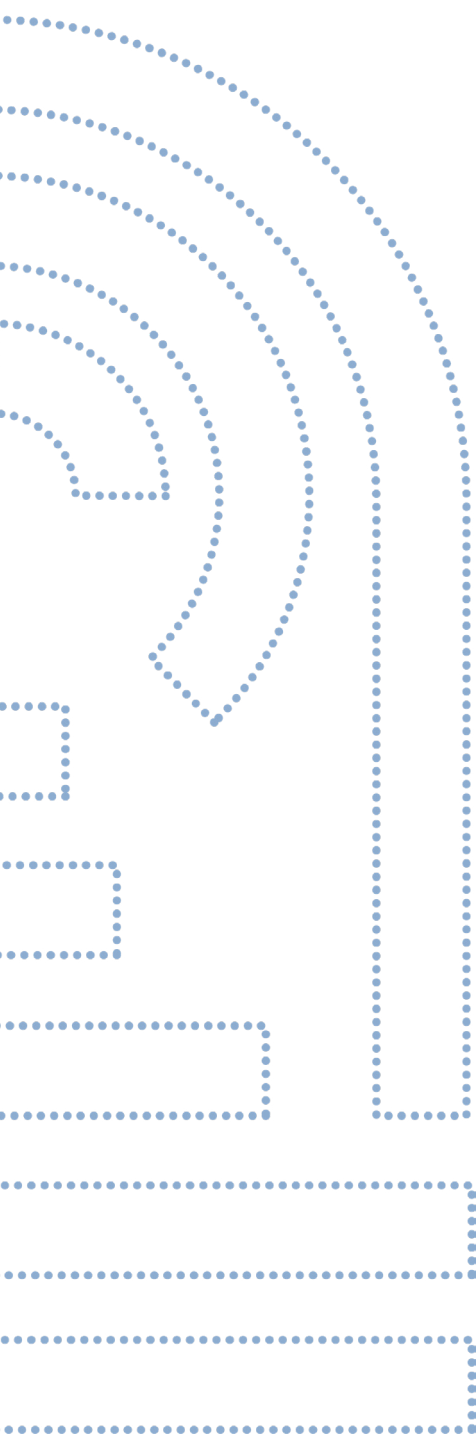
2.2. The Congolese approach: conflict as governance

Tshisekedi's approach to the conflict has been as much about managing his own security apparatus as it has been about the fighting in the East. To understand this, we need only recall the first moments of his administration, his investiture on January 24, 2019. Wearing a bulletproof vest under his suit, he nearly fainted in the capital's heat and had to briefly interrupt the ceremony. This scene was emblematic of his vulnerability at the time. After all, he had only been declared the winner of the elections thanks to an agreement with outgoing president Joseph Kabila, leaving Tshisekedi dependent on his predecessor.

During the first two years of Tshisekedi's mandate, Kabila's coalition controlled the national parliament and most of the provincial parliaments and governments. This was certainly true of the security apparatus, which was run by officers and civil servants appointed by Kabila and where neither Tshisekedi nor his party, the UDPS, had many historical links.

2.2.1. Tshisekedi's security challenge: managing his own army

This sense of vulnerability is reflected in his approach to the security sector. In 2019, the existential threat



to Tshisekedi came from his own security forces, not from the restive east, where he faced a proliferation of dozens of armed groups with local agendas and roots. M23 was largely dormant; the most deadly rebellion was that of the ADF, an extremely brutal Islamist insurgency that controlled only a small part of the territory. Unlike his predecessor, who had appointed the army's top commanders during the previous eighteen years, Félix Tshisekedi had no military experience and few connections within the security apparatus.

Rather than immediately embarking on a reform of his security apparatus, which could have triggered a backlash from the patronage networks rooted in the security services, the president proceeded cautiously with military appointments. For example, the president retained General Gabriel Amisi (alias Tango 4) and General Charles Akili (alias Mundos), both under international sanctions and suspected of serious human rights violations, by appointing them, respectively, inspector general and deputy inspector general of the FARDC. Control of one of the main military oversight bodies was thus entrusted to officers notorious for their abuses. Although there have been a few prosecutions, particularly of lower-ranking officers, financial abuses and human rights violations have remained commonplace.

Tshisekedi's approach is in line with existing attitudes to the conflict. Since Mobutu, Kinshasa's political elites have been more concerned with dissent within the army than with the grievances of the local population. The war in Eastern Congo is secondary to their survival—politicians are not usually punished at the ballot box for neglecting the East, nor has fighting there posed a threat to the security of the country's capital, over two thousand kilometers away, for over twenty years. By deploying the bulk of the army in the East, keeping officers' salaries low but granting them high allowances and discretionary bonuses, and giving them *carte blanche* for racketeering, the political elite have protected themselves against potential coups and enriched themselves through embezzlement schemes.

This system of fragmentation and clientelism has been integrated into the organization of the state, giving it a vested interest in the persistence of the conflict. This can be seen, for example, in the way members of the security



services are remunerated—remuneration is structured in such a way that officers find it hard to prosper in the absence of armed conflict. According to an analysis conducted in 2014, over 90% of officers' remuneration depended on legal or extralegal payments directly linked to military operations. For example, officers in command positions often received a command bonus worth up to \$1,000 a month, and intelligence officers sometimes received a secret intelligence fund worth several hundred dollars a month, but only if they were conducting military operations. These payments were not statutory and were made at the discretion of military officers, reinforcing individual loyalty to them.¹⁴⁷


These incentives to resort to military solutions, combined with Tshisekedi's attempt to win the confidence of senior FARDC officers, may partly explain why the president launched several military operations shortly after taking office, and why these operations failed. In October 2019, he authorized operation Zaruba ya Ituri ("Ituri storm"), followed shortly afterwards by a large-scale offensive against the ADF. Both operations had little success in stabilizing the region.

The state of siege declared by Tshisekedi in April 2021 also provided a source of profit for FARDC leaders in Kinshasa. A national assembly's defense and security commission report stated that of the "\$37 million made available in May [2021] for state of siege emergencies," 53% had gone to general staff officers in Kinshasa, never reaching the East.¹⁴⁸

At the same time, the defense budget has increased dramatically. Significant budget overruns took place in 2022,¹⁴⁹ and the 2023 budget was tripled compared to 2022 to reach \$1.5 billion, or 10% of planned public spending.¹⁵⁰ In its new law on the army, parliament has also planned to maintain a comparable level of spending of over a billion dollars a year between 2022 and 2025.¹⁵¹

The state of siege also offered economic opportunities to officers deployed in the East, as the military replaced civilian authorities. They either took control directly, or were able to exert influence over customs, tax collection, public procurement and the justice sector.¹⁵²

The army has been unable to stem the advance of M23 and RDF troops. This weakness has prompted the



government to call in private military companies to train its troops and use fighter jets. Even more worryingly, the Congolese government seems determined to rely on the aforementioned armed groups.

2.2.2. Tshisekedi's regional security strategy: the failure of rapprochement

Tshisekedi came to power in 2019 beholden to regional powers and with a compromised legitimacy. After the election results were announced, the AU, then under the rotating presidency of Paul Kagame, declared that it had “serious doubts about the conformity of the provisional results,” asking the government to wait before proclaiming the final results.¹⁵³

In the end, the AU backed down after intense diplomatic negotiations.¹⁵⁴ The United States also recognized the victory, which was a key element of legitimization for the new Congolese president.¹⁵⁵ This created bonds of accountability between the new president and the countries that recognized his victory.

To counterbalance Kabila's influence, Tshisekedi set about cultivating his regional networks. Tshisekedi strengthened his ties with Uganda, Rwanda and Kenya, where he already had important relations before the 2018 elections. In 2019, he applied to join the East African Community, a move seen by many around the president as an attempt to gain a counterweight to SADC, where Kabila had historic ties. This move led to an intensification of economic ties with Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda, in particular. By 2020, the Kenyan company Equity Bank had acquired Banque Commerciale du Congo (BCDC), one of the country's largest banks. In April 2022, twenty-six Kenyan companies pledged to invest up to \$1.6 billion in the DRC.¹⁵⁶

Tshisekedi was particularly determined to cultivate good relations with Rwanda. One of his first foreign trips was to Kigali in March 2019, where he paid his respects at the genocide memorial¹⁵⁷ and concluded a series of economic agreements, for example with the airline RwandAir¹⁵⁸ and between a Rwandan company close to the ruling party and the Congolese parastatal mining company Gold Company of Kivu and Maniema (Sakima).¹⁵⁹

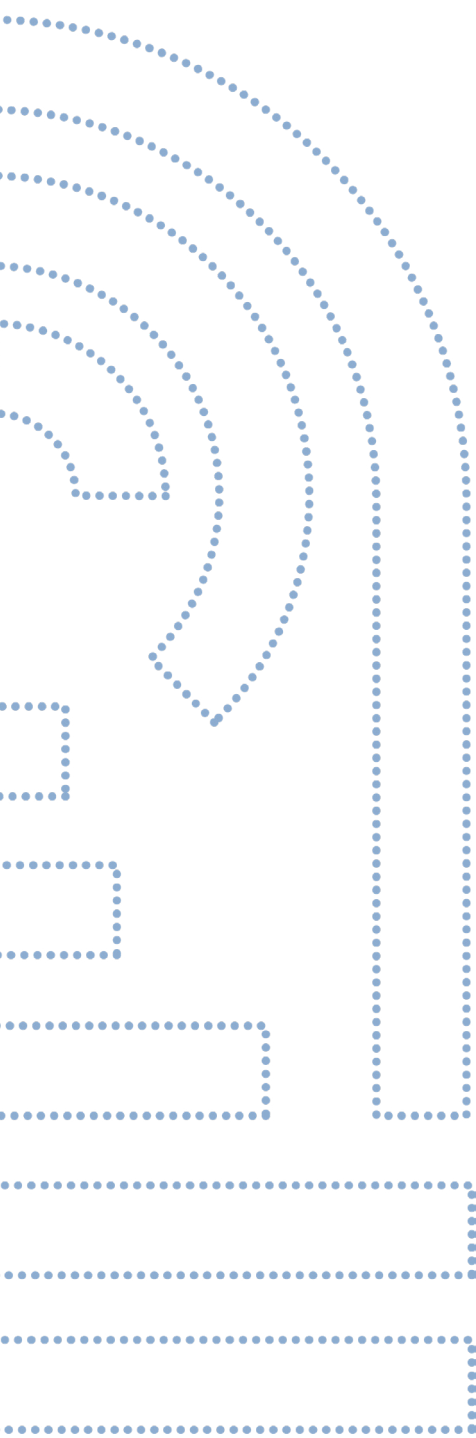
In addition to the above-mentioned rapprochement with Rwanda, the DRC also drew closer to Uganda, as detailed above, first with the project to rehabilitate the roads linking the main towns in North Kivu province, and then with Operation Shujaa. However, this rapprochement between the DRC and East Africa did not prevent the M23 crisis from developing, nor did it provide reliable allies to negotiate an end to the conflict. As described above, Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi all felt it necessary to project a military force into the DRC, creating competition that erupted into violence with the M23 rebellion.

2.2.3. MONUSCO's obsolescence and the international community's disengagement

After twenty-three years in the DRC, the UN peacekeeping mission has reached an inflection point. The M23 crisis has exacerbated its declining popularity and highlighted its political marginalization. While the UN Security Council and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations agreed to downsize and phase out the mission in 2020, they are under increasing pressure due to the resurgence of M23.

The main challenge facing the mission for over a decade has been how to reduce conflict in the absence of a peace process given its strained relations with the host government. Historically, the mission has had the greatest impact when it has been able to negotiate and assist in the implementation of a political process, as it successfully did during the Lusaka and Sun City peace processes between 1999 and 2006. Since then, despite the proliferation of armed groups and the dramatic increase in internal displacement, there has been no comprehensive peace process. The 2013 Addis Ababa PSCF agreement had the ambition to chart a way forward, but after the defeat of M23, the Congolese government did not pursue the planned internal reforms and did not allow MONUSCO to play a major role.

In the absence of a political process capable of tackling the main structural causes of instability—for example, security sector reform, the predation of Congolese resources by local and foreign actors, community reconciliation, justice for past crimes, and land reform—MONUSCO has been largely confined to monitoring human rights, providing logistics and conducting



military operations to protect civilians. On this last point, its relations with the government oscillated between antagonism and collaboration, with the government at times halting all joint operations following MONUSCO's criticism of its abuses. The mission has also been reluctant to use its powers of persuasion—the last three heads of mission have largely considered behind-the-scenes diplomacy to be more effective than firm public condemnations of the government.

A number of other problems have hampered MONUSCO's effectiveness. The previous M23 rebellion in 2012–2013 led to the deployment of the FIB, made up of Tanzanian, South African, and Malawian troops. After helping to defeat the rebellion in 2013, the force was restructured to reduce the dominance of southern African countries—Kenyan and Nepalese contingents joined in 2021 and 2022, respectively. To deal with the persistent massacres perpetrated by the ADF, the main threat to the country's security between 2014 and 2021, it set up more mobile rapid reaction forces capable of responding quickly to ADF attacks. However, this reconfiguration was not adapted to the conventional tactics employed by M23 and RDF. In any case, on the eve of M23's reappearance, the intervention brigade was mainly deployed in northern North Kivu and Ituri, far from this new front line.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 further weakened the mission, leading to the repatriation of its Ukrainian members and their equipment, including their Mi-17s, depriving the mission of a third of its helicopters.¹⁶⁰ Finally, M23 appears to have intentionally targeted the peacekeepers, notably when it attacked a Puma helicopter on March 29, 2022. Its crash killed eight peacekeepers—the heaviest toll for MONUSCO since 2017.

The head of MONUSCO, Bintou Keïta, on June 29, 2022, then her spokesperson on July 13, and finally the UN Secretary-General on September 19, undoubtedly had these facts in mind when she asserted that the mission was not equipped to deal with a “conventional army.”¹⁶¹

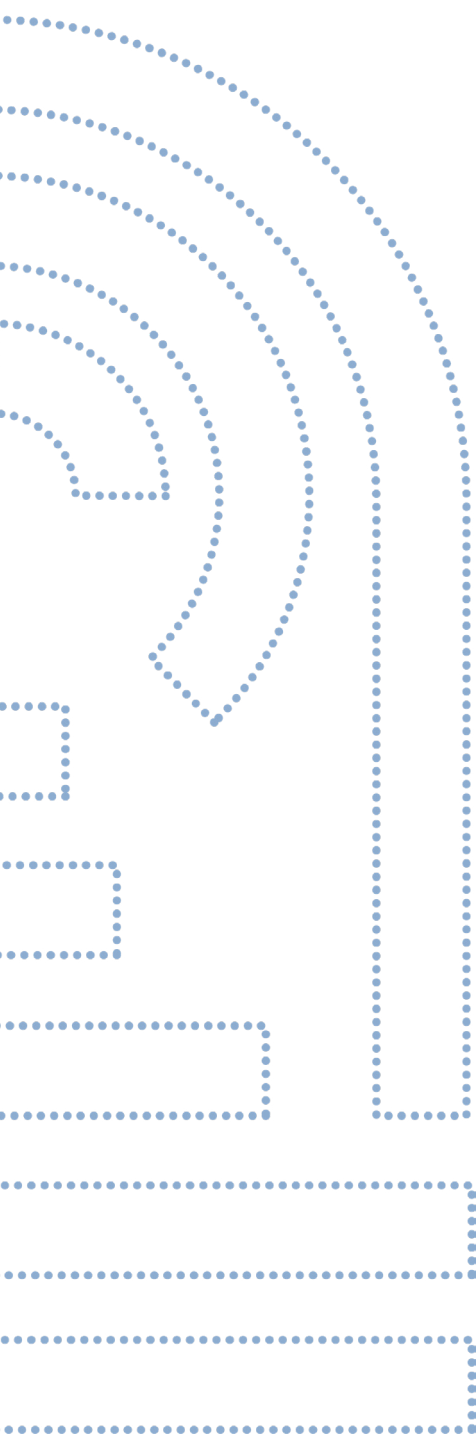
While these statements were probably to draw attention to Rwanda's support for the M23, they only further deteriorated the mission's image among the Congolese by refraining from publicly mentioning Rwanda. The



mission's already low popularity fell further during this period—the number of people with a favorable opinion of the mission dropped from 70% in March 2019 to 42% in January 2022 and to just 23% in January 2023.¹⁶²

The government, on the other hand, has not hesitated to rouse public opinion for political ends. Following the rapid advance of the rebels in North Kivu, demonstrations were organized, largely focused on the poor performance of MONUSCO and not that of the FARDC, which is primarily responsible for security. The government made little effort to contain these demonstrations, which resulted in the deaths of at least fifteen people, including twelve demonstrators and three UN soldiers.¹⁶³ The government also declared the mission's spokesman *persona non grata*¹⁶⁴ and publicly called for an accelerated withdrawal plan from the mission.¹⁶⁵ This further increased mistrust between the FARDC and the peacekeepers, which was particularly noticeable in the sharing of operational information.

The mission has begun a three-phase withdrawal of its 15,000 troops, starting with South Kivu province, where it will withdraw its soldiers by June 2024,¹⁶⁶ leaving only deployments in North Kivu and Ituri. The Security Council has not set a deadline for the withdrawal of the remaining forces. It must now decide whether the mission will support the deployment of SAMIDRC, which has struggled to find sufficient troops, equipment, and funding.




Conclusions and recommendations

The M23 conflict is mired in a violent stalemate, with little hope of immediate resolution. By mid-2023, the rebels had seized much of North Kivu province, displacing hundreds of thousands of people and killing hundreds. They provoked a lackluster response from the Congolese government, which supported armed groups and militias, most of which recruited from within their ethnic communities, making the conflict even more devastating for local communities and even more intractable.

Despite this escalation, there is no functioning peace process. The Nairobi and Luanda processes suffer from a lack of leadership and vision to overcome the parties' divergent interests and opposing worldviews. The Congolese do not want to give in to the demands of what they perceive as an illegitimate rebellion backed by a foreign country. For their part, the various intermediaries are unwilling to exert the necessary pressure to make Rwanda or M23 concede.

The military situation is no better. The FARDC's performance has been mixed, despite massive budget increases. This has led them to support armed groups and employ private security companies without much success to date. Meanwhile, two international forces are in Eastern DRC, MONUSCO and SAMIDRC. Neither of these forces is deployed as part of a functioning or well-designed peace process, nor are they currently willing or able to lead the offensive against M23.

Despite this gloomy scenario, concrete measures could be envisaged to alleviate the suffering of the Congolese people and progress towards resolving the crisis. However, it is important to stress that none of these measures will be possible without a greater investment of political capital in peace. Just as in 1999, at the time of the Lusaka agreement, or in 2002, for the Sun City agreement, this is when the status of the Congolese conflict must be raised to the international level. The kind of pressure needed on the governments in Kigali and Kinshasa will not be forthcoming without much



greater investment, financially and politically, from countries such as the United States, France, the UK, Germany, South Africa, Kenya, and China.

Pressure on Rwanda

Compared to the many other armed groups operating in Eastern DRC, the M23 rebellion could be relatively simple to dismantle, given its overwhelming dependence on Rwandan support. However, foreign donors—some of whom will end up spending hundreds of millions of dollars on the humanitarian response to this crisis—have been unwilling to pressure Kigali as they did in 2013.

Given these interests, in the absence of unexpected events on the ground, only sustained public pressure will likely induce these different countries to act. Public and private actors would need to send out more consistent messages—condemning Rwanda’s support for M23 but organizing major international events in Rwanda and celebrating its successes on the world stage, giving the impression that the international community generally supports Rwanda. Pressure could also translate into the suspension of aid and military support or additional targeted sanctions. The government and multilateral donors such as the IMF, African Development Bank, and World Bank could ask their staff to identify programs that could be suspended without causing disproportionate hardship for ordinary Rwandans. Similar measures contributed significantly to Rwanda’s decision ten years ago to withdraw its support for M23, leading to its demise.

Pressure on Rwanda is more likely to succeed, however, if concessions from the Congolese government accompany it. These should then be part of a much-needed peace process.

Relaunching the peace process

There is no comprehensive peace process for the multiple and intertwined crises affecting the DRC. Following the slow exhaustion of the national stabilization plan—the National Stabilization and Reconstruction Program (STAREC), supported by donors through the International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy (ISSSS)—the government launched a new initiative, the P-DDRCS, in July 2021. However, the P-DDRCS has

been at the heart of controversy since its launch. Its first coordinator, Tommy Tambwe, was challenged by civil society leaders, and he has been unable to persuade donors that his institution is sufficiently transparent or organized to manage the necessary funds.

There is an urgent need for the government and donors to put in place a comprehensive conflict strategy. This strategy could draw on the many elements of the 2013 framework agreement and should include the following elements, some of which are discussed in more detail below:

- Building on the current demobilization plan:
 - A comprehensive strategy to engage the armed groups and enable them to express their demands, with the participation of civil society, MONUSCO, and SADC;
 - A process of community engagement in areas affected by armed conflict that provides for the reintegration of combatants while investing in employment, infrastructure, and social services for local communities;
- Promote community reconciliation, including by:
 - A combination of curriculum development, local dialogue, radio/television programs, and national commissions;
 - In this context, tackling the status of Rwandophone communities;
- Encourage the return of Congolese refugees from neighboring countries;
- Promote security sector reform that invests in community policing, army reform, and rebuilding the justice sector;
- Invest in the management of mineral supply chains to create dignified livelihoods for mining communities and revenues for the government;
- Propose an economic development plan for conflict-affected regions, focusing on the most marginalized sections of the population.



The imperative of security sector reform

It is hard to see how armed groups will disappear from Eastern Congo if the state remains weak and devoid of any deterrent capacity. Army reform lies at the heart of this issue. As we have emphasized, the challenge is, above all, political: the government will have to transform this institution to distribute patronage and extract resources into one capable of providing a public service. This will require determined leadership to crack down on indiscipline, abuse, and corruption—here, financial malfeasance and violence go hand in hand. The cornerstone of these reforms should be greater accountability. The following considerations could be taken into account:

- The creation of a “vetting” mechanism that would make it possible to remove agents against whom there is significant evidence of financial wrongdoing or human rights violations;
- Support for improved living conditions for soldiers and their families, including decent wages and social benefits;
- Eliminate the imbalance between discretionary bonuses and statutory salaries: the bulk of soldiers’ remuneration must be in the form of salaries;
- Increased control through a reorganized inspectorate general, a more diligent parliamentary defense committee, and limiting the use of the “defense secret” label to prevent the publication of information on military finances and operations;
- Strengthening the army’s internal checks and balances: the army inspectorate, the court of auditors, and military justice.

Community reconciliation and the rwandophone question

Since the start of the Congo wars in March 1993, there has never been a serious and comprehensive effort at transitional justice or reconciliation at the local level. The transitional government’s truth and reconciliation commission was stillborn, and although there have

been many courageous local efforts to promote cohabitation and reconciliation, they have generally lacked crucial government support. This allowed resentments to fester, encouraging armed mobilization and empowering demagogues.

Some of the most serious conflicts of this kind revolve around the Rwandophone question. Since at least 1993, the status of the Rwandophone population in Eastern Congo has repeatedly triggered violent conflict. Political elites on both sides have sought to fan the flames of this antagonism in their own interests. The result is a deep sense of mistrust and resentment among key players—and among the general population—which makes progress difficult.


Strong leadership is needed to overcome this situation. Congolese leaders could recognize the history of these populations, most of whom have been settled in Eastern Congo since before independence, and refrain from blaming individual crimes on communities as a whole. While such measures would certainly be politically unpopular, they could go a long way towards preventing future conflict recurrence.

A national effort, led by government and civil society, is needed to promote reconciliation and resolve community tensions across the country. A variety of tools can be used to forge reconciliation, from land arbitration and expert historical commissions to local peace-building workshops, revised school curricula, and truth-telling mechanisms. Whatever form they take, these approaches must involve local community leaders and be part of a broader political process that tackles insecurity and helps to redress past injustices.

A plan for the return of refugees

There are over 80,000 Congolese refugees in Rwanda, many of whom have been there for over twenty years, which is one of the main bones of contention for M23. The bilateral process underway in Geneva, under the aegis of the UNHCR, offers an opportunity to finally make progress.

But these refugees represent only a fraction of the 1.1 million Congolese who have fled their country because of insecurity. While the repatriation of those in Rwanda



is particularly important for M23, all Congolese should be able to return home if they wish. The largest number of them (494,874) are in Uganda, while Tanzania (123,106), Burundi (85,000), and Kenya (56,582) are also hosting large numbers. It is unrealistic to think that all these people will be resettled—in 2022, there were thirty-five million refugees worldwide; only 114,300 were resettled. The Congolese government should continue working with the UNHCR and the various host countries to bring at least some of these citizens back home.

For Congolese refugees in Rwanda, as for all other refugees, this return will depend on improved security in their communities of origin. Preparatory work could be stepped up. This includes carrying out a census to identify their villages of origin, studying what has happened to their land and property in the DRC and what type of restitution would be possible, and facilitating the movement of community leaders from these regions to the refugee camps in order to reach a consensus on their reintegration.

A second part of this plan should tackle the even thornier security issue. How can these returnees be sure that they will not face the same attacks and abuses as those who drove them to flee? The Congolese authorities, possibly with the support of donors and the various diplomatic missions deployed there, should probably provide genuine security guarantees for these returnees, as well as promises of investment to neighboring communities so that these repatriations benefit the local population as a whole.

Repositioning peacekeeping within a political process

A full review of peacekeeping in the Congo is beyond the scope of this report. However, the current configuration is unsustainable. MONUSCO is unpopular and has been politically marginalized.

As part of the revitalization of the process described above, peacekeeping forces could once again play a central role. Their status would be very different from the one they had between 1999 and 2006 since they now deal with an elected and fully sovereign government; they would be advisors and facilitators within a broader process. As in Somalia, the UN would need to establish a collaborative relationship with regional bodies, in this case SADC.

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777 United Nations Plaza, 8th Fl. NewYork, NY
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