

Congo: Protracted Social Conflict and the M23 Rebellion. Analyzing the Ongoing Struggle Between the DRC Military and Rebels

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Abstract: The Democratic Republic of the Congo is experiencing one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, with escalating conflict fueling widespread violence, displacement, and human suffering. The M23 rebel group, backed by Rwanda, has launched an offensive, capturing key towns and expanding its grip on the mineral-rich Kivu provinces. The United Nations has reported thousands of civilian casualties, along with an increase in war crimes, child recruitment, and sexual abuse. The conflict has forced nearly 7 million people to flee their homes, with many seeking refuge in Burundi, putting a strain on local resources. Epidemics, food shortages, and a collapsing healthcare system further contribute to the catastrophe. Using the Protracted Social Conflict Theory, this paper investigates the root causes of the violence and its devastating consequences for the region.

Keywords: Protracted social conflict theory, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Conflict, DRC Military, March 23 Movement (M23), rebels, Eastern Congo.

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is experiencing a deepening humanitarian crisis, with persistent conflict fueling violence, food insecurity, and mass displacement (International Rescue Committee, 2025). The escalation of hostilities—particularly with the resurgence of the Rwanda-backed M23 rebel group—has destabilized the eastern provinces. Despite diplomatic

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Conflict Studies Quarterly
Issue 52, July 2025, pp. 3–31

DOI: 10.24193/cs.q.52.1
Published First Online: July 04, 2025

efforts by the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), M23 continues to expand its territorial control, exacerbating the region's instability (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025).

The M23 has extended its reach further south, capturing Kamanyola and advancing toward Uvira, the third-largest city in the Kivus, with a population of 650,000. This follows their earlier takeovers of Goma—home to 2 million people—and Bukavu, which has a population of 1.3 million. Simultaneously, another prong has moved north of Goma, heading toward Butembo, a city of 280,000 residents. If the M23 were to gain control of the entire mineral-rich Kivus region, spanning 124,000 km², it would effectively dominate an area nearly five times the size of Rwanda.

The M23's assault on Goma led to the deaths of nearly 3,000 people—mostly civilians—according to UN reports, highlighting the extreme brutality of the violence (Jaime, Elsamra, & Stambaugh, 2025). Many believe the actual death toll is significantly higher. In a region where government forces, militias, and rebel groups frequently target civilians, the risk of mass atrocities remains alarmingly high. The UN has also raised concerns over the increasing rates of child recruitment, abductions, killings, and sexual violence. As the conflict intensifies, these human costs—along with broader regional instability—are expected to escalate further. Estimates suggest that the DRC lost approximately \$11 billion—equivalent to 29% of its GDP at the time—and experienced 5.4 million deaths as a result of the First and Second Congo Wars alone (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025).

Moreover, as people flee violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the ongoing conflict has led to a significant increase in the number of refugees entering Burundi. Within just the first two weeks, 42,000 individuals applied for asylum, according to Brigitte Mukanya-Eno, a UNHCR liaison in Burundi. Over a three-month period, the organization launched a contingency plan to assist up to 58,000 refugees. Most of these individuals originate from South Kivu, a region bordering Burundi, where the M23 rebel group continues to expand its control (Antediteste, 2025).

Reports of sexual violence, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and human rights violations are on the rise. As the conflict escalates, millions face severe shortages of food, clean water, and medical supplies. Hospitals are overwhelmed and struggling to cope, while the risk of disease outbreaks—particularly cholera—continues to grow. In North Kivu province, the epicenter of recent violence, 2.8 million people have been displaced, contributing to a total of nearly 7 million displaced individuals across the DRC (UN News, 2024). Between November 2024 and January 2025 alone, approximately 780,000 individuals lost their homes (International Rescue Committee, 2025). Against this backdrop, this article employs the Protracted Social Conflict Theory to examine the root causes of the protracted conflict between the M23 rebel group and the DRC military.

Methodology and Research Design

This study is a literature review employing an integrative or narrative review approach—a qualitative research method suited for critically evaluating a broad body of literature on a specific topic (Snyder, 2019). An integrative literature review (ILR) is a specialized technique that provides a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon by systematically analyzing existing knowledge (Broome, 1993). This approach goes beyond merely synthesizing primary research findings; it introduces new perspectives and consolidates insights. ILR allows for the inclusion of diverse sources—such as opinion pieces, discussion papers, policy documents, and other relevant materials—alongside primary research (Snyder, 2019). Accordingly, this study adopts an integrative or narrative review to gain a broader understanding of the subject matter (Torraco, 2016).

The researcher conducted a critical analysis of relevant literature and evidence, including academic publications, reports, policy briefs, and media coverage, focusing on the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As this approach enables a thorough examination of various types of evidence, it offers a more inclusive perspective on the phenomenon and facilitates the extraction of key insights (Soares *et al.*, 2014). Articles and books were purposively selected through website search engines using keywords such as *Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) conflict*, *actors in the DRC conflict*, and *regional and international power in the DRC conflict* (Bowen, 2009). *The selection process involved an initial screening of abstracts, followed by full-text analysis to finalize sources for inclusion. To ensure quality and reliability, the researcher carefully monitored data abstraction throughout the review process.*

Conceptual Framework: Protracted Social Conflict Theory

Edward Azar introduced the Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) Theory to explain conflicts arising from prolonged, often violent struggles by ethnic groups seeking to fulfill fundamental needs such as security, recognition, acceptance, political representation, and economic freedom (Azar, 1990). Azar (1990) argued that ethnic groups pursue these needs by forming identity groups composed of individuals who share similar interests. In protracted social conflicts, such groups often harbor deep-rooted animosities based on race, religion, tribe, or culture. These identity-driven conflicts are frequently intensified by an underlying fear of extinction, particularly among vulnerable groups facing threats of suppression or persecution.

Typically, these divisions and threats emerge when state institutions are dominated by a single ethnic group or a coalition of elites that denies broader segments of the population access to opportunities and the means to satisfy their basic human needs (Azar, 1990). According to the theory, four primary conditions drive violent conflict: the denial of human needs, the role of the state, international linkages, and communal identity factors. In the context of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, all four of these conditions are present and continue to sustain the protracted nature of the violence.

One of the key conditions—the deprivation of human needs—has served as a rallying point for the M23 rebel group. From this perspective, the conflict between the M23 rebels and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) in Eastern Congo is fundamentally rooted in the systemic denial of basic human needs, which has fueled longstanding grievances, instability, and violence. This deprivation spans economic, security, political, and social dimensions, creating an environment that is highly susceptible to exploitation by armed groups such as M23.

For instance, Eastern Congo's instability has been shaped by decades of weak governance, ethnic tensions, and the plundering of natural resources. The region's conflicts intensified after the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which spilled over into the DRC and exacerbated tensions between Hutu and Tutsi communities (Stearns, 2011). Marginalized groups—particularly ethnic Tutsis—were excluded from political and economic systems, fostering a sense of alienation that groups like M23 would later exploit (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004). The Congolese state's failure to provide basic services, justice, and security further entrenched cycles of poverty and violence (Autesserre, 2010).

Furthermore, Eastern Congo's vast mineral wealth—including resources such as coltan and cobalt—has paradoxically perpetuated poverty. Local communities rarely benefit from resource extraction, which is dominated by armed groups and corrupt elites. High unemployment and the lack of livelihood opportunities often drive young men to join M23 as a means of economic survival. Competition over mines and trade routes further escalates clashes between M23 and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC), as control over these resources finances military operations (Raeymaekers, 2014).

The Congolese state's inability to protect civilians has left many communities vulnerable to violence. M23 exploits this security vacuum, positioning itself as a protector of Tutsi communities against rival militias and government forces (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Persistent insecurity leads to population displacement, disrupts agricultural production, and restricts access to food—factors that, in turn, drive recruitment by armed groups offering basic sustenance (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2022).

The FARDC's aggressive counterinsurgency strategies—which often involve human rights violations—have further alienated civilians, prompting some to align with M23. Ethnic Tutsi communities in Eastern DRC have consistently accused the government of implementing exclusionary policies. M23 leaders justify their rebellion as a response to this marginalization, claiming that the government in Kinshasa has failed to uphold peace agreements or to integrate Tutsi militias into the national army (Stearns, 2012). Political neglect and widespread corruption have deepened mistrust in state institutions, leading some communities to turn to armed groups as alternative sources of governance (Tull, 2003). Decades of conflict have also caused significant social fragmentation, eroding collective identity and making reconciliation increasingly difficult (Autesserre, 2010).

Although not directly tied to human needs, external interference—such as Rwanda's alleged support for M23—exploits local vulnerabilities. Rwanda justifies its involvement

by citing the need to protect Tutsi communities, underscoring how cross-border ethnic connections are intertwined with local grievances (UNSC Report, 2023). This external involvement further complicates efforts to resolve the conflict, as regional geopolitical interests often take precedence over addressing local concerns (Prunier, 2009).

The second precondition examined is the role of the government. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) government has significantly influenced the conflict dynamics between the Congolese Army (FARDC) and the M23 rebel group in Eastern Congo. The government's failure to establish effective governance in Eastern Congo has created a power vacuum, allowing armed groups like M23 to flourish, as previously noted. Years of state neglect, underfunded public services, and widespread corruption have weakened trust in state institutions. Eastern regions, such as North Kivu, remain underdeveloped, with inadequate infrastructure, healthcare, and education (Autesserre, 2010). The central government's prioritization of Kinshasa and resource-rich areas has exacerbated regional disparities, leaving Eastern communities feeling neglected (Tull, 2003). This institutional weakness diminishes the state's credibility, making armed groups seem like viable alternatives for security and livelihoods (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004).

In addition, the government's failure to address longstanding ethnic tensions—particularly those affecting Congolese Tutsi communities—has been a key factor fueling the M23 insurgency. Many M23 members are ethnic Tutsis who claim systemic exclusion and cite the government's failure to honor the 2009 peace agreement, which promised their integration into the national army and political institutions (Stearns, 2012). Kinshasa's refusal to fully recognize the citizenship rights of Congolese Tutsis—often stigmatized as “Rwandophones” or foreign agents—has further intensified grievances (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Politicians have exploited this exclusion for electoral gain, portraying Tutsis as outsiders to mobilize nationalist sentiment. Such rhetoric reinforces M23's narrative of fighting for Tutsi rights and protection.

Furthermore, the state's involvement in the illegal exploitation of Eastern Congo's mineral wealth has directly funded the conflict. Government officials and FARDC officers have collaborated with armed groups, including M23, to control mines and smuggling routes (UN, 2023). For instance, a 2022 UN report revealed that FARDC commanders profited from illegal taxation at checkpoints, diverting state resources that could have been used for public services. This corruption undermines the army's effectiveness, as soldiers prioritize personal gain over combating rebels. Consequently, local communities perceive the state as exploitative rather than protective, increasing support for M23's anti-government stance (Raeymaekers, 2014).

The persistent shortcomings of the FARDC—such as insufficient training, low morale, and inadequate resources—have contributed to the prolonged conflict. Soldiers frequently desert or defect due to unpaid wages, compelling the government to rely on poorly integrated former rebels, which deepens internal divisions (Bøås & Dunn, 2017). Additionally, the FARDC has been repeatedly implicated in human rights abuses,

including extrajudicial killings and sexual violence against civilians accused of aiding rebel groups. These actions have alienated local communities, who perceive both the army and M23 as threats, perpetuating a cycle of violence and retaliation (Human Rights Watch, 2012). The government's reliance on foreign military support—such as UN peacekeepers and East African Community forces—further underscores its inability to stabilize the region independently (UNSC Report, 2023).

The DRC government's inconsistent adherence to peace agreements has undermined trust. The March 23, 2009, agreement, from which the M23 derives its name, promised the integration of Tutsi-led rebel factions into the army and political reforms. However, the government failed to honor these commitments, leading to the group's resurgence in 2012 and 2021 (Stearns, 2012). Similarly, the 2013 Nairobi Declarations and subsequent negotiations collapsed due to Kinshasa's refusal to address critical issues such as amnesty and power-sharing. This pattern of broken promises has reinforced the perception of the state as an unreliable negotiating partner, prompting groups like M23 to return to violence as the only means to secure concessions.

The government has frequently portrayed the conflict as a foreign invasion orchestrated by Rwanda, thereby diverting attention from its own governance failures. While Rwanda's alleged backing of M23 is well-documented (UN, 2023), Kinshasa's emphasis on external actors obscures its own role in perpetuating the crisis through governance deficits. President Tshisekedi's administration has leveraged anti-Rwandan rhetoric to stoke nationalist sentiment, accusing Rwanda of "economic terrorism" while ignoring the need for reforms to address the marginalization of Eastern Congo (Reuters, 2023a). This scapegoating tactic allows the government to evade accountability for fundamental drivers of the conflict, including corruption, ethnic exclusion, and militarized governance.

The government's preference for military solutions over dialogue has further entrenched instability. Operations such as Sokola 1 (2013) and Ukimwi (2022) aimed to dismantle M23 but often resulted in civilian displacement and increased human suffering without achieving sustainable peace (IDMC, 2023). These military campaigns are frequently timed to coincide with electoral cycles, suggesting politically motivated actions rather than strategic objectives. Concurrently, Kinshasa has marginalized civil society and local leaders in peace efforts, disregarding grassroots demands for land reform, justice, and reconciliation (Autesserre, 2010). This top-down approach alienates local communities and fosters support for insurgent groups.

The third prerequisite involves international connections. The conflict between the M23 rebel group and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Army in Eastern Congo has been heavily influenced by international ties, including regional state actors, global economic interests, and multilateral organizations. For example, Rwanda's alleged support for M23 has been frequently cited: Rwanda is accused of providing military, logistical, and political assistance to M23, a rebel group primarily composed of ethnic Tutsis. Reports from the UN Group of Experts (2023) have detailed cross-border arms transfers, Rwandan

troop deployments aiding M23, and the use of Rwandan territory for recruitment and training. Rwanda's involvement is motivated by concerns over Hutu extremist groups such as the FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda), which operate in Eastern Congo and oppose Rwanda's government (Prunier, 2009). Additionally, Rwanda seeks to maintain influence over Eastern Congo's mineral resources—such as coltan and tin—through proxy militias and to support Congolese Tutsis, who face marginalization and violence in the DRC (Stearns, 2012). Despite Rwanda's denials, its role has been corroborated by leaked UN reports and eyewitness testimonies. This backing has enabled M23 to continue its offensives against the FARDC (DRC Army) and destabilize the region.

Furthermore, Uganda's role remains ambiguous. While Uganda officially participates in regional peace efforts, it has been accused of covertly supporting M23. At the same time, Uganda is a member of the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF), deployed in 2022 to address the conflict. This dual role reflects Uganda's attempt to balance its economic interests—such as oil exploration near Lake Albert—with maintaining its diplomatic standing in the region (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004).

Eastern Congo's extensive mineral wealth has attracted foreign corporations and illicit networks, fueling the conflict. Key dynamics include armed groups like M23 controlling mines and smuggling routes, selling minerals to international buyers. The UN Panel of Experts (2023) has linked M23 to illegal gold and coltan exports through Rwanda and Uganda, which finance their operations. Additionally, multinational corporations—especially in the technology and manufacturing sectors—have historically sourced “conflict minerals” from Eastern Congo, indirectly funding armed militias (Raeymaekers, 2014). Although initiatives like the Dodd-Frank Act (2010) were introduced to restrict this trade, weak enforcement and persistent smuggling networks have undermined these efforts. Furthermore, Congolese political elites and foreign businessmen have collaborated to launder minerals through hubs such as Dubai, perpetuating corruption (UN, 2023).

The influx of weapons into Eastern Congo from regional and global actors has exacerbated the conflict. Rwanda and Uganda have been accused of supplying M23 with advanced weaponry, including drones and artillery (UN Report, 2023). Meanwhile, the DRC government has turned to mercenaries, such as the Russian Wagner Group, and allied militias, like Burundian forces, to combat M23, further internationalizing the conflict. Additionally, the MONUSCO peacekeeping mission, active since 1999, has faced challenges in disarming armed groups due to restrictive mandates and insufficient funding (Autesserre, 2010). Its perceived ineffectiveness has diminished local confidence in the mission.

International organizations have played inconsistent roles. For example, targeted sanctions on M23 leaders and Rwandan officials have had minimal impact due to poor enforcement and underground financial networks. Similarly, the AU's Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework (2013) failed to address the root causes of the conflict, as signatories like Rwanda and Uganda prioritized their national interests over regional stability. Moreover,

while Western donors fund humanitarian aid and state-building programs, they often overlook local governance needs, reinforcing dependency (Trefon, 2016).

The conflict has also become a proxy battleground for broader geopolitical rivalries. For instance, Rwanda frames its involvement as “self-defense” against FDLR threats, while the DRC accuses Rwanda of pursuing territorial expansion (Al Jazeera, 2023). Lastly, great power competition further complicates the situation. The U.S. and EU’s tacit support for Rwanda, a key ally in Central Africa, contrasts with China’s significant investments in DRC mining, hindering cohesive international responses.

One of the most critical elements of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is its communal dimension. The ongoing struggle between the M23 rebel group and the DRC Army in Eastern Congo is deeply rooted in communal dynamics, including ethnic divisions, historical grievances, land disputes, and social fragmentation. These communal factors have driven recruitment, justified violence, and perpetuated cycles of retaliation, making conflict resolution highly challenging. For example, the ethnic diversity of Eastern Congo has been exploited by both M23 and state actors. The region is home to more than 100 ethnic groups, with longstanding tensions between indigenous communities such as the Hunde and Nande, and groups perceived as “foreign,” like the Banyamulenge (Congolese Tutsis). The Banyamulenge, descendants of Rwandan migrants, have faced systemic exclusion and violence, often labeled as “outsiders” despite their Congolese citizenship (Stearns, 2012). M23, predominantly composed of ethnic Tutsis, positions itself as a protector of this marginalized group, leveraging grievances related to land rights and political representation (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Conversely, the DRC Army has allied with local militias such as the Mai-Mai, who advocate for indigenous communities’ rights and frame the conflict as resistance against “Rwandan aggression” (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004). This ethnic polarization has deepened communal mistrust and legitimized violence under the guise of self-defense.

Additionally, communal conflicts over land and natural resources play a central role in the violence. Eastern Congo’s fertile lands and mineral wealth have long been sources of contention, exacerbated by colonial-era land policies that favored certain groups. After independence, indigenous communities sought to reclaim territories from Banyamulenge pastoralists, leading to violent confrontations. M23 has exploited these disputes by promising displaced Tutsi communities the return of lands taken by rival groups (UN, 2022). Meanwhile, the DRC Army has armed local Mai-Mai militias to counter M23, framing their efforts as a defense of communal lands. This competition over resources, combined with weak land governance, has transformed communal tensions into militarized conflict.

Moreover, decades of war have severely eroded social cohesion, leaving communities distrustful of both the state and each other. Massacres, sexual violence, and forced displacement have caused intergenerational trauma, with survivors often perceiving rival ethnic groups as existential threats (Autesserre, 2010). M23 has exploited this by

recruiting youth who have lost family members to state-backed militias, framing revenge as a communal duty. Similarly, the DRC Army's alliance with Mai-Mai groups—known for brutal reprisals against Tutsi civilians—has further deepened communal divisions. Social institutions such as churches and traditional elders, once mediators in conflicts, have lost credibility due to perceived associations with armed groups (Titeca & Fahey, 2016). The breakdown of state authority in Eastern Congo has shifted power to traditional leaders and armed factions, dividing community loyalties. Chiefs (*mwami*) and local councils often collaborate with militias to maintain influence, creating parallel governance systems (Raeymaekers, 2014). For example, some Hunde chiefs support Mai-Mai groups to resist M23, while Tutsi leaders depict M23 as a “community defense force.” The DRC Army's failure to provide security forces communities to rely on these non-state actors, blurring the lines between “protector” and “predator.” This decentralization strengthens local autonomy but weakens national unity (Vircoulon, 2015).

Both M23 and the DRC Army use historical narratives to gain support. M23 leaders invoke the 1996–2003 Congo Wars, during which Tutsi communities were targeted by Hutu militias (FDLR) and state forces (Stearns, 2011). They frame their rebellion as a continuation of the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) “liberation” movement, appealing to a shared Tutsi identity across borders (Prunier, 2009). Conversely, the DRC government uses anti-colonial rhetoric, portraying M23 as a Rwandan proxy seeking to annex Eastern Congo (Reuters, 2023a). These narratives resonate with communities' experiences of marginalization, making compromise appear as betrayal. Violence in Eastern Congo follows a cyclical pattern of communal retaliation. For instance, an M23 attack on a Hunde village often prompts Mai-Mai reprisals against Tutsi civilians, which then justifies further offensives by M23 (UN Report, 2023). The DRC Army's indiscriminate tactics—such as destroying homes suspected of harboring rebels—further alienate civilians, driving some to seek protection from M23 (IDMC, 2022). Increasingly, communities view violence as the only means of survival, perpetuating a “war economy” that benefits armed groups (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002).

Background on the Evolution of Conflict in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

The conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has resulted in the deaths of approximately six million people since 1996. The violence originated in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, during which Hutu extremists killed around one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus (Parens, 2022). This horrific event forced nearly two million Hutus to flee to neighboring DRC (then Zaire), with most settling in the North and South Kivu provinces (Zapata, 2011). Among these refugees were some perpetrators of the genocide, who later formed armed groups within the DRC. The situation escalated as Tutsi militias emerged to counter these Hutu armed groups, involving various international actors (Minorities at Risk Project, 2025). Following the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF)

defeat of the genocidaires in Rwanda, the new Tutsi-led government under Paul Kagame launched military operations in Zaire (French, 2009). Rwanda, in collaboration with local Tutsi militias, invaded Zaire with the stated aim of dismantling Mobutu Sese Seko's dictatorship and protecting Tutsis from Hutu extremists who had found refuge under Mobutu's regime.

During the First Congo War, Rwanda led a coalition of African countries—including Uganda, Angola, and Burundi—in an invasion of Zaire. These nations were united partly by shared concerns over Mobutu Sese Seko's support for various rebel groups across Africa (Reyntjens, 2009). The coalition worked closely with Laurent Kabila, who was leading the rebellion against Mobutu at the time (McGreal, 2008). The war resulted in thousands of deaths, affecting not only Hutu militants and combatants but also numerous innocent Congolese civilians and refugees in the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu. Rwandan forces and Tutsi militias became notorious for their brutal tactics. The conflict concluded in 1997 when Mobutu fled Kinshasa, securing victory for the Kabila-Kagame alliance. Following this, Kabila assumed the presidency and renamed the country the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Second Congo War erupted in 1998 amid escalating tensions between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Reyntjens, 1999). Laurent Kabila, seeking to assert his independence from Rwanda, began minimizing Kigali's role in his rise to power and distanced himself politically and militarily. He removed ethnic Tutsis from government positions and pushed to reduce Rwanda's military presence in eastern DRC (Duke, 1998). Meanwhile, the international community became increasingly aware of war crimes committed by Kagame's forces against Hutu populations during the First Congo War, damaging Kabila's legitimacy. In a strategic shift, Kabila expelled foreign troops from the country and permitted Hutu armed groups to regroup near the border (Zapata, 2011). In response, Rwanda launched an invasion in 1998, justifying it as a necessary measure to establish a buffer zone along the DRC-Rwanda border to counter Hutu threats.

The conflict expanded into a regional war, with Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe supporting Congolese forces against Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, and their allied rebel groups (Reyntjens, 1999). A turning point occurred in 2001 when Laurent Kabila was assassinated during a failed coup. His son, Joseph Kabila, succeeded him and officially ended the Second Congo War in 2002. By 2004, the war had claimed over three million lives (OHCHR, 2002). Between 2002 and 2003, peace agreements among Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC led to a transitional government headed by Joseph Kabila. Despite initiatives like truth and reconciliation commissions and increased UN peacekeeping, eastern DRC remained unstable. Joseph Kabila was democratically elected in 2006 (DFID, 2006).

In August 2018, Kabila announced he would not seek a third term, and Félix Tshisekedi won the December 2018 election, marking the DRC's first peaceful transfer of power (Bearak, 2019). However, the election's legitimacy was contested, with some polls indicating Martin Fayulu as the actual winner (Financial Times, 2019). Tshisekedi faced

immediate challenges, including Ebola outbreaks and ongoing violence in eastern Congo (Belluz, 2019). The region's instability risks reigniting a broader conflict, a grave concern given the Second Congo War remains the deadliest conflict since World War II.

The DRC is currently locked in a tense standoff with Rwanda (Kasongo, 2024). After five years of dormancy, the M23 rebels reemerged in 2022 and by July 2023 had captured significant territory in North Kivu province (Agence France-Presse, 2023). Kinshasa, supported by several international governments, has repeatedly accused Rwanda of backing M23's resurgence, while Rwanda counters by accusing the DRC of supporting Hutu extremist groups, notably the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) (Butty, 2023). Rwanda maintains a strong military presence along the shared border and within eastern DRC. Both Rwanda and Uganda, along with allied militias, have vested economic interests in Congolese mining, often pursued through illicit activities (Muhumuza, 2024).

In October 2023, UN Special Envoy Xia Huang warned of the risk of direct military conflict between the two countries, highlighting military buildups, a lack of high-level dialogue, and ongoing hate speech. Although a U.S.-brokered agreement in November 2023 aimed to reduce border militarization, curb hate speech, and respect sovereignty, deadly violence in eastern Congo has persisted into 2024, despite a planned 72-hour ceasefire ahead of the DRC's national elections.

International security forces in the DRC have faced considerable challenges. Between 2022 and 2023, MONUSCO peacekeepers were met with violent local protests, as both civilians and officials questioned their effectiveness and opposed their presence (VOA Africa, 2023). Despite these obstacles, international and regional interventions have continued. In May 2023, SADC forces joined UN stabilization efforts ahead of the DRC's December elections (Kavanagh, 2023; Lorgerie, 2022). Although President Tshisekedi initially called for MONUSCO's withdrawal before 2024, the UN Security Council overruled this, fearing a security vacuum and disruption to humanitarian aid. Instead, MONUSCO's mandate was extended through 2024 with a phased withdrawal process initiated (UN News, 2023).

Who are M23 and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC)?

The Congolese Revolutionary Army (*Armée révolutionnaire du Congo*, ARC), better known as the March 23 Movement (M23) or *Mouvement du 23 Mars* in French, primarily operates in the North Kivu province of the DRC. The conflict is further complicated by alleged support for M23 from the Rwandan government. After the Congo Wars, the integration of Rwandophone militants was problematic, leading to divisions within the group—some wished to remain in the DRC, while others preferred to return to Rwanda. Those who stayed formed the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), led by Laurent Nkunda, a former member of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which

transitioned from a rebel group to Rwanda's ruling party after the 1994 genocide. Backed by Rwanda, the CNDP aimed to protect Congolese Tutsis (Redae, 2023).

The name "M23" originates from the failed March 23, 2009, negotiation process between the CNDP and the DRC government. The group formed and became active after the collapse of the 2012 merger between the FARDC (DRC Army) and former CNDP militants (Africanews, 2023). Almost immediately, M23 seized control of parts of North Kivu, including Goma, the provincial capital near the Rwandan border. After international mediation, the rebels briefly took Goma in late 2012, with political violence intensifying in November before M23 withdrew in December (Blanshe, 2022). Violence persisted in surrounding areas such as Rutshuru and Nyiragongo. From 2012 to 2013, M23 was the most active non-state armed group in the DRC, responsible for over 20% of political violence incidents (Africanews, 2023). In November 2013, a major offensive by FARDC and UN forces inflicted heavy losses on M23 and led to a decline in Rwandan military support (Vogel, 2013). Hundreds of fighters, including leader Sultani Makenga, surrendered after being pushed into Uganda. However, according to ACLED, M23 reemerged as the most active non-state armed group in North Kivu by late 2021, with its activity nearly thirty times higher in 2022 than in 2021 (Serwat, 2023).

The Democratic Republic of the Congo's national military, the FARDC, was established in 2003 following the end of the Second Congo War. Its creation involved merging various armed factions—both former government forces and insurgent groups—into a single command structure as part of peace agreements aimed at ending the conflict. Despite these efforts, the integration process has faced major challenges, including issues with military discipline, unit cohesion, and divided loyalties among soldiers. The FARDC is tasked with protecting the country's borders, maintaining internal security, and combating armed militias, particularly in the volatile eastern regions.

The FARDC faces significant criticism for operational shortcomings, inadequate training, and limited resources. Human Rights Watch (2023) has documented serious abuses by the army, including unlawful killings, sexual violence, and alleged collaboration with some militant groups. The military remains engaged in protracted battles against insurgents such as the M23 rebels and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), alongside other armed factions in eastern Congo. These conflicts are further complicated by regional dynamics, with neighboring countries like Rwanda and Uganda accused of supporting certain rebel groups, according to 2023 UN reports. Efforts to reform and strengthen the FARDC continue with support from international partners, notably the UN's MONUSCO mission. However, progress has been slow, and the Congolese military still faces major challenges in stabilizing the country and protecting civilians.

Who are the key players in the recent surge of violence?

The conflict primarily affects the eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri. Over 120 armed groups operate in the region, broadly divided into two main factions: pro-Rwandan, anti-government rebels, and the Congolese government forces along with their allies. The Congolese military is supported by the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a militia of ethnic Hutu extremists, including some refugees involved in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Although the FDLR's goal is to overthrow the Rwandan government, analysts generally agree that the group is now significantly weakened (Reid & Ferragamo, 2025). Numerous local militias, known as Mai-Mai groups, also operate in the area, each with distinct identities and missions. The primary rebel force, mostly composed of ethnic Tutsis, is the M23, which launched its first uprising in 2012. Rwanda provides material support to M23, and Rwandan troops have fought alongside them. Another notable rebel group is the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), founded in Uganda and linked to the Islamic State (ISIS).

Next are the 11,000 United Nations peacekeeping forces. While they do have some cooperation with the Congolese government forces, protecting civilians is their top priority. There have occasionally been public demonstrations against the peacekeeping effort, and they are not always well-liked. The United Nations and the Congolese government reached an agreement to pull out peacekeepers, although the process has faced delays (Reid & Ferragamo, 2025).

Which other countries, besides Rwanda and Uganda, have vested interests in the DRC, and for what reasons?

The United States has engaged in the M23 rebellion and the broader conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) primarily through diplomatic and economic measures, avoiding direct military involvement. The U.S. has imposed sanctions on Rwandan officials and M23 leaders to hold them accountable for their roles in the conflict and associated human rights abuses. Notably, James Kabarebe, Rwanda's Minister of State for Regional Integration, was sanctioned due to allegations of his significant involvement in Rwanda's support for M23 (Muia, 2025; Mpuga, 2025). Furthermore, the U.S. has proposed peacebuilding initiatives, such as infrastructure projects including the expansion of the Lobito Corridor railway, aimed at fostering regional stability. However, these proposals have been rejected by Rwanda (Schwikowski, 2025a).

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has shown interest in establishing a minerals-for-security agreement with the United States, modeled on a similar framework proposed for Ukraine. Under this arrangement, the U.S. would provide military support in exchange for access to strategic minerals such as cobalt and coltan (Lawal, 2025; Zane, 2025). Additionally, the U.S. is actively promoting increased private sector investment in

the DRC's mining industry, emphasizing responsible and transparent business practices (Zane, 2025).

While discussions about U.S. military assistance to the DRC are ongoing, direct deployment of American troops remains unlikely. Analysts anticipate that U.S. involvement will focus mainly on supplying military resources, training, and capacity-building support for Congolese forces rather than ground troop engagement (Lawal, 2025; Zane, 2025). The United States has also called on Rwanda to cease its alleged support for the M23 rebel group, highlighting concerns over human rights abuses and regional instability (Hixon, 2025). Washington underscores the importance of a peaceful resolution to the conflict, stressing the humanitarian crisis and the need to uphold human rights (Hixon, 2025; Schwikowski, 2025a). Overall, the U.S. approach to the M23 and DRC conflict combines diplomatic pressure, economic interests, and limited military engagement, with a primary focus on promoting regional stability, encouraging conflict resolution, and advocating for human rights protections.

The European Union has adopted a dual-track strategy of diplomatic and economic measures in response to the M23 insurgency in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Through targeted sanctions, the EU has penalized Rwandan military officials, M23 leaders—including president Bertrand Bisimwa—and commercial entities such as the Gasabo Gold Refinery, which has been implicated in illegal resource extraction from conflict zones (Bagala, 2025; Al Yahyai, 2025). These sanctions aim to pressure Rwanda to end its alleged support for M23 and to disrupt the illicit mineral trade that sustains regional instability. While the EU supports peace negotiations mediated by Angola, its sanctions regime has paradoxically contributed to M23's withdrawal from dialogue efforts (Al Yahyai, 2025; Reuters, 2025b).

The European Union, alongside international partners, continues to allege Rwandan involvement with the M23 rebel group, despite consistent denials from Kigali (Reuters, 2025a; Walther, 2025). This coordinated pressure forms part of a broader multilateral strategy aimed at addressing the regional dimensions of the conflict. Due to concerns over Rwanda's role in the DRC crisis, the EU is considering reassessing its agreements with Rwanda, including a memorandum of understanding on strategic minerals (Reuters, 2025a). The conflict has precipitated a severe humanitarian crisis, displacing millions of people. Through sanctions and diplomatic efforts, the EU seeks to reduce violence and alleviate the humanitarian situation (Walther, 2025; Reuters, 2025b). In response to the EU's sanctions, Rwanda severed diplomatic ties with Belgium, a key proponent of these measures, accusing Belgium of bias and efforts to destabilize the region (Walther, 2025; Peltier, 2025). Overall, the EU's approach to the M23-DRC conflict centers on economic and diplomatic pressure to reduce violence, promote stability, and combat the illicit exploitation of natural resources that fuels the conflict.

Russia's involvement in the M23 and DRC conflict primarily focuses on calls for de-escalation, dialogue, and condemnation of violence. Moscow has strongly denounced the

actions of the M23 armed group, demanding an immediate cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of militants from occupied territories (TASS, 2025). Russia advocates for inclusive dialogue among all parties to resolve the crisis and cautions against any escalation that could trigger a wider interstate conflict. Additionally, Moscow supports the resumption of negotiations within existing regional peacekeeping frameworks, notably the Angola-mediated talks between Rwanda and the DRC (TASS, 2025).

During UN Security Council meetings, Russia has reaffirmed its commitment to the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of the DRC. It has urged external actors to cease their support for the M23 rebel group and withdraw any military assistance (TASS, 2025). Russia also acknowledges the escalating humanitarian crisis in North Kivu and emphasizes the urgent need to prevent further conflict escalation to enable a diplomatic resolution (TASS, 2025). Although there have been claims that Russia is providing military assistance to the DRC against M23, such reports are frequently dismissed as disinformation (African Digital Democracy Observatory [ADDO], 2024). Russia's expanding engagement in Africa is viewed by some as an opportunity for countries like the DRC to deepen ties amid growing anti-Western sentiment (Titeca, 2023).

China has emerged as a key partner in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), playing a pivotal role in both economic development and diplomatic relations. Its engagement follows a cooperation model centered on mutual benefit, exemplified by the 2008 Sicomines agreement based on a "resources-for-infrastructure" approach. This initiative has driven substantial investments in critical infrastructure projects such as roads, schools, and hospitals, fostering long-term economic growth. Beyond infrastructure improvement, these projects have created employment opportunities and stimulated local economic activity, helping to address some root causes of instability. Additionally, China supports peacekeeping efforts in the region, with Chinese troops contributing significantly to MONUSCO's engineering, medical, and logistical operations, underscoring China's commitment to regional stability and international conflict resolution (Ndegwa, 2025).

China has consistently engaged in multilateral efforts to resolve the crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) through frameworks such as the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), and Southern African Development Community (SADC). Emphasizing a policy of non-interference and respect for sovereignty, China has built strong diplomatic ties with successive Congolese governments, enabling it to exert influence in peace initiatives. This diplomatic approach offers a valuable opportunity to support long-term stability in the DRC. Through a partnership-based and mutually beneficial strategy, China has positioned itself as a credible mediator in conflict resolution. Furthermore, sustained and expanded economic investments by China could address root causes of violence by generating employment, improving infrastructure, and stimulating economic growth—thereby reducing poverty and inequality, key factors driving instability. China's support for governance reforms and capacity-building efforts also holds promise for strengthening institutional capacity and fostering durable stability in the DRC (Ndegwa, 2025).

While Chinese investment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) offers clear benefits, it has also raised concerns. Critics warn that the DRC's growing dependence on Chinese funding may weaken its negotiating leverage and raise the risk of debt-trap diplomacy (Khanna, 2025; Gregory & Milas, 2024). Additionally, revenues from mining and arms sales could inadvertently finance militant groups. Although infrastructure development is positive, it may sometimes exacerbate local tensions (Khanna, 2025; Rapanyane, 2021). Moreover, the deployment of Chinese drones and undisclosed military cooperation with the Congolese government risks heightening regional tensions, especially with Rwanda, which has been accused of supporting the M23 rebel group (Khanna, 2025; Center for Preventive Action, 2025).

France has been actively engaged in diplomatic efforts to resolve the M23-DRC conflict, condemning M23's offensive and demanding the group's immediate withdrawal from occupied territories. It has called on Rwandan forces to leave the DRC, underscoring the inviolability of Congolese sovereignty and territorial integrity. France supports peace negotiations led by Angola and Kenya aimed at fostering dialogue between the DRC and Rwanda. As a leading voice on the crisis within the UN Security Council, France has pursued a strategic but discreet approach following M23's advance into Goma (Kasongo & Irish, 2025). It proposed a draft resolution urging an end to hostilities, reaffirming support for the DRC's sovereignty, endorsing MONUSCO's peacekeeping mandate, and creating conditions conducive to dialogue.

France has reiterated its full backing of MONUSCO (United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC), condemning attacks on the mission and any attempts to obstruct its operations. It emphasizes that MONUSCO must be allowed to operate unhindered to fulfill its peacekeeping role. Highlighting the worsening humanitarian crisis, France noted the displacement of over one million people and condemned reports of attacks on civilians, including sexual violence and violence against children. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has confirmed instances of summary executions of children by M23 in Bukavu, underscoring the urgent need for international intervention (Radio France International, 2025). France has supported DRC appeals for UN Security Council sanctions against Rwanda and continues to advocate for a ceasefire, renewed dialogue, and respect for Congolese sovereignty. Amid escalating clashes, France, alongside the US and UK, has advised its nationals to evacuate Goma for safety reasons.

Belgium has played a pivotal role in advocating for diplomatic and economic actions against Rwanda within the European Union (EU). It has been a leading proponent of EU sanctions targeting Rwanda, citing allegations of Rwandan military involvement in the DRC and support for the M23 rebels. These sanctions focus specifically on Rwandan military and government officials (Walther, 2025; Oelofse, 2025). Belgium has accused Rwanda of violating the DRC's territorial integrity and exacerbating instability in eastern Congo through its backing of the M23 (Paternoster & Jones, 2025; Oelofse, 2025). In response to Belgium's position, Rwanda severed diplomatic relations and expelled Belgian diplomats. Kigali accused Belgium of bias in the conflict and of attempting to destabilize

Rwanda and the wider region through “lies and manipulation” (Walther, 2025; Oelofse, 2025; Chibelush, 2025).

Belgium described Rwanda’s decision to sever diplomatic ties as “disproportionate” and retaliated by expelling Rwandan diplomats, declaring them *persona non grata* (Chibelush, 2025; Oelofse, 2025). Critics are divided: some view Belgium’s stance as influenced by its colonial history in the DRC, while others argue it stems from Rwanda’s violations of international law (Walther, 2025). Belgium has also voiced concern over the worsening humanitarian crisis in eastern DRC and emphasized the need for a peaceful resolution. In response to Belgian pressure, Rwanda suspended its 2024–2029 bilateral aid program with Brussels, accusing Belgium of obstructing its access to development funding (Paternoster & Jones, 2025).

Meanwhile, Qatar has emerged as a mediator in the eastern DRC conflict, leveraging its diplomatic and economic influence to facilitate dialogue between the DRC and Rwanda. The conflict, fueled by clashes between Rwanda-backed M23 rebels and the Congolese army, has caused widespread violence, displacement, and regional instability. On March 18, 2025, Qatar hosted a trilateral summit in Doha with Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi, Rwandan President Paul Kagame, and Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani—marking the first direct meeting between Tshisekedi and Kagame since the escalation of M23 attacks earlier that year (Schwikowski, 2025b; Mills & Ross, 2025; Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

The summit produced a joint declaration calling for an “immediate and unconditional” ceasefire, though enforcement remains uncertain amid ongoing hostilities (Schwikowski, 2025b; Mills & Ross, 2025). Qatar’s diplomatic efforts complement existing peace processes, such as the Luanda Process (backed by SADC) and the Nairobi Process (supported by the EAC), both aimed at fostering peace between the DRC, Rwanda, and armed groups (Karr *et al.*, 2025; Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). Qatar’s mediation experience in conflicts like Chad and Afghanistan underscores its broader strategy to enhance regional stability while bolstering its international standing (Schwikowski, 2025b).

Qatar holds significant investments in Rwanda, including stakes in RwandAir and Bugesera International Airport, which likely influence its interest in maintaining a neutral mediation role acceptable to both parties (Schwikowski, 2025b; Mutambo, Vieira, Anami & Ilunga, 2025). Despite these diplomatic efforts, the situation on the ground remains volatile, with M23 rebels continuing to control key territories, complicating ceasefire implementation (Mills & Ross, 2025; Mutambo *et al.*, 2025; Karr *et al.*, 2025).

Some analysts question whether Qatar’s close economic ties with Rwanda might compromise its neutrality as a mediator. Given that previous regional mediation efforts, such as those led by Angola, have failed, doubts persist regarding Qatar’s ability to secure lasting peace. Nonetheless, Qatar’s involvement marks a significant diplomatic initiative in one of Africa’s most protracted conflicts. While it has succeeded in bringing key stakeholders to the negotiating table, achieving sustainable peace will require ongoing dialogue, robust

ceasefire monitoring mechanisms, and addressing fundamental issues such as competition over natural resources and historical grievances.

Impact of the Conflict Between M23 Rebels and the DRC Military in Eastern Congo

Allison D. Bosch (2019) highlights the devastating impact of conflict-related sexual violence on the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This violence often involves brutal acts such as gang rape, genital mutilation, torture, and the intentional transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. The UN Secretary-General's report on conflict-related sexual violence underscores that these atrocities are used as weapons of war, instruments of torture, and tools of retaliation amid the DRC's escalating political and security crises (UNSC, 2023).

Since 2020, sexual violence has been widespread in eastern DRC, particularly in Tanganyika, Ituri, South Kivu, and North Kivu provinces. In 2022, MONUSCO documented 701 incidents affecting 503 women, 187 girls, and 11 men (Redae, 2023). Most cases were attributed to non-state armed groups, while others involved state actors from the DRC and neighboring countries supporting the government. The UN Secretary-General's October 2022 report on Children and Armed Conflict notes that sexual violence remains the most frequently reported violation involving government forces, with FARDC elements identified as primary perpetrators.

Victims suffer long-term trauma, physical and psychological harm, and increased HIV infection risks (Redae, 2023). Reports also include female genital mutilation and the use of foreign objects such as weapons and sticks for penetration. Despite growing pressure to hold offenders accountable, low conviction rates persist. In December 2022, 22 FARDC members, 11 Congolese National Police officers, and 18 civilians were convicted for conflict-related sexual violence, but the limited justice progress continues to discourage survivors from seeking redress.

The eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has long suffered from armed violence that has devastated healthcare infrastructure and disrupted essential services, severely weakening disease surveillance efforts. The destruction of hospitals, clinics, and medical supply chains has deprived communities of critical healthcare resources, increasing their vulnerability to zoonotic disease outbreaks. The capacity to detect, diagnose, and treat emerging infectious diseases, especially zoonoses, has been significantly impaired by the deteriorated healthcare facilities.

Beyond physical damage, ongoing conflict has disrupted healthcare system functionality. The displacement or loss of healthcare workers has created a shortage of skilled personnel needed to manage outbreaks and deliver vital medical care (Kavulikirwa, 2024). Persistent violence and insecurity further obstruct the transport of medical supplies and staff to affected areas, limiting healthcare delivery.

Since 2009, the DRC has pursued Universal Health Coverage (UHC), but ongoing instability in the east presents formidable obstacles. Armed conflicts threaten healthcare workers, degrade working conditions, damage facilities, and displace communities, collectively weakening the health system. Consequently, insecurity impedes progress toward UHC by restricting the availability, affordability, and accessibility of healthcare services (Kavulikirwa, 2024).

Insecurity-driven psychosocial pressures have significantly altered how affected populations in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) seek healthcare. Cultural barriers, fear of violence, and mistrust of medical professionals contribute to these changes. Due to ongoing instability and psychological stress, many people avoid healthcare facilities (HCF) out of fear of attacks or doubts about the safety and reliability of these services. Additionally, cultural customs and beliefs may further hinder healthcare utilization, complicating efforts to achieve Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in the region. Addressing these challenges requires a multidimensional approach that respects cultural contexts, enhances security, and builds trust in healthcare institutions to improve service use and health outcomes.

Beyond the direct impact on medical facilities, armed conflict has severely weakened disease surveillance systems. Effective outbreak detection and reporting depend on robust healthcare systems, reliable communication networks, and trained personnel—elements that are often disrupted in conflict zones. This breakdown leads to underreporting and delayed responses to emerging health threats. Compromised surveillance increases the risk that zoonotic disease outbreaks go unnoticed until they become critical, heightening the chance of spillover from animals to humans. In environments where humans, animals, and pathogens interact closely, the disruption of surveillance systems significantly raises the likelihood of zoonotic transmission (Kavulikirwa, 2024).

The ongoing conflict in North Kivu is severely disrupting agricultural activities and limiting farmers' access to their fields (FAO, 2024). This disruption threatens to worsen the already critical food insecurity in the province by reducing agricultural productivity and increasing hunger. The M23 group's control over certain areas has isolated Goma from surrounding regions, further hampering food production and distribution (UNSC, 2024).

As of January 2024, approximately 2.63 million people in North Kivu faced acute food insecurity, including around 48,000 children under five suffering from severe acute malnutrition (OCHA, 2024a). Limited market access and livelihood opportunities are expected to deepen the food crisis. According to IPC estimates from September 2023, over 2.7 million people (31% of the province's population) were projected to experience Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse levels of food insecurity between January and June 2024. This includes nearly 170,000 people in Goma, representing 20% of its population (IPC, 2023).

Food prices in DRC markets remain unusually high and continue to rise. By April 2024, staple foods like beans were 5% more expensive than the previous year and 31% above the five-year average. Mixed bean prices rose 16.9% compared to 2023 and were 46.21% above

the five-year average, while cassava prices increased 18.04% from 2023 levels and stood 69% above the five-year average (FEWS NET, 2024).

Persistent armed conflict, coupled with soaring food prices and ongoing epidemics, continues to severely impact the DRC population. Approximately 25.6 million people are currently experiencing acute food insecurity at Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse levels. From July to December 2024, around 3.1 million people (3% of the population) are expected to face Emergency (IPC Phase 4) conditions, marked by severe food shortages and alarming rates of acute malnutrition. An additional 22.4 million people (19%) are projected to be in Crisis (IPC Phase 3), reflecting widespread food insecurity.

While the crisis affects the entire country, the most vulnerable include displaced persons and returnees—especially in North Kivu, Ituri, South Kivu, Tanganyika, and Mandombe provinces—as well as those affected by natural disasters and unemployment. Forecasts for January to June 2025 indicate minimal improvement, with an estimated 25.5 million people (22% of the population) likely to remain in IPC Phase 3 or worse, including approximately 3.3 million in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) and 22.2 million in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, 2023).

Millions of children across Africa are being deprived of education due to the ongoing effects of armed conflict and insecurity. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, over 14,300 schools had closed across 24 African countries by June 2024 (Yusuf, 2024). The highest numbers of closures were reported in Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, and Niger.

In eastern DRC, the continuing conflicts have severely disrupted education, particularly in the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri. Between January 2022 and March 2023, approximately 750,000 students were unable to continue their education, with over 2,100 schools closing due to security concerns. The situation is especially dire for about 240,000 displaced children living in overcrowded camps near Goma, forced to flee their homes due to violence by armed groups.

UNICEF Representative Grant Leaity highlighted that the escalating conflict is forcing children to sacrifice their education, with many now living in harsh conditions in camps instead of learning in classrooms. Most displaced children lack access to education, as only a small number can attend UNICEF's Child Friendly Spaces or Temporary Learning Centers. The shortage of educational facilities also limits the ability of displaced students to take their June final exams and earn their qualifications.

Data from UNICEF's education coordination team, working with government authorities and NGOs in North Kivu and Ituri, show that armed groups have attacked or occupied 119 schools. Additionally, around 1,700 schools have suspended operations due to ongoing security threats, as many are located in territories controlled by armed groups. About 300 schools have been repurposed as emergency shelters for displaced people, rendering them unable to function as educational institutions. Recent UN statistics report that the conflict

in eastern DRC has displaced over 5.3 million people, including more than 800,000 from North Kivu since the M23 crisis began in March 2022 (UNICEF, 2023).

In April 2023, 1.34 million people returned to North Kivu, while 2.75 million remained displaced, according to the Population Movement Commissions (CMP). As of May 28, the ongoing conflict between the M23 rebel group and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) has caused the displacement of 1.77 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and over 682,000 returnees (International Organization for Migration, 2024; OCHA, 2024b). Among those displaced, 44% live in camps and shelters, while 56% reside within host communities. All face urgent needs for food, water, and medical care, enduring unstable and precarious living conditions (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2024; International Organization for Migration, 2024).

Years of violent clashes in Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu have forced multiple forced relocations (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2024). After a month of fighting that drove many to seek refuge in nearby towns, some people have begun returning to villages in Masisi Territory and the city of Sake in southern Masisi. However, the growing presence of rebels in Sake and nearby Bweremana has caused concern among returnees. The ongoing insecurity, damage to village infrastructure, loss of livelihoods, and limited humanitarian assistance continue to fuel urgent humanitarian needs (Radio Okapi, 2024).

In early 2024, a resurgence of violence caused significant loss of life and displaced more than 738,000 people from January to March. The security situation deteriorated sharply, with North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri provinces hardest hit. Intense fighting among armed groups forced thousands to flee, often to or from areas with limited humanitarian access. Non-state armed groups also targeted IDP sites, creating serious protection challenges. In Ituri, intercommunal clashes resulted in numerous deaths and widespread human rights abuses. By mid-2024, over 940,000 people had been displaced, many of them multiple times. The already critical humanitarian crisis worsened, as IDPs and refugees across the DRC faced dire conditions, including inadequate shelter, poor sanitation, and limited means to support themselves (Redae, 2023).

Conclusion

The ongoing conflict between the M23 rebel group and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) military reflects deep-rooted political, economic, and ethnic tensions that have troubled the region for decades. Using Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict Theory, this analysis shows how unmet human needs, weak governance, international interference, and communal divisions have driven one of the deadliest and most prolonged conflicts in modern history. The humanitarian crisis in eastern DRC—characterized by mass displacement, widespread violence, and systemic instability—highlights the urgent need for comprehensive, sustainable solutions.

Addressing this crisis requires a multidimensional approach. The Congolese government must undertake inclusive governance reforms to ensure equal political representation and economic opportunities for marginalized groups, especially Congolese Tutsis, whose grievances are often exploited by armed groups like M23. Regional actors, including Rwanda and Uganda, must be held accountable for their roles in sustaining instability, with international oversight mechanisms enforcing compliance with peace agreements. Furthermore, the exploitation of the DRC's abundant natural resources must be curtailed through stricter regulations and international cooperation to prevent illicit trade from funding armed groups.

The international community—including the United Nations, African Union, and regional organizations—must move beyond reactive military interventions toward proactive conflict resolution strategies. Diplomatic efforts should focus on fostering dialogue, investing economically in local communities, and demilitarizing armed groups through effective disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. Additionally, humanitarian aid needs to be significantly increased to meet the urgent needs of displaced populations, ensuring their access to food, healthcare, and protection services.

If left unaddressed, the crisis in eastern DRC risks further destabilizing the Great Lakes region, heightening tensions among neighboring countries, and perpetuating cycles of violence that have already claimed millions of lives. Breaking this cycle requires strong political will, regional cooperation, and sustained international engagement. Without decisive action, the DRC will remain a battleground for competing interests, leaving millions of innocent civilians trapped in a relentless humanitarian disaster. The time for meaningful intervention is now—before the conflict spirals further out of control.

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