

## AFRICA

# Eastern DRC: The Rise of the M23 and the Implications for the Region

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On May 3, an [attack on an internally displaced persons \(IDPs\) camp](#) in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) left 18 civilians dead and more than 30 others injured. The camps were near Goma, the capital of North Kivu province. According to witnesses [quoted by Le Monde](#), government forces positioned near the camp had been bombarding the rebels on hills nearby and the [M23 \(March 23 Movement\)](#) retaliated through indiscriminate bombing.

The M23 is a mostly Tutsi armed group and is one among over 200 armed rebel groups in the Eastern DRC. [According to evidence](#) referenced to by the United Nations, the M23 enjoys Rwandan support in the forms of weapons and recruits, as well as military backing by Rwandan troops, thousands of whom have been deployed to North Kivu over the past six months.

Following the attack, the [US State Department blamed](#) the Rwanda Defense Forces (RDF) and the M23. For its part, [Rwanda denied the accusations](#), blaming instead the [Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda \(FDLR\)](#) and [Wazalendo](#). The former is a Hutu group founded by Hutu officials who fled Rwanda after the 1994 genocide, while the latter are informal militias who have partnered with the Congolese military (FARDC).

## The context in which the attack took place

After eight years of dormancy, the M23 [took up arms again](#) in late 2021. Since then, the group has increased dramatically its territorial expansion – an unsurprising development considering that as early as June 2022 the top UN official for the DRC [said that](#) the group “possesses firepower and equipment, which is increasingly sophisticated, specifically in terms of long-range fire capacities — mortars, machine guns, as well as precision fire against aircraft.”

Over the past few months, the fighting has moved worryingly closer to the city of Goma and the rebels have taken control of several surrounding towns and villages. This has prompted thousands of people to seek refuge in the city. Last March, for instance, the M23 rebels extended their control in the Rutshuru and Masisi areas and conquered the town of Nyanzale, forcing [more than 100,000 people to flee](#). Prior to that, in February, intensifying fighting between the rebels and the Congolese army around the town of Sake had pushed around [135,000 people to seek refuge](#) in Goma.

In Goma – which the M23 rebels [had occupied](#) for ten days back in 2012 before being forced to leave it amid international pressure and military defeat at the hands of the Congolese army and a multinational force – people are afraid that the group will bring the city under its control once more.

As the M23 makes its comeback, the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) is [finalizing its plans to leave](#) by the end of the year. The departure plan was drawn following a formal [request by the government](#), which accused MONUSCO of being [widely unpopular](#) and of having failed to protect civilians against the threat posed by armed groups.

### **The regional dimension of the Eastern DRC conflict**

When Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi first came to power in 2019, relations between the DRC and Rwanda seemed set for an improvement. Tshisekedi and Rwandan President Paul Kagame paid reciprocal visits, [the DRC entered the East African Community \(EAC\)](#) with the support of Rwanda, and an agreement between Kinshasa and Kigali was signed over Rwandan processing of Congolese gold ore.

However, all that knew a reversal in 2021. In November, Uganda and the DRC signed a military agreement that [allowed Kampala to deploy its troops](#) in the Eastern DRC against the [Allied Democratic Forces \(ADF\)](#), bringing the Ugandan army at the border with Rwanda. They also signed an economic agreement that foresaw [the construction of a road](#) running through Rutshuru territory. The new road, if built, would negatively affect trade transit on the Rwandan side of the border and diminish the related tax revenues.

Moreover, as it those concerns were not enough, Kigali felt threatened by the alliance between the FDLR and the Congolese army, fearing that their cooperation aimed to create an insurgency in Rwanda and overthrow the government. In early 2022, President Kagame, referring to the FDLR-DRC cooperation, [said that Rwanda](#) does not need anyone's permission to send troops across the border to defend itself – certainly not a veiled threat.

It was in that context of regional tensions between the Great Lakes' countries that the M23 knew its resurgence, which has been intensifying since.

On this background, the risk of a regional war is extremely high and dramatically real. This is evident in the confrontations currently ongoing in Goma, where the Congolese armed forces and the multi-national [Southern African Development Community \(SADC\)](#) force are actively fighting side by side against the Rwanda-backed M23 rebels.

The SADC includes South African, Malawian, and Tanzanian troops and was deployed in February 2024 with an offensive mandate targeted against the M23. Its deployment followed Tshisekedi's decision [not to renew the mandate](#) of the East African Community regional force, which Kinshasa resented for failing to assume a more assertive posture.

### **The conflict in the Eastern DRC from a global perspective**

Since the early 2000, China has been progressively expanding its presence in the DRC, as well as in [many other African countries](#). This has been especially the case in the mining sector.

In the DRC, China is currently dominating [almost 70%](#) of the country's mines. Last January, Chinese construction companies [announced that they will invest](#) up to \$7 billion in infrastructure projects as part of an agreement over their copper and cobalt joint venture in the DRC, thus confirming China's determination to grow its footprint across the DRC's mining sector.

China's expansion in the African – and Congolese – mining sector has raised alarm in the [European Union and the United States](#). Washington and Brussels, in fact, are worried that Chinese investments in the DRC's mining sector will allow Beijing to increasingly [drive the global green energy transition](#), which depends on minerals (such as cobalt) of which

the DRC is abundant.

A geopolitical competition has thus emerged between the US and the EU on the one side and China on the other over the supply chain of copper, cobalt, and other critical raw materials. On the background of this competition, in December 2022 the US signed a joint Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the DRC and Zambia. In October 2023, [the EU followed suit](#) and signed its own MoU with the DRC (and a separate one with Zambia).

Beyond the mining sector, China seems also to be involved in the DRC's internal conflicts. The Congolese government, in fact, is fighting M23 rebels with the [help of Chinese drones](#) and weaponry, and [Uganda has purchased](#) Chinese arms to carry out military operations within DRC's borders. For China, in fact, defending the mining areas located in the Eastern DRC is key to safeguarding its economic interests.

Conversely, the US is reluctant to engage in arms sales to the DRC due to the constraints imposed by the 1987 Missile Technology Control Regime. However, the Chinese transfer of drones to Kinshasa to fight the M23 does not seem to have attracted condemnation from Western countries, suggesting [greater convergence](#) than divergence on this specific matter.

## **Conclusion**

As of now, the balance of power on the ground between the M23 and the Congolese army has evolved in the former's favour and a military victory for Kinshasa does not seem realistic.

Nevertheless, Tshisekedi is not open to engage in negotiations. In fact, he does not want to enter talks with the M23 as long as the group is in control of so many territories in North Kivu. Understandably, no one wants to negotiate from a position of relative weakness, and so does not want Tshisekedi. He is betting that with the SADC's support it will be possible to ultimately push back the M23.

However, looking at the rootedness and penetration of the M23 in Eastern DRC, as well as the group's military strength, this thinking can only lead to more suffering, displacement, and casualties for the people of North Kivu.

To spare the Eastern DRC from a brutal confrontation, regional blocs such as the EAC, the SADC, and the African Union (AU) should invest their diplomatic efforts to have the M23 cease its pressure on Goma, demand a cease-fire from the warring parties, and promote a political solution to the conflict through an inclusive dialogue. International actors such as the United States, the European Union, and China could (and should) also use their leverage on Rwanda to encourage a de-escalation.

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