The M23 Offensive: Elusive Peace in the Great Lakes

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Principal Findings

What's new? Fighting is spreading in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Despite signing peace deals in Washington and Doha, the Congolese army, M23 rebels and Rwandan troops continue to trade fire, with the insurgents and invading soldiers taking more territory as 2025 draws to a close.

Why does it matter? The fighting, under way since the M23 re-emerged in 2021, has forced millions from their homes and killed tens of thousands of civilians. It has also strained relations among Great Lakes neighbours, with Rwanda and Burundi at loggerheads since the latter piled in to support the weak Congolese army.

What should be done? Diplomats with influence over the warring parties should push urgently for a sustained ceasefire and engage in back-channel talks to head off an even worse crisis. In the longer run, Great Lakes countries must respect the region's borders and stop using armed groups to settle their quarrels.

Executive Summary

In January, the M23 insurgency and Rwandan troops took over the city of Goma in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), home to one of the world's biggest UN operations and host to a multitude of fighters backing the Congolese government. They proceeded to advance in the North and South Kivu provinces, cranking up tensions across the Great Lakes region. Diplomatic efforts to restore peace quickened in response. The Rwandan and Congolese governments initialled an accord in Washington in June and then signed a full agreement at a presidential summit in December, in which they restated their pledge to end the fighting. Parallel talks between the Congolese government and M23 under Qatari mediation also gave birth to a framework deal in November. But as both sides recruit and re-arm, and violence spreads, an alarming disconnect has emerged between peace talks and events on the ground. Western, Gulf and African diplomats need to redouble efforts to achieve a ceasefire, head off regional escalation and persuade Kinshasa and Kigali to pull back their allied militias.

The M23 – named after an agreement signed between a previous insurgency and Kinshasa on 23 March 2009 – is the latest avatar of foreign-backed Tutsi armed groups which, while purporting to support their downtrodden Tutsi brethren, have wreaked havoc throughout the eastern DRC for three decades. The M23 and its political wing, the Congo River Alliance (or AFC, by the French acronym), control the largest area a rebel group has held since the civil and regional wars of the 1990s and early 2000s, with disastrous consequences for humanitarian relief efforts, which are now near the breaking point. The rebellion's ambitions seem diverse. While its military wing has focused on capturing territory under the banner of protecting Tutsis, its political leaders say they aim to topple the government in Kinshasa. The objectives of their sponsors in Rwanda are even less transparent. Even so, Kigali and its Congolese proxies seem determined to take full advantage of their military strength and are bedding down for a long-term occupation.

The insurgency has expanded at a delicate time in Congolese politics. Relations between the government, on one side, and opposition, civil society and influential church bodies are tense following President Félix Tshisekedi's 2024 announcement of plans to change the constitution, which observers fear could enable him to seek a third term in office. The prospect of a controversial amendment is eating away at chances of achieving any sort of cross-party agreement as to how to deal with the M23. All these problems have been exacerbated by the conflict in the east, as a number of opposition politicians align with

some of the AFC's demands, while stopping short of outright support. The government has reacted by accusing them of sedition. A further blow to hopes of consensus on handling the crisis came in September, when a military court sentenced former President Joseph Kabila to death in absentia for insurrection, accusing him of backing the M23.

Mediators' efforts to resolve the conflict have been complicated by the imbalance of power between a shambolic Congolese army and ill-coordinated allies, on one side, and a well-equipped insurgency and robust Rwandan army, on the other. Under the mandate of the African Union (AU), Angola attempted to bridge the gap between Kigali and Kinshasa, but its diplomatic push faltered at the end of 2024 and Luanda withdrew from mediating the following March.

Rwanda and the DRC have held fast to their respective positions. Kigali has argued that the violence in the DRC was Congolese rather than international in origin, saying it impinged on Rwanda only in so far as it threatened the country's security. It has consistently denied any active role in supporting the M23 despite growing evidence to the contrary. It has also stressed in public and in negotiations Kinshasa's collaboration with a remnant of the Rwandan Hutu militia responsible for the 1994 genocide, the Rwandan Democratic Liberation Front (FDLR, by the French acronym), in an attempt to boost its argument that its deployment is defensive. But Rwanda's deployment of thousands of troops in the DRC seems to have the wider aim of conquering territory beyond areas under FDLR influence. For its part, the Congolese government has refused to fully cut ties to this militia and the Wazalendo, a loose alliance of self-defence groups responsible for numerous abuses.

Since the fall of Goma, fresh talks have got under way, but they face similar problems. Washington brokered a deal in June under which Congolese and Rwandan ministers agreed to cooperate, and it hosted the Rwandan and Congolese presidents on 4 December for a signing ceremony. Qatar, crucially, engineered a heads-of-state summit between the Congolese and Rwandan leaders in March that contributed to largely halting an M23/Rwanda offensive deeper into Congolese territory outside the Kivus. Doha is now hosting talks between the Congolese government and the AFC/M23 rebels. Kinshasa had previously refused to engage with the rebels, arguing that the group was a Rwandan puppet. The two parties signed a ceasefire in October, and a framework agreement in November, though fighting continues on the ground. In March, as Angola bowed out, the AU designated President Faure Gnassingbé of Togo as mediator alongside a team of five senior facilitators, tasking them with shouldering more of the diplomatic burden if and when Kinshasa and the rebels comply with a permanent ceasefire, which remains an important objective of the Doha framework agreement.

A priority for diplomats in Washington, Doha and African capitals is to work out a path for future mediation. If Washington relinquishes the lead, African powers may need to take up the baton on the Rwanda-DRC track. For that to happen, their diplomats need to sustain pressure on the parties and start to flesh out terms that will satisfy Rwanda while respecting the DRC's territorial integrity. Washington and Doha need to stay engaged to insist that the belligerents adhere to the terms of the deal and declarations they have overseen, especially as concerns an immediate, unconditional ceasefire.

The road to a settlement will not be simple or direct. First, all parties to the conflict should work toward a permanent ceasefire. Heading off further escalation, both in the DRC and the region, is equally important. Relations between Rwanda and Burundi have soured due to Burundi's continued support for Congolese troops, and high-level shuttle diplomacy is needed to work out a modus vivendi between the two rivals. Diplomats need to pressure Kigali and the M23 to allow full humanitarian access to the eastern DRC. Finally, though the conflict may seem intractable, Western, Qatari and African diplomats and mediators should not lose sight of the overarching goal of restoring the DRC's territorial integrity through the withdrawal of Rwandan forces, as called for in UN Security Resolution 2773 of February, and restarting regional cooperation focused on limiting the suffering inflicted by armed groups.

Rwandan and M23 actions, and the clumsy Congolese government response, have exposed the fragility of Great Lakes regional politics and brought great harm to many. Restoring a semblance of peace, while keeping longer-term aims of regional cooperation and disarmament of armed groups in mind, will occupy diplomats for some time to come.

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The M23 Offensive: Elusive Peace in the Great Lakes

I. Introduction

After being dormant for years, the M23 rebellion re-emerged in 2021 to mount an offensive that has gradually allowed it to capture swathes of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), including cities, roads and mines. Led mainly by ethnic Tutsi fighters, the movement has put forward demands focused on the protection of Tutsi civilians and combatants. An earlier iteration of the rebellion briefly took over Goma, capital of North Kivu province, in 2012, demanding that the government fulfil a promise to integrate demobilised insurgents into the national army. Key figures in that movement – including military chief Sultani Makenga, who uses the title of general, and political leader Bertrand Bisimwa – serve as senior commanders today.[1]

As in 2012, the M23 gained ground largely due to Rwanda's support. For years, the DRC's neighbours, particularly Rwanda and Uganda, which seek to exert influence in the area, have used militias in the country's east as proxies. This time around, Rwanda bolstered the rebellion by supplying weaponry, technology, equipment and training, while stationing thousands of troops in the eastern DRC. Over the course of four years, this assistance enabled the rebellion to display unexpected military prowess, defeating the poorly equipped and ill-disciplined Congolese army and its allies at almost every turn. In 2023, the M23 added a political wing, the Congo River Alliance (AFC in French), which calls for regime change in Kinshasa.[2] In the course of 2025, the group has established a parallel administration in the areas it controls in North and South Kivu, running local and provincial councils and a reconstituted police force. All evidence suggests that the insurgents intend to stay.

[1] Makenga is from the Mugogwe sub-group of the Tutsi ethnic group. He grew up in Rutshuru, near the border with Uganda and Rwanda. The 50-year-old military commander earned his stripes in the Rwandan army in the 1990s and took part in all the insurrections that have roiled the eastern DRC in the past three decades. Bisimwa, born in Bukavu in 1972, has led the M23's political wing since 2013. With the AFC's advent in 2023, Bisimwa took the role of deputy coordinator, together with Freddy Kaniki, leader of the armed group of the Banyamulenge Twirwaneho community, which is active mainly in southern South Kivu.

[2] This report uses the term M23 to refer to the movement as it existed before December 2023. When discussing the group as it has been composed thereafter, it uses AFC/M23, while retaining the M23 nomenclature when referring to the military wing.

Diplomatic efforts have failed to achieve a lasting ceasefire. Rwanda has long denied backing the M23, claiming its troop deployment in the DRC is one of the "defensive measures" it has taken against anti-Kigali rebels. For his part, President Félix Tshisekedi refused to talk to the M23, arguing that his country has been invaded by Rwanda. Under the aegis of the African Union (AU), mediation efforts by Angolan President João Lourenço from 2022 were thwarted by the bad faith of the conflict parties, who were determined to keep on fighting.[3] In December 2024, Angola's efforts ground to a halt when Rwanda's President Paul Kagame failed to attend a meeting in Luanda that was supposed to seal a peace agreement.

The Congolese government remained steadfast in its opposition to dialogue with the M23 until early 2025, when the M23 captured the cities of Goma and Bukavu. Confronted with the loss of these cities, and with the Congolese army on the back foot, Tshisekedi softened his stance and agreed to hold talks under Qatari facilitation. In a separate diplomatic track, on 27 June the Rwandan and Congolese foreign ministers initialled a peace agreement in Washington, following up with a presidential summit on 4 December where the accord was signed by the heads of state. But the Washington process reserved the question of what to do about the M23 rebellion for the Doha talks. These negotiations in turn produced a framework agreement on 14 November, but one that left most of the main issues for later discussion as fighting resumed on the ground.

This report analyses the M23's resurgence and its expansion in the eastern DRC, as well as the evolution of regional and international diplomacy toward the conflict. It highlights the importance of achieving a workable ceasefire and the need for longer-term diplomacy to head off further conflagration. It is based on around one hundred interviews with Rwandan and Congolese officials, AFC/M23 representatives, diplomats, researchers, experts, eyewitnesses, humanitarian workers, civil society representatives and survivors of the fighting, including traditional chiefs and members of women's organisations. Interviews were conducted in Goma, Kinshasa and Bukavu, as well as in various regional and Western capitals and by telephone. Around one quarter of interviewees were women, mainly reflecting the gender balance among Congolese administrators and officials working on the file in African capitals.

[3] A senior UN official working on the Great Lakes for many years attributed the failure to bad faith among all the parties over two decades of negotiations. Crisis Group interview, October 2025.

II. Who are the M23 Rebels?

A. *The M23: The Latest Incarnation of Tutsi Rebel Movements*

The Tutsi community has been at the centre of rebellions in the DRC since the 1990s. Congolese Tutsi live in territories in North Kivu and South Kivu near Rwanda and speak Kinyarwanda. The Congolese authorities have often tolerated hate speech against them and at times openly questioned or even revoked their Congolese nationality.[4] The 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the subsequent influx of defeated soldiers and Hutu militiamen into Rwandophone areas of the Kivus worsened the plight of Congolese Tutsis, many of whom fled to Rwanda. Some of those who stayed in the DRC formed armed groups that, with Ugandan and Rwandan backing, fought in the civil and regional wars of the 1990s and early 2000s.

As a result, a core group of aggrieved, battle-hardened figures has long circulated in the Great Lakes region, seeking, and often receiving, sponsorship from the DRC's neighbours.[5] Rwanda in particular has often used proxies to exert influence in the DRC, whose ample mineral resources underpin its own economy. In addition, given the large-scale slaughter of Tutsis in the genocide, Rwanda views the protection of Congolese Tutsis, who are a minority in North Kivu, as its moral duty. It has also made clear that it seeks to eventually repatriate around 80,000 Congolese Tutsi refugees on its territory.[6]

The eastern DRC has thus seen a succession of armed movements that were ostensibly fighting on behalf of the Tutsi community, with their members also eyeing positions in the army and administration or angling for their own enrichment. Tutsi fighters occasionally joined the Congolese army as part of peace deals, but more often mounted new insurgencies to put pressure on the government. Those in power in Kinshasa have never fully addressed demands for amnesties, army billets or broader issues such as protecting the Tutsis or allowing the wholesale return of Tutsi refugees from camps in Rwanda and

[4] "How DR Congo's Tutsis become foreigners in their own country", BBC, 22 February 2025.
[5] On the M23's background, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°165, *Congo: No Stability in Kivu despite a Rapprochement with Rwanda*, 16 November 2010. See also Jason Stearns, *The War That Does Not Say Its Name* (Princeton, 2022); "La résurgence du M23: rivalités régionales, politique des donateurs et blocage du processus de paix", Ebuteli, August 2024; and "Le M23 'Version 2' : Enjeux, motivations, perceptions et impacts locaux", IPIS, April 2024. This section also draws on numerous interviews with diplomats, Congolese and Rwandan officials, former combatants and insurgent commanders, civil society observers and security experts, conducted over many years in Goma, Kigali, Kinshasa, Nairobi, Kampala and Western cities.
[6] "Paul Kagame : 'Personne ne m'intimidera avec des menaces de sanctions'", *Jeune Afrique*, 12 February 2025.

Uganda.[7] At the same time, dozens of other militias have emerged in the eastern DRC, often to battle Tutsi armed groups they viewed as invading forces.

In 1999, the UN deployed a peacekeeping mission, MONUSCO, with a mandate to stem the violence in the eastern DRC and support the government. Though troop numbers have varied over the years, at its peak the mission had some 20,000 blue helmets, some of whom engaged in combat with rebel groups including the M23. As the main protagonists signed peace agreements in the early 2000s, the mission gradually drew down and became more of a holding force to protect civilians. In recent years, it has been subject to increasing criticism from Congolese governments as well as locals as the unrest spread again, spearheaded by the M23's return.

The rebel group's roots can be found in a militia led by Congolese warlord Laurent Nkunda, who formed the National Council for the Defense of the People (CNDP in French) in 2006. When the Congolese government of then-President Joseph Kabila began pushing for CNDP fighters to be integrated into the national army as part of stabilisation plans, Nkunda baulked at the prospect of having to break up his rebellion, fearing that his military and political power might shrink. Talks between Rwanda, the CNDP's sponsor, and the DRC culminated in an agreement to tackle jointly rebel groups in the east, in particular the Hutu-led Rwandan Democratic Liberation Front (FDLR, by the French acronym) insurgency. Following that deal in January 2009, Rwandan authorities arrested Nkunda, leaving his military chief of staff Bosco Ntaganda to take over the CNDP's leadership.

On 23 March 2009, the CNDP reached an agreement with the Congolese government to transform into a political party and allow the army to absorb its fighters. The agreement also covered the return from exile, amnesty and reintegration into Congolese institutions of the movement's leaders. The CNDP participated in elections in 2011, winning one parliamentary seat and several provincial assembly seats. But integration of rebel fighters into the army lagged, for two main reasons. First, Congolese officials and international partners, including the UN, sought to avoid further disrupting the army's chains of command. Secondly, Kabila's government had little appetite to follow through on the 2009 agreement, especially after the CNDP's weak

[7] Crisis Group interviews, senior M23 officials, August 2022, September 2025. For the positions taken by M23 leaders since 2021, see "Mama Urwagasbao TV: Maj. Gen Sultan MAKENGA ATUGANIRIJE BYINSHI BITUMA M23 IKOMEZA KURWANA NDETSE NA TUMWE MUDUCE BAFITE", video, YouTube, 24 May 2024, wherein Makenga talks about protecting Congolese Tutsis from "recurrent massacres"; and tweet by IGIHE, @IGIHE, 7:54pm, 29 November 2022. Senior Rwandan officials have also portrayed the M23 as an organisation aiming to protect Tutsis. See "TV 5 Monde : Entretien avec Olivier Nduhungirehe", video, YouTube, 1 November 2025.

electoral performance. As a result, it never issued the promised amnesties.

Three years later, under strain from internal leadership disputes, former CNDP units formed the M23 insurgency, naming the group after the 23 March 2009 accord. The rebels argued that the government had violated the terms of the agreement and put forward a range of demands, including full integration into the national army on their own terms and with their own ranks, a halt to alleged discrimination against former rebels and the safe return of Congolese Tutsis from refugee camps in Rwanda and Uganda. Unable to draw sizeable support among Congolese Tutsis, but counting on Rwanda's backing, the M23 seized Goma in December 2012. International pressure on Rwanda, coupled with pushback from the Force Intervention Brigade, a unit with an offensive mandate within the UN peacekeeping mission (and composed of troops from Malawi, South Africa and Tanzania), compelled the rebellion to retreat. A majority of M23 combatants fled to Uganda, while others withdrew to Rwanda with the hope of eventually returning to the DRC.

After taking office in January 2019, President Tshisekedi tried to tackle the myriad armed groups in the eastern DRC by mending relations with his neighbours. He had some success at first, mainly by bringing Rwanda's Kagame and Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni together under a quadripartite framework facilitated by Angola. Deep-rooted mistrust between Rwanda and Uganda stalled the regional process, however, prompting Tshisekedi to pursue bilateral diplomacy instead. Tshisekedi acceded to Kagame's call for Rwandan troops to be allowed to fight the FDLR on Congolese soil. He also agreed to consider the M23's demands, greenlighting talks with the group's leaders. But the dialogue went nowhere, as the rebels insisted on full amnesty for ex-combatants or integration into the army, while the Congolese government insisted that those guilty of serious crimes face justice. Still, in late 2019, Tshisekedi instructed military prosecutors to rescind arrest warrants for senior M23 figures.[8]

Over time, Tshisekedi's bilateral efforts to stabilise the east got tangled in the web of power and business interests that has kept the Great Lakes in turmoil for decades. He struck deals with the Ugandan government that gave Rwanda the impression of being excluded from negotiations over future regional economic and security relations. In November 2021, Kinshasa allowed Kampala to deploy as many as 4,000 soldiers on Congolese soil to fight the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamic State affiliate that Museveni held responsible for a spate of bombings in Uganda's capital. Uganda used this opportunity

[8] Crisis Group interview, senior M23 official, August 2022. "DRC: How Tshisekedi once tried to negotiate M23 surrender with a million dollars", *Africa Intelligence*, 17 November 2022.

to forge ahead with mining projects and road construction in the tri-border area, threatening Rwanda's access to mineral resources in the DRC. A few months later, presumably with Tshisekedi's blessing, hundreds of Burundian troops crossed into South Kivu province to hunt down insurgents from RED-Tabara, a rebel group that opposes the regime in Bujumbura and has backing from Rwanda.

Tshisekedi was trying to curb the violence in the east, but the Ugandan and Burundian deployments visibly angered Kagame. In a blistering speech to parliament in early February 2022, Kagame threatened to send troops across the border to contain what he said was a grave threat emanating from the Kivus, citing alleged connections between the ADF and FDLR.[9]

B. *The M23's Re-emergence*

In late 2021, M23 fighters filtered back into the DRC to set up a base in the tri-border area with Rwanda and Uganda known as Rutshuru territory. Most of the commanders, including the top one, Makenga, came from the M23 cohort that had taken refuge in Uganda when the rebellion disintegrated in 2013.[10] In early 2022, and under Makenga, the M23 began capturing strategic areas, attacking villages near the Rwandan and Ugandan frontiers before marching into the town of Bunagana, which straddles the Congolese-Ugandan border. The capture of Bunagana in June 2022 enabled the M23 to strengthen its rear bases and supply routes, with Ugandan border officials reportedly looking the other way. After M23 rebels captured two more towns in October, the Congolese government, angered by what it said were Rwandan troops arriving *en masse* on Congolese territory, expelled the Rwandan ambassador in Kinshasa, heightening diplomatic tensions.

Despite Kigali's denials that it was supporting the M23, it soon became clear that the rebels were benefiting from sophisticated planning, as well as arms, recruitment and training, provided by Rwanda.[11] In late

[9] Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°181, *Easing the Turmoil in the Eastern DR Congo and Great Lakes*, 25 May 2022. Kagame's speech is online at "Ijambo rya Perezida Kagame mu muhango wo kwakira indahiro z'abayobozi bashya", video, YouTube, 8 February 2022.

[10] Makenga has operational command alongside Bernard Byamungu, deputy commander for intelligence and operations. Baudouin Ngaruye is operations commander for northern North Kivu province, which includes Rutshuru and Lubero territories. The western area – including Masisi and Walikale – falls under Justin Gacheri Musaanga (brother of Colonel Bahati Musanga Erasto, the M23's appointed governor of North Kivu).

[11] A UN expert panel estimated the rebellion at around 3,000 combatants in 2024. "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", UN Group of Experts, June 2024. Recruitment often occurred in Rwanda, including in Congolese refugee camps. Some of those recruited in the DRC received training in Rwanda from Rwandan soldiers. Crisis Group telephone interviews, residents

2023, the rebels encountered fierce resistance from Congolese soldiers aided by local militias known collectively as the Wazalendo, which temporarily recaptured the town of Kitshanga and slowed the M23's offensive. According to UN experts, thousands of Rwandan troops poured into the eastern DRC throughout this period, handing the M23 weaponry and uniforms. Today, overwhelming evidence from UN investigations, civil society groups, eyewitness accounts and satellite imagery confirms that the Rwandan military has been directly involved with the M23 since at least 2022.[12]

Bolstered by military gains, the M23 then declared its political ambitions. In December 2023, the former chief of the Congolese electoral commission, Corneille Nangaa, announced that the M23 was creating a political wing, the AFC. In a press conference in Kenya, Nangaa said the AFC sought to overthrow the government as a means of addressing endemic insecurity and corruption.[13] Most observers perceived the AFC's establishment as an attempt to broaden the rebellion's support base, given that Nangaa is from Haut-Uélé province in the north east and is not Tutsi. The AFC's creation also appeared to indicate that regional powers were growing tired of Tshisekedi's refusal to negotiate with the M23. They hoped that a new political platform could press him to reconsider his stance.[14]

By early 2024, the M23 began encircling the strategic town of Sake, cutting off key roads and threatening supply lines to Goma, situated some 30km to the east. Aided by Rwandan drones, mortars and other heavy weaponry, rebel fighters captured important terrain, prompting tens of thousands to flee to Goma. The standoff around Sake lasted for months, pitting Rwandan soldiers and the M23, on one hand, against the Congolese military and allied forces, on the other.

of Rwanda and North Kivu with direct knowledge of M23 recruitment, 2023; researcher with direct knowledge of recruitment in refugee camps in Rwanda, April 2024; regional security experts, Kigali, March 2024; and Kampala, September 2024. See also "UN Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo: Confidential Note", UN Security Council, July 2022; and "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", UN Group of Experts, June 2023.

[12] Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Goma, Brussels and Nairobi, June-July 2024 and May 2025; eyewitnesses, Goma, Brussels and Nairobi, June-July 2024 and May 2025. Crisis Group telephone interviews, security officials, June-July 2024 and May 2025; eyewitnesses to Rwandan incursions, June-July 2024 and May 2025. "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", June 2024, op. cit. "Tombés dans le silence : en République démocratique du Congo, les morts de la guerre inavouée de Paul Kagame", Forbidden Stories, March 2024.

[13] "RDC : Pour Corneille Nangaa, 'on doit refonder tout l'État congolais. Tout est corrompu jusqu'à la moëlle'", *La Libre Afrique*, 19 February 2025.

[14] Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and officials, Nairobi, Brussels, Kinshasa and Goma, 2023-2024.

Elsewhere, the rebels escalated their campaign by seizing valuable mining assets. For example, in April 2024, they captured the Rubaya mining site, where there is a major reserve of the coltan (columbite-tantalite) used to make smartphones and other electronic devices. This mineral had previously transited various routes, including through Rwanda via Congolese traders, before being shipped to Asia. By taking Rubaya and the roads and tracks that lead from the vast site to the Rwandan border, the M23 acquired full control of the trade, freezing out Congolese intermediaries.[15]

Following the breakdown of regional diplomacy in December 2024, the M23 and Rwandan army intensified their assault on Sake. As the Congolese army and its allies retreated in disarray, the attackers pressed their advantage. As the following January came to an end, fierce fighting engulfed the outskirts of Goma, involving up to 6,000 Rwandan troops and decisive Rwandan weaponry, especially armed drones and mortars. Thousands of civilians and soldiers died, and hundreds of thousands of people either fled the violence or were forcibly displaced by the M23 and Rwandan troops. Abuses against civilians, mainly displaced people, were widespread, especially sexual and gender-based violence.[16] On 27 January, the rebels marched into the city, where most of the MONUSCO peacekeepers have been stationed for decades, opening a new chapter in the region's turbulent history.[17] Within a month, the rebels captured Bukavu, with less fighting this time, consolidating their control of two strategic cities and Lake Kivu, which sits between them and Rwanda.

C. *The International Dimension: Mediation and Intervention*

Between 2022 and 2024, mediation efforts mandated by the AU struggled. Kigali and Kinshasa remained intransigent on key issues, engaged in hostile rhetoric and wilfully misinterpreted the commit-

[15] According to the president of the provincial chamber of mines, production at Rubaya alone accounts for 50 per cent of coltan output nationwide. "Mines : la ville de Rubaya, qui produit 50% du coltan en RDC, aux mains des M23", *Mine and Business*, May 2024. Crisis Group interviews, mining sector operator and experts in conflict and mining, Goma, June-July 2024. See "Masisi : les rebelles du M23 contrôlent la cité de Rubaya", *Radio Okapi*, 3 May 2024; "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", June 2024, op. cit.; "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", UN Group of Experts, July 2025. On problems with tracing minerals before the capture of Rubaya, see "The ITSCI Laundromat", Global Witness, May 2022.

[16] "Report of the OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission on the situation in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo", OHCHR, 5 September 2025.

[17] Crisis Group Statement, "Fall of DRC's Goma: Urgent Action Needed to Avert a Regional War", 28 January 2025. Estimates of the number of Rwandan troops in the eastern DRC are based on Crisis Group research. Crisis Group telephone interviews, security sources and diplomats, February and March 2025. See also "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", July 2025, op. cit., paras 36 and 45; Annex 8.

ments they had made. Meanwhile, Rwanda's backing for the M23 was unstinting.

1. Mediation efforts flounder

Conscious of the impact of spreading fighting on regional stability, the AU named Angola as mediator between Rwanda and the DRC in 2022. Angola has deep knowledge of the DRC: it shares a 2,500km border with the country and was militarily involved in the 1998-2003 civil war. Angolan President Lourenço and a small team of advisers expended considerable effort to extract concessions from the two sides, on one hand urging Kigali to withdraw its troops from Congolese territory and on the other asking Kinshasa to stop collaborating with non-state armed groups and to clamp down on anti-Tutsi hate speech. But while Lourenço had the clout needed to summon the two sides' leaders for individual talks, he was hard pressed to achieve consensus between them.

From the outset, Rwanda refused to admit that it was part of the fighting. Kigali argued that the crisis was an internal Congolese matter that affected Rwanda only in so far as the violence threatened its borders. For his part, Tshisekedi stuck to the view that the eastern DRC had been invaded by a hostile neighbour and made concessions only haltingly, all the while refusing to speak with the M23. His government repeatedly ordered the army to loosen its ties to the FDLR as a show of good faith. But it failed to enforce these directives when commanders disregarded them.

Still, during ministerial talks in Luanda in July 2024, the DRC and Rwanda agreed to a ceasefire that was to take effect on 4 August.[18] The parties also committed to "neutralising" the FDLR and to establishing a tripartite verification mechanism to monitor compliance with the ceasefire. Angola described the truce as indefinite. Both sides were violating the agreement within weeks, however, as clashes resumed in North Kivu, particularly in Rutshuru territory. In December, Kagame cancelled his plans to attend a meeting in Luanda with Tshisekedi. Frustrated with the two sides' obstinacy, Angola formally ended its mediation role in March 2025, weeks after taking over the rotating AU presidency.

Other regional initiatives have faced even greater struggles. In 2022, the East African Community (EAC) deployed a Kenya-led peacekeeping operation with the goals of ending armed group violence in the eastern DRC and supporting humanitarian relief efforts.[19] Despite

[18] Angola announced the ceasefire in an official statement. "SITUATION IN THE DRC", press release, Presidency of the Republic-Angola, 29 January 2025.
[19] Initial plans envisaged a force of between 6,000 and 12,000 troops, but the exact numbers on the ground were never reported.

gains on the latter front, the DRC decided not to renew the force's mandate after twelve months. East African diplomats later claimed that the government sometimes set contradictory aims for the mission.[20] For its part, the DRC perceived Kenya as sympathetic to Rwanda given that the force did not undertake targeted military action against the M23. The bloc also named former President Uhuru Kenyatta as its facilitator with the responsibility of pushing for a political settlement in talks with armed group representatives, dubbed the Nairobi process. These talks soon faltered, however, as Kinshasa objected to the M23's participation in the absence of a working ceasefire.

In late December 2024, the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) decided to enter the fray at Kinshasa's invitation. But it was only the following February, two months after the first SADC soldiers arrived in Goma, that South Africa's government announced it was deploying 2,900 troops "to assist in the fight against illegal armed groups in the eastern DRC".[21] Malawi and Tanzania were said to have committed about 2,000 troops as well, but little information was made public about the deployment as a whole. Coordination among this force and others in Goma, including the UN, was reportedly difficult and sometimes non-existent.[22] In any event, the force was ill-equipped and lacked air support, contributing to the death of fourteen South African soldiers when the M23 captured Goma. SADC officially confirmed the force's withdrawal from the eastern DRC in April.

2. Positions and motivations of the M23's backers

Since 2022, foreign diplomats and mediators working on the Great Lakes file have largely acknowledged that Rwanda backs the M23 and has stationed troops in the eastern DRC to bolster the rebellion. Yet they struggle to grasp Rwanda's underlying rationale, and views diverge as to whether its actions are the cause or the result of instability in the DRC's eastern provinces.[23] Generally speaking, discussion focuses not on whether the threats Rwanda evokes are real, but on whether they are serious enough to justify its 2021 decision to reactivate the M23 insurgency. These differences have prevented Western and African officials from exerting coordinated, consistent pressure on Rwanda to withdraw from Congolese territory.

All the while, Rwanda has reiterated that it does not support the M23 and that its military intervention is part of what it describes as

[20] Crisis Group interviews, Kenyan and other African diplomats, Nairobi and Kampala, 2024-2025.
[21] "South Africa contributes troops to SADC mission to the DRC", Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Republic of South Africa, 12 February 2024.
[22] Crisis Group interviews, UN officials and diplomats, Goma, June-July 2024.
[23] Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and other officials, Kinshasa, Nairobi, Brussels, Kampala, London and Paris, and by telephone, 2024-2025.

"defensive measures" to ward off armed groups in the eastern DRC, particularly the FDLR. Kigali is also worried about former government insiders who have tried to muster opposition to the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front from outside the country.[24] Furthermore, Rwandan officials claim that Kigali has a moral duty to protect Congolese Tutsis from ethnic persecution, at times even using the word "genocide" to describe the scale of the violence against their kinsmen.

But Kigali's assertion that it is acting in self-defence does not stand up to scrutiny when it comes to the FDLR.[25] As noted above, joint operations by the Congolese and Rwandan armies had progressively weakened the FDLR prior to the M23's re-emergence. Combined initiatives involving the UN as well as Congolese and Rwandan authorities also succeeded in peeling off FDLR members who then returned to Rwanda, indicating that attempts to divide the group were enjoying some success. These operations also resulted in the death of a senior FDLR commander, Sylvestre Mudacumura, in September 2019.

Likewise, Kigali's insistence that Congolese Tutsis are victims of persecution by their government does not fully explain its backing for the M23 and subsequent invasion of the eastern DRC. It is true that Tutsis are periodically subject to repression and harassment in the DRC, and ordinary people and politicians sometimes question their citizenship. Occasionally, this ethnic antipathy tips into hate speech.[26] That said, there were no signs of increased threats to Tutsis in 2021. Nor do Congolese Tutsis in general support the rebels who purport to

[24] Kigali has long acted outside Rwandan territory against opponents – not just former genocidaires, but also former regime insiders – some of whom have been assassinated, including in Kenya and South Africa. Kigali has suspected former regime insiders of trying to link up with anti-Kigali armed groups based in the DRC. It takes this kind of threat particularly seriously, given that it came to power itself through a regional insurrection in 1994. See "Rwanda's Extraterritorial Repression", Human Rights Watch, 10 October 2023; and Omar McDoom, "Securocratic state-building: The rationales, rebuttals and risks behind the extraordinary rise of Rwanda after the genocide", *African Affairs*, October 2022.

[25] Notably, the timing implicit in Kigali's argument does not match up, as the Congolese army began cooperating with the FDLR to push back the M23 in 2023, long after Rwanda had already deployed troops in the eastern DRC.

[26] For example, the Sovereign National Conference (1990-1992) excluded Tutsi and Hutu delegates (commonly referred to as Rwandophones and assumed to have come from Rwanda at some point), deeming their nationality "questionable". For more up-to-date details, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°312, *Elections in DR Congo: Reducing the Risk of Violence*, 30 October 2023. See also Jason Stearns and Archie Macintosh, "Rwanda-RD Congo. La guerre de récits", *Afrique XXI*, August 2024. Rwanda pushes its view of Congolese culpability in the supposed genocide against the Tutsis in the DRC through orchestrated action on social media. See Morgan Wack, Darren Linvill and Patrick Warren, "Old Despots, New Tricks: An AI-Empowered Pro-Kagame/RPF Coordinated Influence Network on X", Clemson University, Media Forensics Hub, June 2024.

be defending them: many argue that Tutsi insurrections and Rwandan invasions make their position in the DRC more, not less, vulnerable.[27]

Rwanda's perception that it is hemmed in by hostile or rival forces appears to be a more convincing explanation for its decision to reactivate the M23 at the same time that Uganda was expanding its military and economic influence in the eastern DRC.[28] Rwanda's determination to retain a sphere of influence in North Kivu, with all the benefits it brings, goes back decades. Senior Rwandan officials and army officers were involved in earlier conflicts that saw militants, militiamen and soldiers alike strip resources such as wood and minerals from the DRC's eastern provinces. Heightened competition with Uganda was thus likely the spark that set off Rwanda's actions in 2021.[29] Though Rwanda has also profited from Congolese minerals in peacetime, the M23's battlefield victories have helped channel considerably more gold and coltan into Rwanda for processing and export.[30] A diplomat summed it up by saying Kigali's motivations are principally "wanting access to North Kivu and wanting Burundi and Uganda out of the area".[31]

Rwanda's aggression in the eastern DRC has also caused it economic harm, however, primarily by reducing foreign aid flows. Faced with growing evidence of Rwanda's role, Western countries decided to impose sanctions, in the hope that such measures could alter Kigali's calculations, as they did in 2012. Some donors delayed payments – for example, the European Union withheld money from the Rwandan army for its intervention force in Mozambique – or imposed travel

[27] Crisis Group interviews, community leaders and members of women's civil society groups, Goma, June-July 2024. North Kivu residents of all ethnic groups see the M23 as a rebel group intent on grabbing power and resources. They have little regard for its claims to be protecting a particular community. Crisis Group interviews, displaced people, observers, civil society figures, diplomats, 2022-2024. See also Stearns, *The War That Does Not Say Its Name*, pp. 121-163, which examines the historical tensions between Congolese Tutsis and Rwandan-backed armed groups. It is also notable that the M23 failed to recruit a substantial number of Tutsi fighters on Congolese territory before its assault on Goma, drawing instead on Tutsis living in refugee camps outside the DRC. For recent analysis, see "'People started to point the finger': How the M23 conflict endangers DR Congo's Tutsi communities. 'We didn't agree to create this group'", *The New Humanitarian*, 10 July 2024.

[28] Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and analysts with close experience of Kigali, Rwandan officials and ministers, Brussels, Washington, London and Kigali, 2022-2024. See also Stearns, *The War That Does Not Say Its Name*, op. cit., pp. 80-87.

[29] See Kagame's February 2022 speech, op. cit.; and "La résurgence du M23: rivalités régionales, politique des donateurs et blocage du processus de paix", op. cit.

[30] Crisis Group interview, Congolese mineral trading house director, Goma, June 2024. According to the National Bank of Rwanda, mineral exports more than doubled from 2021 to 2023. "Annual Report 2022-2023", National Bank of Rwanda, Appendix 15. See also "La résurgence du M23 : rivalités régionales, politique des donateurs et blocage du processus de paix", op. cit., p. 43.

[31] Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Goma, July 2024.

bans on mid-ranking officials. Following the takeover of Goma, donors stepped up pressure on Rwanda, including by publicly condemning its backing of the AFC/M23. Over the following months, the U.S., the EU and Germany either rolled out individual sanctions on more senior officers or suspended aid programs.

These measures were insufficient to change Rwanda's thinking, however.[32] The Rwandan government likely believes that it can cope with aid suspensions, which have not significantly reduced its overall budget thus far. Rwanda's largest donor remains the World Bank, which accounts for around 30 per cent of total foreign assistance.[33] Donors have been reluctant to reduce aid further, due both to Rwanda's role in stabilisation missions in Africa and to inconclusive debates in Western capitals concerning whether Rwanda bears responsibility for crimes committed in the DRC.[34]

Rwanda may be more vulnerable to damage to its wider reputation, as it has long been committed to maintaining a business climate that outside investors praise as predictable and largely free of corrupt practices. Since it lacks large-scale mineral resources, sea access or ports, Rwanda relies on foreign investment that is underpinned by good diplomatic relations, whether with Western countries or others farther afield. Even so, Rwanda's continued presence in the eastern DRC indicates that Kigali is prepared for now to weather the storm.

Uganda has also supported the M23, though to a lesser degree than Rwanda. Some evidence has emerged of help with recruitment and free movement, with indications that a number of M23 and AFC leaders and their allies continue to frequent Kampala, where some of their families live.[35] Ugandan leaders, notably General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, son of President Museveni and head of the Ugandan army, has made various statements supporting the M23 and hinting at support for Rwanda's presence in the DRC.[36]

Kampala's support for the M23 appears intended to retain conduits of influence in the rebel group and to assert itself among the various regional powers active in eastern Congo.[37] But Kampala is treading a

[32] "Paul Kagame : 'Personne ne m'intimidera avec des menaces de sanctions'", *Jeune Afrique*, 12 February 2025.
[33] Crisis Group telephone interview, senior aid official based in Kigali, March 2025.
[34] Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and observers, Brussels, London and Paris, 2024-2025.
[35] Crisis Group interviews, security experts and diplomats, Goma, June 2024; Kampala, September 2024 and October 2025; and Nairobi, May 2025. "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", June 2024, op. cit.
[36] See "La résurgence du M23 : rivalités régionales, politique des donateurs et blocage du processus de paix", op. cit. For an example of support for Rwanda, see also tweet by @Mkainerugaba, Uganda's chief of defence forces, 2:17am, 20 October 2024.
[37] Crisis Group interviews, security analyst, Goma, June 2024; regional experts, Kigali and Kampala, 2024; and regional experts, Kampala, October 2025.

fine line: it needs Kinshasa's consent for its troops to move around freely in North Kivu and Ituri, the province to the north, where they are supposed to fight the ADF alongside the Congolese army. Many Congolese army officers say they appreciate the cooperation with their Ugandan counterparts, and Tshisekedi has publicly played down allegations that Kampala backs the M23.

III. The M23 since the Fall of Goma: Rule and Expansion

The M23's territorial advances have come at a heavy cost for Congolese communities. Nearly four million displaced people live in makeshift shelters amid rapidly deteriorating health services in North and South Kivu, placing the eastern DRC among the regions worst affected by violence in the world.[38] The majority have been forced to flee (often more than once) by fighting involving the M23, including half a million new displacements in 2025 alone. On top of that, the U.S. government decision to terminate development aid has hampered food and medicine deliveries, while reducing essential services in protection, resettlement assistance and food security.[39] Women and children are bearing the brunt of the protracted crisis.

Since the rebels advanced on Goma in early 2025, many residents have fled to neighbouring countries, particularly Burundi. Their situation remains dire.[40] The M23 closed camps for the displaced around Goma in a bid to flush out pro-government militia members; sending people from these camps back to their villages also helped reinforce the AFC/M23's argument that they have the situation under control. Schools have been badly hit, depriving hundreds of thousands of children of education.[41] Humanitarian organisations working to relieve these problems face not only dwindling resources but also struggles with bringing in supplies.[42] The AFC/M23 has shuttered Goma's airport on the grounds that it was damaged by the fighting. Aid workers, meanwhile, must engage in delicate negotiations over access with the AFC/M23, who are pressing them to pay "tax" to their new administration. Kinshasa is wary of any organisation or group that is seen as legitimising the rebels' occupation, while the UN, EU and U.S. have placed M23 leaders on sanctions lists.

[38] Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers and security analysts, Goma, May 2025. See also "RD Congo : Situation humanitaire dans la province du Sud-Kivu Rapport de situation #6", OCHA, 21 May 2025; and "RD Congo : Note de Plaidoyer", OCHA, 24 November 2025.
[39] "DRC in Crisis: The Human Cost of U.S. Aid Cuts Amid the M23 Rebellion", Think Global Health, 20 March 2025.
[40] "Burundi : réfugiés congolais face à un choix mortel entre faim et guerre," *SOS Médias Burundi*, 21 August 2025.
[41] UNICEF warned of the risks faced by 375,000 children in North Kivu who are being deprived of education, saying school closures make children vulnerable to forced recruitment, child labour and other forms of exploitation. "RDC : le coût humanitaire de la guerre dans l'Est", *Jeune Afrique*, 7 March 2025. See also "Grand Invité d'Afrique Jolino Malukisa", RFI, 1 September 2025.
[42] Jean-Yves Kamale, "More than 80% of health facilities in eastern Congo are out of medicine, Red Cross says", Associated Press, 8 October 2025.

Compounding the humanitarian problems, the AFC/M23 has organised the repatriation of thousands of Congolese Tutsi refugees from camps in Rwanda, without consulting locals or involving the UN refugee agency. The influx has fuelled communal tensions and could deepen resentment of Tutsis. Returns of Congolese Tutsis also add to widespread suspicions that Rwanda is seeking to consolidate its sphere of influence in the eastern DRC.[43]

A. *The M23: From Chaos to Consolidation*

Despite violence in and around territories under rebel control, the AFC/M23 has set up a system of governance to impose its authority and exploit natural resources. In doing so, it has ousted local chiefs who stayed in the area and replaced them with new figures, disrupting the delicate balance of formal and informal governance, particularly in North Kivu.

Though the rebels have reinstated several Congolese police and administrators, the M23 is firmly in charge. Decisions about military affairs are taken by General Makenga and his two closest collaborators, Colonel Imani John Nzenze, head of intelligence, and Brigadier General Bernard Byamungu, who handles operations. Political decisions concerning the two provinces under M23 control are taken jointly by Nangaa and Bisimwa, respectively AFC coordinator and M23 president, though Kigali likely steers the movement's broader direction. Provincial decisions in Goma and Bukavu are the responsibility of governors named by the M23.[44] Other officials from the Tutsi diaspora are barely known to the local population, reinforcing the widely held view that the AFC/M23 is an occupying force.

The AFC/M23 claim to be far more efficient than the Congolese authorities, but the group asserts its authority mainly through coercion and violence. To silence dissent, the rebels have restricted communication, mostly in rural areas, and at times banned mobile phones to prevent evidence of abuse from circulating.[45] Foot soldiers have rounded up residents for forced labour; they have also committed extortion, mass killings and gender-based violence – especially against

[43] Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers and security experts, Goma, June-November 2025. See also "Le M23 'Version 2' : Enjeux, motivations, perceptions et impacts locaux", IPIS, April 2024; and "DR Congo: M23 Armed Group Forcibly Transferring Civilians. Rwanda as Occupying Force May be Responsible for War Crimes", Human Rights Watch, 18 June 2025.

[44] The rebel governor of North Kivu, Colonel Erasto Musanga Bahati, was the M23's treasurer until his appointment and enjoys considerable freedom of action. In South Kivu, the M23 quickly dismissed the first governor it had appointed, Emmanuel Birato, a businessman from Bukavu, and replaced him with Patrick Busu bwa Ngwi, a local politician whom it judged more loyal.

[45] Crisis Group interviews, residents of M23 zones, including representatives of women's organisations, Goma, 2024-2025; Crisis Group telephone interviews, residents of M23 zones, 2024-2025.

displaced girls and women.[46] In the early months after Goma's fall, the M23 encouraged mob violence against suspected criminals and killed or imprisoned those who refused its orders.[47] Escaped prisoners, militiamen and rebel fighters have also staged robberies, terrifying the population.[48] At night, most streets in Goma and Bukavu are deserted. During the day, residents no longer use private vehicles to drive to work for fear of car theft.

Commerce is constricted: Kinshasa has prohibited banks from distributing paper currency in all rebel-held areas, freezing lending and trade. Converting currency needed for import-export business has become exorbitantly expensive and access to salaries for civil servants almost impossible. Rebel administrators have tried to get around these restrictions, but without success, meaning that merchants and other citizens must take long journeys out of the AFC/M23-controlled areas, either to other Congolese cities or to Rwanda, to make transactions.[49]

Given the above, the AFC/M23 is deeply unpopular in the areas it controls. Crisis Group interviews with residents, as well as the M23's failure to recruit volunteers in Congolese territory, all bespeak disdain for the movement, even among Congolese Tutsis, some of whom say its actions run counter to their interests.[50] The group remains depen-

[46] See "Report of the OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission on the situation in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo", op. cit.; "DRC: M23 Kill, Torture and Hold Civilians Hostage at Detention Sites", Amnesty International, 27 May 2025; and "DR Congo: M23 Mass Killings Near Virunga National Park", Human Rights Watch, 20 August 2025.

[47] Crisis Group interviews, researchers, witnesses to the lynching and other locals, Goma, March-April 2025. See also "DRC: M23 Kill, Torture and Hold Civilians Hostage at Detention Sites" op. cit.; and "Mise à jour concernant la situation dans les provinces du Nord-Kivu et Sud-Kivu en République démocratique du Congo", OHCHR, 16 June 2025.

[48] Crisis Group interviews, researchers, residents and humanitarian workers, Goma and Bukavu, March-October 2025. "DR Congo: Rwanda-backed M23 Executed Civilians in Goma", Human Rights Watch, 3 June 2025. The AFC/M23 has rejected the accusations of human rights violations. "Réaction de l'AFC/M23 face aux allégations sur les prétendues violations des droits humains dans les villes de Goma et de Bukavu", Secrétariat Permanent de l'AFC, May 2025.

[49] Crisis Group interviews, businesspeople and residents, Bukavu, Goma and Nairobi, March-November 2025. See also "Est de la RDC : dans Goma sans cash, le M23 sous pression", *Jeune Afrique*, 14 May 2025; "Goma, une ville coupée du système bancaire", Deutsche Welle, 23 October 2025; and "Perturbation des circuits financiers : Comment la crise M23 reconfigure les programmes de transferts monétaires et les services financiers au Nord et au Sud-Kivu", Mercy Corps, 29 April 2025.

[50] Crisis Group interviews, civil society figures from M23-controlled areas, Goma, June 2024. See also "RD Congo. À Goma, les réfugiés tutsis font profil bas", *Afrique XXI*, 19 August 2024. Christophe Rigaud, "RDC : le M23 s'offre une vitrine politique", *Afrikarabia*, 28 February 2024.

dent on forced recruitment and Rwandan support.[51] It has compelled surrendering Congolese soldiers and police to join its ranks; it has used coercion (along with enticement) to sign up unemployed young people as well. In mid-2025, the M23 embarked on a program of enlistment and training of new "recruits". Well-informed sources now put the M23's numbers at 15,000 to 27,000, though some doubt that the new recruits are prepared or willing to fight and report mistrust between them and the M23's traditional units.[52]

After the initial chaos following the fall of Goma and Bukavu, the AFC/M23 has put elements of public administration in place. It has set up loyal administrative units at all levels, from villages to provincial governorates, alongside the replacement of traditional leaders mentioned above. In May, the rebels appointed new registry officials, chosen on the basis of loyalty to the M23, to administer the sensitive issue of land ownership, furthering suspicions that the rebels are part of a plan of long-term land grabbing. In November, to consolidate its parallel administration, the M23 published a list of 378 magistrates with a view to reviving judicial institutions in the areas under its control.[53] While the inhabitants of the eastern DRC are fed up with their government's failure to provide a semblance of stability, few if any see the AFC/M23 as better equipped to deliver credible governance.[54] Regardless, AFC/M23 officials stick to the line that they are there to stay and that the population would be wise to cooperate.[55]

[51] Crisis Group interview, witness to an attempt at forced recruitment, Goma, April 2025. See also "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", July 2025, op. cit.
[52] Crisis Group interview, UN security expert, Goma, October 2025; Crisis Group telephone interview, separate UN security expert, December 2025. See also Kivu Morning Post: RDC : DES MILLIERS DE POLICIERS ET MILITAIRES SE RENDENT AU M23 ET ARRIVENT À GOMA VERS RUMANGABO", video, YouTube, 23 February 2025; and "Formation de plus de 7,000 nouveaux combattants par l'AFC/M23: inacceptable pour Kinshasa, un rapport sera fait à Washington et à Doha", *Actualite.cd*, 18 September 2025.
[53] Crisis Group interview, expert, Goma, November 2025. See also "AFC/M23 rebellion sets up a parallel justice system in North Kivu", *Africa News*, November 2025; and "M23's State-Building Project: Africa File Special Edition", Critical Threats, 9 September 2025.
[54] Crisis Group interview, religious leader, Goma, March 2025.
[55] An AFC/M23 spokesperson said: "We are not going anywhere; we are staying". Crisis Group interview, Johannesburg, September 2025. See also "We have come to Goma to stay. We are not going to withdraw, but we will move forward from Goma ... up to Kinshasa", *New Times Rwanda*, 31 January 2025; "*New Times Rwanda*: Exclusive: Corneille Nangaa on capture of Goma, FDLR and what's next", YouTube, 31 January 2025; and "RDC: Goma aux mains du M23", ARTE, 5 May 2025.

B. *The M23's Widening Footprint*

Bolstered by the capture of Goma, the M23, with Rwandan support, has conquered new areas in the south, west and north, more than doubling the territory under its control. The Congolese army fled the fighting, heading for areas in government hands, and did not attempt a counteroffensive for several months. Occasional attacks by Wazalendo groups and the FDLR failed to reverse the M23's advance.[56]

UN peacekeepers retreated to their barracks after being unable to defend Sake and then Goma, despite heavy fighting with M23 members and Rwandan troops.[57] Their failure to thwart the insurgents led to protests outside the mission's offices in Kinshasa. Since then, the UN has had to negotiate with the M23, which has put pressure on the mission by cutting electricity and water supplies as well as by restricting troop movements and rotations. While committed to staying in Goma, the mission temporarily relocated its military headquarters to Beni – 350km north in government-controlled territory – and evacuated non-critical international staff. All UN activities in support of state institutions in rebel-held territory were cancelled, with funds redirected to assisting vulnerable populations.[58]

In March, the M23 seized Walikale town, west of Goma. Observers saw it as a possible first step in an advance toward Kisangani, the country's third-largest city and, since the fall of Goma, a major military hub.[59] Following the M23's routing of the Congolese army and its allies, many analysts were convinced that the group could even move on Kinshasa or foment a coup to topple Tshisekedi. Many also believed that the rebels had the strength to press through South Kivu to Katanga, a mineral-rich region from where the central government derives the vast majority of its revenue.[60]

But the longer the war has dragged on, the less likely this scenario has become, for several reasons. Diplomatic pressure on the M23 and its Rwandan ally, especially from the U.S. and Qatar, has curbed their

[56] "RDC : les milices Wazalendo revendiquent l'attaque de Goma, repoussée par le M23", RFI, 13 April 2025.
[57] While Goma was falling, MONUSCO sheltered 2,000 disarmed Congolese soldiers and police officers at its bases. After several months during which the M23 threatened the UN force, the UN transported most of those soldiers and police to Kinshasa in mid-May, with support from the International Committee of the Red Cross. The mission also took in 60 civilians, including human rights defenders and government officials. More civilians asked for protection than it could accommodate.
[58] Crisis Group interviews, UN staff, Goma, 2025; Crisis Group telephone interviews, UN staff, November 2025. See also MONUSCO reports to the UN Security Council.
[59] "La ville de Kisangani serait-elle dans le viseur du M23", Deutsche Welle, 8 April 2025.
[60] Crisis Groups interviews, experts and diplomats, Goma, Nairobi, Brussels and London, March-July 2025.

expansionist plans at key moments. For example, in March, Washington secured an M23 withdrawal around Walikale, on the road to Kisangani, when the rebels were threatening the large Bisie tin mining site, which was under U.S. ownership at the time.[61] Later on, calls for a ceasefire as part of the Washington and Doha processes also likely tempered the belligerents' ambitions, prodding them into a kind of war of attrition centred on parts of South Kivu, such as the vicinity of Uvira, and North Kivu, where clashes continue in Masisi, Rutshuru and Walikale territories. The external diplomatic intervention almost certainly averted a wider conflagration that might even have threatened Tshisekedi's hold on power.

Other factors may have hindered the M23's advance toward the country's major urban centres. Tactically, the rebels are now facing a Congolese army that has invested heavily in weaponry; it has high-capacity Bayraktar drones that give it air supremacy, allowing it to slow down columns and destroy bridges, as seen during the M23's attempts to reach Walikale in October and November.[62] The rebels may have also learned lessons from expanding too quickly, which has left various flanks vulnerable and stretches units farther from their bases along the border with Rwanda, making it harder to pull in support from the Rwandan army as has been required in the past. That said, as discussed below, October and November saw an uptick in fighting as the M23, with Rwandan backing including anti-drone weaponry, once again undertook to conquer areas of the Kivus outside its grasp.[63]

While the rebels expand west, albeit without the speed of early 2025, to the north the M23 has entered areas where other armed groups are active and Uganda exerts influence, checking its expansionism.[64] As noted above, Uganda deployed troops in the eastern DRC in 2021, and it has offered the AFC/M23 some support. Since capturing Goma,

[61] Several sources confirmed that the pause in M23 expansion in this area was due to U.S. pressure. Crisis Group telephone interviews, diplomats, May 2025; UN official, Bunia, May 2025. See also "Est de la RDC : la mine d'étain de Bisié va reprendre ses activités après un mois à l'arrêt", RFI, 10 April 2025; and "RDC : la rébellion de l'AFC/M23 prend le contrôle de nouvelles entités dans le Walikale", *Actualite.cd*, 27 May 2025.
[62] "DRC: Kinshasa in negotiations for three new Chinese combat drones", *Africa Intelligence*, 23 April 2025; "RDC : L'armée se dote de drones turcs Bayraktar", *Africa Intelligence*, 20 June 2025.
[63] Crisis Group interview, UN security official, December 2025.
[64] Crisis Group interviews, senior international and Congolese officials, Goma, June-July 2024. See also "Gen Kainerugaba Concludes Visit to DRC after High-Level Engagements", Uganda People's Defence Force, 22 June 2025; "Uganda's Chess Game in Eastern DRC: With or Without M23?", Egmont Institute, June 2024; "Understanding Uganda's (Ambiguous) Actions in Eastern DRC: Military Interventions to Protect Roads and Trade?", Egmont Institute, June 2025; and "Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", July 2025, op. cit.

the M23 has avoided encroaching on areas where Ugandan soldiers are stationed. Kampala has sent thousands more troops to northern North Kivu since the fall of Goma, but they have avoided any contact with the M23. Overall, residents appreciate the Ugandan presence, which, even if it has not stopped armed group attacks, has at least kept the M23 out.[65]

In South Kivu, meanwhile, the M23 advanced toward the town of Uvira on the western shore of Lake Tanganyika, opposite Burundi's economic capital Bujumbura and astride a vital supply route. Burundi's army briefly retreated, after suffering heavy casualties defending Goma, and was redeployed in April to help protect Uvira alongside local Wazalendo groups.[66] Kinshasa also sent additional troops into South Kivu and neighbouring Tanganyika province to stop the M23 from progressing further.[67] Fighting has taken place south of Bukavu as well as in and around the coveted High Plateaux overlooking Uvira, an area rich in gold and pastures for grazing.

On 10 December, the M23-Rwanda coalition took control of Uvira, following heavy fighting to the north of the city – though Congolese soldiers and their allies evacuated, ensuring that the takeover did not entail heavy fighting. Many Burundian troops retreated to shore up their country's border. By taking Uvira, the insurgents have put further pressure on the Burundian government and could now open a route to Kalemie, the capital of Tanganyika province in Katanga, the country's economic heartland.

The fighting in South Kivu has raised tensions between the Congolese army and its local Wazalendo allies. In September, clashes broke out in the city between soldiers and militiamen. The latter objected to the nomination of a Banyamulenge officer to a senior command position in the province, accusing him of complicity with his ethnic kinsmen in the M23.[68] Kinshasa backed down and withdrew the officer, leaving the Wazalendo emboldened. Wazalendo groups have since fought

[65] A resident of the town of Butembo told Crisis Group that though the Ugandan army had not resolved the security problems caused by the ADF, it had at least prevented the M23 from invading the region. Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2025.

[66] Crisis Group interviews, experts on regional security, Brussels and Nairobi, May 2025; Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2025. Crisis Group telephone interview, security analyst working in the humanitarian sector in Bukavu, June 2025. See also "Rwanda planning to attack Burundi, president tells BBC", video, YouTube, 25 March 2025.

[67] "'Il y a eu de la psychose' : Kalemie, dans l'est de la RDC, est-elle désormais hors de danger ?", *Jeune Afrique*, 7 July 2025. For details on Congolese soldiers arriving in Kalemie, see also tweet by Le Journal Afrique TV 5 Monde, @JTAtv5monde, 11:08pm, 7 July 2025.

[68] The Banyamulenge are widely regarded as ethnic cousins of the North Kivu Tutsis. "Trois morts dans des manifestations des Wazalendo contre la nomination du général Gasita à Uvira", Radio Okapi, 5 September 2025.

bloody battles among themselves for control of roadblocks that they use to extort payments from the population.

The Rwandan-M23 capture of Uvira has exacerbated already poor relations between Burundi and Rwanda. Despite tentative contacts between intelligence officials and moments of calm throughout 2025, there have been heated exchanges as Rwandan-backed rebels fight Burundian troops close to the Burundian territory. Burundian leaders in particular have stepped up their bellicose rhetoric, accusing Kigali of trying to unseat their government.[69] The AFC/M23 and Rwandan command, for their part, were incensed at the deployment of several Burundian army battalions in South Kivu to fight the Twirwaneho armed movement, the Banyamulenge allies of the M23 and members of the AFC coalition.

The rebels are also concerned by the Congolese army's use of Bujumbura airport as a logistical hub, including for launching drones at rebel positions. The airport could become a military target, which would represent a major escalation of conflict, with repercussions likely to be felt across the region.[70] In early December, sources reported increased fighting in areas close to the Burundian border and approaching Uvira itself, including mortar fire in populated areas, as happened near Goma and Sake in January.[71]

Following the M23's lightning advances in January and February, the front has stabilised to an extent. The M23 and its Rwandan allies hold the upper hand, but they are facing pushback at the edges of areas they have conquered, and the new Congolese weaponry is making further gains difficult. That said, from October to December the rebels continued to make advances in both Kivus and appear able to operate deep in the Congolese forest, reducing the impact of drones. The Congolese army, meanwhile, has lost up to four drones, most likely to Rwandan missiles. Given that the M23 is unlikely to risk a confrontation with the Ugandan troops farther north, the most probable mid-term scenario is continued piecemeal expansion and more fighting around besieged cities in North and South Kivu, where the population continues to pay a steep price.

[69] "Photo de la semaine : nous n'allons pas accepter de mourir comme les Congolais qui sont tués comme des chèvres, j'ai déjà averti le Rwanda (Évariste Ndayishimiye)", *SOS Médias Burundi*, 17 February 2025; "Evariste Ndayishimiye : 'Nous ne sommes pas en RDC en tant que partie au conflit'", *Mbote.cd*, 11 November 2025.
[70] Crisis Group interview, UN security expert, October 2025. See also "Burundi, RDC. L'intrigant ballet d'avions-cargos militaires au-dessus de Bujumbura", *Africa Intelligence*, September 2025; "Conflit en RDC : le spectre de l'embrasement plane sur l'Ouest burundais", *SOS Médias Burundi*, 18 September 2025.
[71] Crisis Group interview, senior UN security source, December 2025. See also "Violences dans est de la RDC – Au moins 20 soldats burundais tués dans l'est de la RDC", *La Libre Afrique*, 6 December 2025.

IV. The AFC/M23 on the National and International Stages

The AFC/M23 has used its military advances to obtain a seat at the negotiating table, hoping to portray itself as a legitimate Congolese political movement and extract concessions, starting with recognition of its authority over the areas it now controls. Diplomacy over the eastern DRC has as a result branched into multiple tracks, as Kinshasa negotiates with both Kigali and, reluctantly, the rebels. The rebellion, meanwhile, has become a disruptive catalyst in Congolese politics. Since the start of 2025, the opposition has increasingly accused the government of having lost its legitimacy as it is unable to defend the country, while the government has labelled a number of its opponents, notably former President Joseph Kabila, seditious. In September, a military court found Kabila guilty of associating with the AFC/M23 and sentenced him to death in absentia.

A. *The AFC/M23's Impact on Congolese Politics*

Since adopting a national platform focused on government corruption, the AFC/M23 has tried to use its military muscle to secure a place in Congolese politics. Some of the government's second-rank opponents, especially from Kabila's camp, joined the AFC following its creation in 2023, but overall, there was no wave of new supporters. First, Tshisekedi's rivals, while blaming him for the crisis, are wary of being publicly associated with the rebellion. They are also aware that much of the Congolese public seems convinced that the AFC/M23 is a Rwandan puppet that only claims to represent Congolese Tutsis.[72] Secondly, the fact that the AFC/M23 leadership is both under sentence of death in the DRC and subject to international sanctions hardly encourages new adherents.[73]

Still, many Congolese opposition leaders hope that the conflict will weaken Tshisekedi. In 2024, Tshisekedi indicated his desire to change the constitution, raising concerns that he wishes to stay in office be-

[72] While it is hard to accurately gauge public opinion on the issue, it is clear that Kinshasa's politicians are aware that they can muster support by pressing this position. See "Patrick Muyaya : "Les M23 n'existent pas", Deutsche Welle, 7 March 2025.

[73] On 8 August 2024, the military court in Kinshasa sentenced to death 26 individuals accused of war crimes and treason, including key AFC/M23 figures. These included Nangaa, the movement's political coordinator; Makenga, its military leader; Bisimwa, president of its political wing; and Lawrence Kanyuka and Willy Ngoma, its political and military spokespersons, respectively, all tried in absentia. The following 7 March, the justice minister placed bounties on the heads of Nangaa, Makenga and Bisimwa. "Est de la RDC : Corneille Nangaa et ses alliés du M23 condamnés à mort pour 'crimes de guerre'", *Jeune Afrique*, 8 August 2024. "Kinshasa met à prix les têtes de plusieurs dirigeants du M23", TV5 Monde, 8 March 2025.

yond his constitutional term limit.[74] Partly in response, Catholic and Protestant clergy have called for a national forum intended to lead to an as yet ill-defined "social pact". Most opposition figures support this initiative, likely hoping that it could challenge Tshisekedi's leadership and perhaps help prevent him from extending his time in office. Even if they try to keep a distance from the rebellion, both major churches and the opposition support the AFC/M23's participation, arguing that all Congolese must be included in the search for a long-term solution to the conflict. Most diplomats working on the country agree with this diagnosis, with some of them arguing that this approach reflects Kinshasa's longstanding commitment to addressing armed groups' grievances as a way of reinforcing regional security.[75]

Kinshasa sees the proposal for a national dialogue quite differently. For officials close to the president, armed groups have no place in Congolese politics and their likely demands focused on integrating their combatants into the national army are non-starters.[76] Tshisekedi himself has thus far dismissed proposals for a national dialogue, saying any such process would have to be his "own initiative".[77]

The political comeback of Joseph Kabila, who was president from 2001 to 2019, has further ratcheted up tensions. Suspicions that Kabila supported the M23, either financially, politically or both, have circulated in government circles since at least 2023. Kabila left the country late that year, spending most of his time in southern Africa and largely refraining from public speaking. After Nangaa launched the AFC, however, Tshisekedi accused Kabila of being the new organisation's main architect. Relations between the two were already acrimonious. Following uneasy political cooperation in 2019 and 2020, Tshisekedi had increasingly asserted his authority from 2021 onward by sidelining Kabila's military and political allies and encroaching on his business interests. Kabila's friends accuse Tshisekedi of leading a witch hunt.

Following the fall of Goma, Kabila began openly criticising the government. In early May, he castigated the DRC's justice system after the senate voted in favour of lifting his immunity from prosecution over

[74] "Constitution en RDC : Félix Tshisekedi ira-t-il jusqu'au bout ?", *Jeune Afrique*, 17 December 2024.
[75] A senior UN official, for example, pointed to Kinshasa's commitments to internal reforms and dialogue embedded in the 2013 Peace and Security Framework. Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2025.
[76] "RDC : Une proposition de loi contre l'intégration des ex rebelles au sein des institutions politiques et sécuritaires déposée à l'Assemblée nationale", *Actualite.cd*, 22 September 2025. Of late, the AFC/M23 have started denying that they aim to join or rejoin the army, putting forward the more ambitious goal of creating new national armed forces.
[77] "Dialogue national et inclusif en RDC : Félix Tshisekedi dit oui mais 'sur sa propre initiative'", *Actualite.cd*, 31 August 2025.

his alleged links to the AFC/M23. Then, on 29 May, he suddenly appeared in public in Goma to meet religious leaders, in what participants said was a push for peace.[78]

Some observers saw the move as Kabila stamping his authority on the AFC, in particular on Nangaa.[79] While stopping short of openly supporting the AFC/M23, his pronouncements have aligned closely with the rebels' regime change agenda.[80] His presence in Goma also indicates that he got a green light from the Rwandan government, though well-informed observers are unsure how close he is to authorities in Kigali.[81]

Whatever the extent of his involvement with the AFC/M23, Kabila's return to the political scene bolstered opposition to Tshisekedi's rule, at least at first. Prominent members of Kabila's now-suspended political party and an array of Congolese politicians openly aligned with the AFC/M23's anti-government agenda at a peace and security conference in South Africa in September that Tshisekedi's camp largely shunned. Kabila doubled down on his approach in October by creating a new opposition platform, launched, like the AFC two years previously, in Nairobi.[82]

The response to Kabila's alleged alliance with the AFC/M23 and entry into Goma was swift. Starting in July, military prosecutors in Kinshasa held what amounted to a summary trial in Kabila's absence, which the accused refused to recognise and to which he did not send legal representation, resulting in his conviction.[83] In September, the Military High Court sentenced Kabila to death on multiple charges, including treason, crimes against humanity and organising an insurrection.[84] Furthermore, the Congolese government has moved to suspend all the parties involved in Kabila's new opposition platform and put under house arrest several senior generals known to be close to the former president. Some analysts now think Kabila's gambit of leading a new

[78] "Congo ex-president Kabila makes first public appearance in rebel-held Goma", Reuters, 30 May 2025.
[79] Crisis Group interview, Congolese politician, Johannesburg, September 2025.
[80] Crisis Group sources indicated that Kabila has backed the AFC/M23 for some time, but without providing clear proof. Crisis Group interviews, senior officials and diplomats, Kinshasa, December 2023; London, 2023 and 2024.
[81] Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, former senior African diplomat and senior UN security official, Kampala and by telephone, October-December 2025.
[82] "Joseph Kabila lance 'Sauvons la RDC', une nouvelle plateforme d'opposition", BBC, 17 October 2025; "Suspension des activités de 12 partis politiques de l'opposition en RDC", Radio Okapi, 2 November 2025.
[83] See "'C'est lui le boss du M23' : en RDC, peine de mort requise contre Joseph Kabila", *Jeune Afrique*, 22 August 2025; and "Vendetta in Democratic Republic of Congo", Human Rights Watch, 1 October 2025.
[84] "Congo's ex-president Kabila sentenced to death in absentia by military court", Reuters, 30 September 2025.

political movement aimed at unseating his successor may be running out of steam.[85]

That said, the ruling in the Kabila case, which adds to the already long list of death sentences for rebel leaders, will make it even harder to negotiate a political solution to the conflict. Though the government hides behind the ostensible independence of the judiciary, it backed the military prosecutors from the outset, while at the same time entering dialogue with the AFC/M23 in Qatar. The AFC/M23 has described Kabila's conviction as a sign of the government's unwillingness to negotiate in good faith.[86]

B. *The AFC/M23 in Regional and International Diplomacy*

The fall of Goma marked a new phase in diplomacy around the AFC/M23 crisis. As the AU took a back seat and Angola withdrew from mediation, Doha stepped in to broker talks between Kinshasa and the AFC/M23 and Washington to facilitate dialogue between Kinshasa and Kigali. Under U.S. and Qatari pressure, diplomacy has made headway, with belligerents signing numerous agreements or statements of principles. Still, diplomatic progress in world capitals has not yet stopped fighting on the ground. Kinshasa's rearmament and Rwandan and AFC/M23 expansion show that the parties are not yet ready to comply with a lasting ceasefire, raising doubts about their good faith in negotiations.

Talks have taken place amid a fast-changing diplomatic landscape.[87] On 18 March, Qatar managed to bring Kagame and Tshisekedi together in Doha, kicking off a new negotiation track with U.S. and French backing.[88] Facing relentless M23 military pressure, Tshisekedi agreed in April to talks with rebel leaders under Qatari auspices, offering them a seat at the negotiating table for the first time since short-lived discussions with Congolese officials in Nairobi in 2022.[89] Qatar thereafter shifted its focus to mediate talks between Kinshasa and the M23, creating parallel negotiation tracks by handing the baton of Rwanda-DRC diplomacy to Washington. Following a regional tour

[85] Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat and senior UN security official, Kampala and by telephone, October-December 2025. See also "Où en est l'enquête sur la débâcle de l'armée face au M23 ?", *Jeune Afrique*, 24 November 2025.
[86] "Former Congolese president sentenced to death for war crimes", BBC, 30 September 2025.
[87] Crisis Group, "The New Scramble for Peace (and Minerals) in DR Congo", The Horn (podcast), 20 May 2025.
[88] "Angola surprised by Kagame-Tshisekedi meeting in Doha", Deutsche Welle, 21 March 2025. "AU welcomes Doha talks between DR Congo and Rwanda leaders", Al Jazeera, 19 March 2025.
[89] During the first phase (April-July 2025), the M23 delegation included Bisimwa, its political leader, Colonel Imani Nzenze, an intelligence officer, and Benjamin Mbonimpa, executive secretary of the AFC/M23 and head of the delegation. They were joined later by Rene Abandi.

by U.S. President Donald Trump's Africa adviser, Massad Boulos, and expert-level discussions between Rwandan and Congolese officials, DRC and Rwanda initialled an agreement on 27 June in Washington.

At a presidential summit in Washington held on 4 December, the agreement was formally signed in the presence of several African heads of state. The presidents of Angola, Kenya and Burundi made speeches following those of Tshisekedi and Kagame. President Gnassingbé of Togo, the Great Lakes mediator for the AU, attended, as did the AU Commission Chair Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, as the organisation will serve as guarantor of the accord.[90]

The deal reaffirms that the parties will stop supporting armed groups, confirms the importance of the DRC's territorial integrity, requires Rwanda to withdraw its "defensive measures" and commits the parties to cooperate on security concerns.[91] Like the Luanda-negotiated draft agreements of 2024, it also focuses on eliminating the FDLR, at Kigali's request. Additionally, the agreement outlines commitments to boost regional trade in minerals with U.S. public and private support, including offering Kigali a greater slice of legitimate trade. While seeking long-term benefits for U.S. mining investors, mediators also saw these clauses as a way of locking the parties into the peace deal.[92]

Getting from the fall of Goma to an initialled agreement in Washington in five months, confirmed at head of state level five months later, undoubtedly represented a swift turnaround. Much of the progress comes down to both sides' interest in staying in President Trump's good books as he sought wins for his deal-making diplomacy. But reaching the accord has not changed the terms of negotiation or the parties' willingness to adhere to commitments. Indeed, barbed exchanges between the two presidents and senior officials in the run-up to the Washington gathering in December and a sour atmosphere at the summit bode ill.[93]

In the five months between initialling and signing the Washington accord, fighting has not abated, and the decision to take over Uvira six days later, almost certainly greenlighted in Kigali, shows how hard it will be to make the deal stick. Both Kigali and Kinshasa are well versed in skirting commitments and blaming the other party for sabotaging talks. Rwanda has baulked at agreeing to withdraw its army from the eastern provinces, despite U.S. pressure. Kigali pulled some soldiers out after Goma's fall, but it has previously reduced troop numbers only

[90] "In Washington, DRC and Rwanda sign fragile peace agreement under auspices of Trump", *Le Monde*, 5 December 2025.
[91] Richard Moncrieff, "The DR Congo-Rwanda Deal: Now Comes the Hard Part", Crisis Group Commentary, 4 July 2025.
[92] Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. diplomat, June 2025.
[93] See, for example, "DR Congo's president says his Rwandan counterpart wants to 'split' his country", Anadolu Agency, 3 November 2025.

to increase them again at a later date, and there is no sign of its commitment to the AFC/M23 wavering.[94]

Furthermore, Rwandan officials have again stated, as they did to Angolan mediators, that their full withdrawal is dependent on eliminating the FDLR leadership.[95] Rwanda seems to have achieved a major diplomatic victory by conditioning its withdrawal on defeating the FDLR, an outcome that will be hard for any verification mechanism to certify. Kinshasa says Kigali has thus created a pretext for keeping its troops in place, and disputes over this issue risk locking the parties once again into rounds of accusation and blame. In any case, it seems unclear how Kinshasa can respond to this demand, given that Congolese forces no longer have sway over areas of FDLR influence following Goma's fall.

After the June deal in Washington, attention switched back to talks between Kinshasa and the AFC/M23. A new round of negotiations got under way in Doha in mid-July, and the parties signed the Doha Declaration of Principles on 19 July, in which they undertook to conclude a peace agreement. They committed to a permanent, immediate ceasefire, the restoration of state authority in areas under rebel control and technical points such as the return of refugees, the release of M23 prisoners by Kinshasa and the establishment of a joint mechanism to monitor the agreement. In October, the two parties settled on a ceasefire and monitoring mechanism, and on 15 November, they signed a framework agreement for a peace deal.[96] A further round of discussions is set to begin in December.

Progress has faltered, however, due to gaps between the sides in their interpretation of their commitments thus far. Despite the ceasefire text and the November framework agreement, much remains to be hammered out. The parties disagree over the sequencing of steps in a peace accord, and persistent ceasefire breaches as well as spreading conflict have deepened mistrust. The AFC/M23 complains that the government has thus far failed to follow through on agreed-upon trust-building measures, such as the release of political prisoners.[97]

[94] On the reduced Rwandan deployment after its peak in early 2025, see "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo", July 2025, op. cit. Concerning the deployment, Crisis Group interview, security analysts with excellent access, October-December 2025.
[95] "Est de la RDC : 'La levée de nos mesures défensives est conditionnée par la neutralisation des FDLR', insiste le Rwanda", *Jeune Afrique*, 30 June 2025.
[96] This document lists eight protocols, six of which have yet to be discussed. The two others, relating to the prisoner exchange and ceasefire monitoring, are settled on paper, but barely implemented. The six protocols that have yet to be agreed upon cover humanitarian access, disarmament of armed groups, re-establishing state authority, identity and citizenship, economic and social priorities, and justice and reconciliation. "Congo, M23 sign deal in Doha on ceasefire monitoring, sources say", Reuters, 14 October 2025.
[97] Crisis Group interview, AFC/M23 spokesperson, Johannesburg, September 2025.

Furthermore, there is no sign of rapprochement on substantive issues such as territorial control and the future of the M23's troops and leadership.

Underlying these differences is the bigger issue at stake: who will run the areas the M23 has wrested from Kinshasa's grasp? Kinshasa naturally wants to recoup territorial control.[98] While Congolese officials know they will be hard pressed to do so, they have no incentive to compromise on this goal, especially as it has become central to the ruling coalition's rhetoric.[99] The M23, meanwhile, is pushing for full recognition of its administration and increasingly raising the idea of regional autonomy, which would require de facto acceptance by Kinshasa of its occupation.[100] In addition, both Kinshasa and, now, the AFC/M23 reject integration of the rebels into the army as a solution to the insurrection, ruling out an approach commonly adopted for previous insurgencies.[101] International officials, aware of M23 and Rwandan strength on the ground, talk in private of the need to accept a form of interim administration that would allow them to work with the AFC/M23 while preserving the principle of Kinshasa's sovereignty over the territory.[102]

The AU, for its part, has been largely absent from the mediation efforts. In March, Angola pulled out from its role due to its frustration with all parties and because it had just taken over the AU rotating presidency. In Angola's place, African states were able to agree on a diplomatic formula that made Togolese President Gnassingbé lead mediator, with a panel of five former African heads of state to back him up. Each facilitator was to take charge of a specific sector, keeping

[98] A typical example can be found in Tshisekedi's words at a regional summit in March: "Safeguarding the DRC's territorial integrity and national sovereignty is not negotiable. No other flag than that of the DRC can fly on our territory". See "Crise sécuritaire dans l'Est du pays : 5 anciens Chefs d'état africains nommés facilitateurs à l'issue du 2ème sommet EAC-SADC", Présidence RDC, 24 March 2025.
[99] "Jacquemain Shabani : 'Le retrait du M23 et l'intégrité territoriale de la RDC ne sont pas négociables'", *Jeune Afrique*, 23 July 2025. Even before Goma's fall, an official told Crisis Group that "the M23 is unlikely to lose at the table what they have gained on the ground". Crisis Group interview, senior Congolese diplomat, Kinshasa, December 2024. Even optimistic mediators have accepted that it will be hard to achieve the M23's full withdrawal. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, June 2025.
[100] The AFC/M23 spokesperson has also argued that the DRC's territorial integrity is dependent on the fall of the government in Kinshasa. See tweet by Lawrence Kanyuka, @LawrenceKanyuka, AFC/M23 spokesperson, 2:11pm, 19 July 2025.
[101] See "Felix Tshisekedi : 'Pas de brassage ni mixage' dans l'accord avec le Rwanda", Radio Okapi, 29 November 2025; and the AFC/M23's reaction in a tweet by Bertrand Bisimwa, @Bbisimwa, M23 president, 6:28pm, 29 November 2025.
[102] Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior international officials working on the Great Lakes, November 2025.

the AU involved in an array of issues.[103] The move calmed the intra-African tensions over the eastern DRC described above, but the team is poorly coordinated, arguably over-tasked and has made little headway in the search for an effective African-brokered ceasefire.[104] The AU remains hamstrung by the need to paper over regional disagreements and by the inherent difficulty of mediating a war between two member states, especially given Kigali's clout within the organisation. Nevertheless, AU diplomats hope at some point to play a greater role, including in sponsoring or following up on the Doha framework agreement and the Washington accord.[105]

[103] Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo is tasked with facilitating the AU's position on Kigali-Kinshasa diplomacy, former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta is to work on armed groups and former Botswanan President Mogweetsi Masisi is to handle regional trade and the mineral sector, while former Central African Republic President Catherine Samba Panza and former Ethiopian President Sahle-Work Zewde will take the humanitarian affairs and displacement file together. Crisis Group interview, AU official, Addis Ababa, October 2025. See also "Communiqué of the Meeting of the Joint EAC-SADC Co-chairs with the Facilitators for the DRC Peace Process", EAC/SADC, 1 August 2025.
[104] On the initial period of AU activity after Goma's fall, see Paul Simon Handy, "African solutions have not solved the Great Lakes problems", Institute for Security Studies, 13 May 2025. The AU was subsequently unable to weigh in effectively. Crisis Group interviews, AU officials, Addis Ababa, September and November 2025.
[105] Crisis Group interviews, AU officials and southern African diplomat, Addis Ababa, November 2025.

V. Dealing with the New Reality in the Great Lakes

The fall of Goma and the AFC/M23's subsequent consolidation of its control of swathes of North Kivu and South Kivu provinces have redrawn the contours of power in the DRC. Diplomatic efforts by Doha and Washington have helped contain the short-term ambitions of the rebels and their Rwandan sponsors, at least for the duration of talks. Yet the ranks of the AFC/M23 continue to swell with new recruits, while AFC leader Nangaa has repeatedly made clear that the movement is intent on taking territory with the objective of overthrowing the government in Kinshasa. Furthermore, while Rwanda provided the impetus, weaponry and troops for the takeover of Goma, and retains thousands of troops in the Kivus, the AFC/M23 may be able to operate more independently of its main backer, likely reassured by the fact that the Congolese army is at present too weak to attack it on multiple fronts at once. Some Congolese observers believe that the M23 aims to eventually seize the mineral-rich Katanga region.[106]

Achieving a wider peace deal may therefore be at odds with the reality on the ground. Like Angola before them, the U.S. and Qatar have attempted to cajole Kigali into withdrawing the Rwandan army and scaling back its support for the M23 by offering incentives as diverse as tackling the FDLR and giving it a bigger role in legitimate mineral trade. At the working level, officials have tried to hammer out proposals to disband the M23's leadership and reinstate Kinshasa's authority in the eastern DRC. All have come up against the movement's determination, along with Rwanda's, to benefit from military supremacy. At no point have Rwandan troops or M23 insurgents planned for the withdrawal that peace agreements and UN Security Council resolutions have called for.

For its part, Kinshasa seems to have little faith in negotiations. Despite the Congolese army and its allies' resounding defeat in early 2025, officials have been re-stocking with arms and sounding out new and old allies for further support.[107] Furthermore, the condemnation of Kabila for association with the M23 risks alienating otherwise sympathetic capitals in Africa and Europe. The overall impression is one of diplomacy driven by anti-Rwandan rhetoric and unwillingness to compromise despite being in a weak position on the ground. Against a backdrop of inter-state acrimony and prolonged violence, Western, Qatari and African officials should redouble their efforts to secure a ceasefire, head off regional escalation and persuade Kinshasa and

[106] Crisis Group interview, Johannesburg, September 2025.
[107] "Pourquoi tant de défaites ? En RDC, l'armée enquête sur sa débâcle", *Jeune Afrique*, 22 August 2025. "Guerre contre le M23 : l'armée congolaise enquête sur les responsables de la 'débâcle'", *Africa Intelligence*, 22 August 2025.

Kigali to pull back their allied militias – or, at the minimum, ensure that they halt further advances while diplomacy to fashion a way forward continues.

A. *Achieving a Ceasefire in South Kivu and Quelling the Militias*

With chaos threatening to engulf South Kivu following the fall of Uvira, it is vital that all those with influence over Rwanda, Burundi, the AFC/M23 and the DRC urge the parties to tamp down hostilities in the area. The main protagonists should urgently pull back their troops or auxiliaries and allow humanitarian workers access to the area. The M23 should halt its advances, and the Congolese government should avoid rash attempts to recapture areas under M23 control, which could spark more fighting and civilian suffering.

Should the parties fully comply with a permanent ceasefire, as outlined in the Washington agreements and the Qatar-mediated declaration of principles, the UN stabilisation mission could boost its presence along the fronts in both North and South Kivu. UN peacekeepers have decades of experience observing ceasefires, including in the DRC during the early 2000s. Even so, the mission has come under fire in recent years after finding itself unable to quell the reflux of violence or to stop the M23 advance. The mission could find renewed purpose by assuming a measure of responsibility for monitoring a ceasefire, though to do so, it would need to enter further complex negotiations with both Kinshasa and the AFC/M23, especially as the latter continues to see the UN as a hostile party.[108] Supporting or monitoring a ceasefire would also involve some kind of renewed presence in South Kivu, from where the mission withdrew in 2024, which would pose logistical challenges.

As a next step, Kinshasa should consider reducing its reliance on abusive militias, in particular the Wazalendo. The Congolese army's internal divisions and operational weaknesses make this task difficult, and it would be harder still now that the Wazalendo have acquired a degree of autonomy and power, as evidenced by the skirmishes with soldiers in Uvira described above. But longer-term peace in the Kivu provinces calls for a far more robust policy from Kinshasa as to how it can rein in its unruly allies.

B. *Heading off Further Regional Conflagration*

Rwanda's backing for the M23 rebels has exacerbated long-running regional tensions. In particular, already poor relations between Rwanda and Burundi continue to deteriorate at an alarming pace. The rebels' advance in South Kivu, Congolese arms shipments through

[108] Crisis Group interviews, senior UN staff, November 2025. See also Crisis Group Special Briefing N°13, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2025-2026*, 9 September 2025.

Bujumbura airport and mutual suspicions that the other side is harbouring dissidents form a potentially explosive cocktail.[109] Regional diplomats would do well to turn their energy to ensuring that any fallout from these tensions can be contained, while working toward constructive dialogue between the two governments.

Progress on regional reconciliation is unlikely in the short term, however, given the AFC/M23's occupation of much of the two Kivu provinces. But, should progress be made toward a sustainable ceasefire, all four Great Lakes countries need to recommit to stop using proxy fighters to squeeze their neighbours, as they agreed to do in a 2013 landmark regional stability agreement.[110] Supporting such groups undermines the trust needed to make progress on other vital issues such as trade and the return of refugees. The region is already awash with armed groups, state and non-state, and all sides need to create the space required to advance demobilisation and associated community cohesion programs.

C. *Finding a Modus Vivendi with the M23*

With continued but less visible Rwandan support, the AFC/M23 is settling into parts of North and South Kivu provinces for the long term, in particular in and around the city of Goma. Although it asserts its authority mainly through coercion and fear, the movement is also placing new administrators in key posts, recruiting fighters and making plans to create a new judiciary, as noted above. Over time, it may become more autonomous of its Rwandan sponsors, even if that independence has yet to be tested in heavy fighting.

Given the Congolese army's inability to dislodge the rebels, and in light of the AFC/M23's own rhetoric and ambitions, diplomats and mediators should operate on the assumption that the rebels intend to stay. Diplomats, especially UN personnel, as well as aid agency staff, must find a modus vivendi with the AFC/M23 to allow for conversations about how to limit abuses, maintain humanitarian access and reopen Goma's airport.

The government, while understandably reluctant to take any measure that might be seen as facilitating or legitimising the AFC/M23 occupation, must at the very least show flexibility toward the predicament of humanitarian agencies and do what it can to enhance relief work in the two provinces. It should also consider unfreezing the banking system in the affected region, given the many obstacles residents already face earning sustainable livelihoods. For their part, donors

[109] "Rdc Burundi : l'aéroport de Bujumbura un point de ravitaillement des armes au front M23", *Kivu Morning Post*, 5 September 2025.
[110] "Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Region", African Union, February 2013.

should continue and, where possible, increase their financial contributions to humanitarian agencies to alleviate suffering in the eastern DRC, including for measures to address the physical and psychological trauma of sexual and other physical violence, as well as to provide safe haven and other protective measures for civilians.

D. *Finding the Right Mediation Formula Post-Washington*

The acrimony between the DRC and Rwanda, and between Rwanda and Burundi, has generated divisions among African leaders throughout the continent. The inability of successive mediators to achieve a workable ceasefire has also intensified frustration among the numerous powers playing a role in the crisis or its mediation. U.S. and Qatari diplomats succeeded in slowing the M23's advance and getting the Washington and Doha agreements over the line, but African mediators also have a role to play, particularly if U.S. attention wanes.

The AU, as discussed above, has limited room for manoeuvre regarding the eastern DRC. Ideally, it would acknowledge these constraints and seek to identify the priorities that it can work on. These could include pushing for a ceasefire and engaging in quiet diplomacy to head off further regional fighting. Before it can do so, however, it will need better support – its lead mediator and five facilitators currently lack any kind of secretariat – and improved coordination between its component parts.[111] As long as Doha and Washington remain engaged, the AU and African mediators should envisage a continued division of labour, with the latter encouraging ceasefire talks and stressing the urgency of a lasting truce. African leaders are also well placed to engage in back-channel talks to persuade Rwanda and Burundi to dial down their vitriol toward each other. Eventually, and supposing that a working ceasefire can hold, African states and the AU could engage more fully in ceasefire monitoring alongside the UN, as the AU has done in the past.

For Western, Qatari and African officials and diplomats, meanwhile, the cause of peace in the Great Lakes will require sustained attention to negotiating ceasefires, monitoring them despite imperfections, getting the parties to scale down heated rhetoric and reduce abuses, and stopping further regional conflagration. But it will also depend on greater willingness to press for Rwanda's withdrawal. Calling on the AFC/M23 and Rwandan troops to pull out is an important statement of principle in the face of aggression – without it, the conflict will surely become even more protracted. Despite the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 2773 in January, which called on the M23 and Rwanda to depart from North and South Kivu, Western, Gulf and

[111] Crisis Group interviews, AU officials and southern African diplomat, Addis Ababa, November 2025.

African diplomats have so far seemed reluctant to muster the pressure needed to persuade Kigali to follow through.

To this end, Western powers should consider further measures to change Kigali's calculations and increase the cost of its decision to invade the DRC. Donors should review the direct and indirect financial support they give to the Rwandan armed forces. They should make clear that such assistance could be suspended if Kigali pursues its current course in the eastern DRC – to be resumed only if and when it complies with commitments to withdraw.

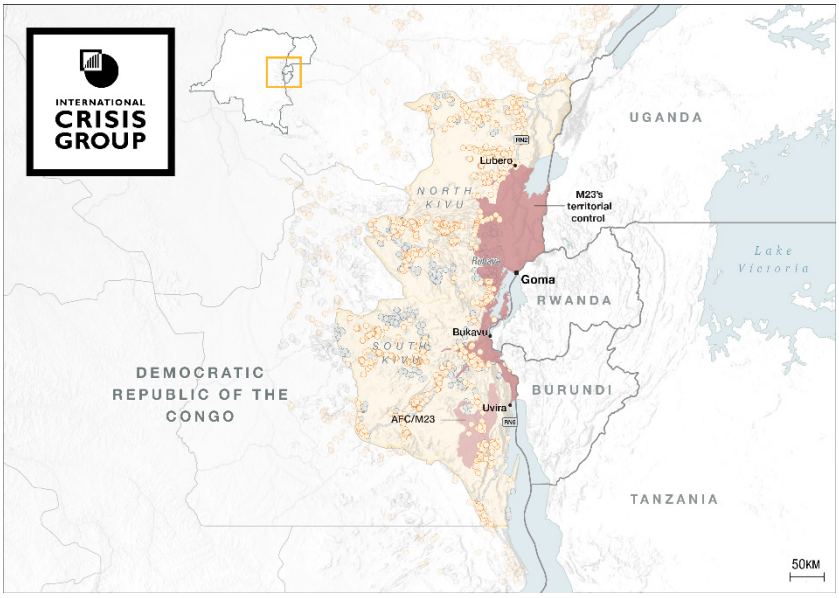
VI. Conclusion

The renewed fighting in the eastern DRC since 2021 represents a huge setback after two decades of internationally supported peace-building efforts. The human impact of the latest wave of conflict has been calamitous: numerous families have been displaced multiple times, health and education systems are in tatters, and many lie dead. Equally alarming is how impervious these conditions seem to be to the efforts of diplomats, who have hurried to strike deals that have little or no effect on the fighting. The hard work, including getting a meaningful ceasefire in place, channelling help to the needy, laying out a plan to pull back armed groups and ensuring respect for international borders, is only just starting now that the ink is dry on the peace agreements.

The years that have elapsed since fighting began, the array of armed groups involved and the high stakes for neighbouring countries have contrived to turn the Great Lakes into a seemingly ingrained conflict. Policymakers rightly see stilling the fighting and bringing humanitarian relief as their priorities. But Western, Qatari and African diplomats and mediators should also keep in mind the importance of restoring the DRC's territorial integrity, primarily through the withdrawal of Rwandan forces, as well as the goal of rekindling regional cooperation. This latest bout of warfare is a cruel reminder that no stopgap solution will do.

Nairobi/Brussels, 19 December 2025

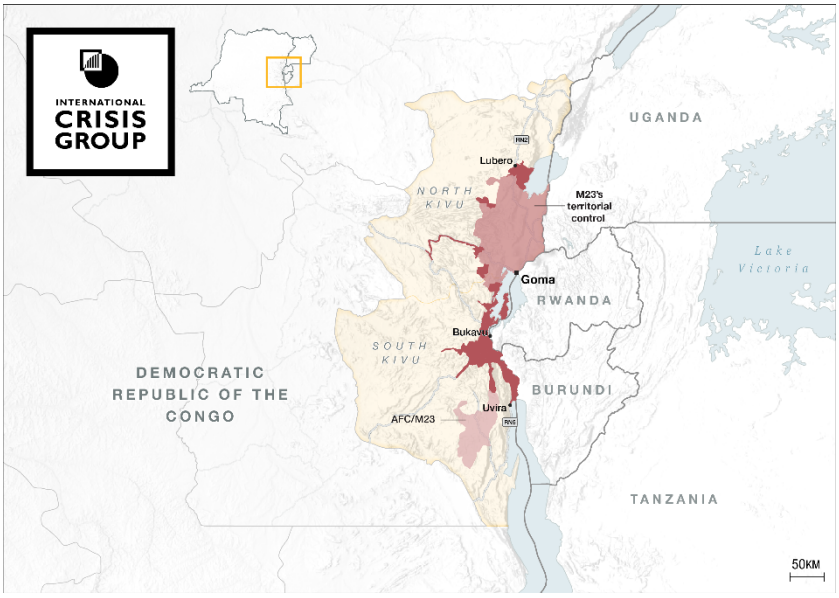
Appendix A: M23 Control and Mining in the Eastern DRC



Locations of gold (yellow) and other (grey) artisanal mining in the eastern DRC and the M23's area of operations as of 10 December 2025.

Sources: International Peace Information Service; Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute; CRISIS GROUP.

Appendix B: M23 Control and Mining in the Eastern DRC



The lighter red shows the territory the M23 holds as of 10 December 2025 and the darker red the maximum extent of its advances over the last year.

Sources: Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute; CRISIS GROUP.

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes CrisisWatch, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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