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DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Conflict in North Kivu

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

From mid-January 2024, there has been a spike in fighting between the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) and the March 23 Movement (M23) in North Kivu province (UNSC 21/02/2024). Clashes have been particularly intense in Bahunde, Bashali, Katsiru, and Mweso towns, Masisi territory; Bukumbo town in Rutshuru territory; and Buhumba and Kibumba towns in Nyiragongo territory. On 12 February, fighting escalated near Sake town, around 25km west of Goma (UNSC 21/02/2024; UNICEF 19/02/2024; IOM 14/02/2024).

Heavy artillery and mortar use have caused civilian casualties and damage in Mweso and Sake (Masisi territory) and Goma city's outskirts, including in IDP camps (IOM 14/02/2024). As at 21 February, at least 35 civilians had been killed and dozens injured since 16 January, including in the displacement site of Sake, where at least 100,000 displaced people were hosted as at 7 February (NRC 15/02/2024; IOM 14/02/2024; OCHA 13/02/2024; AI 20/02/2024).

Between 2–8 February, fighting displaced around 150,000 people in North Kivu, around 50% of whom were children (STC 08/02/2024). More than 135,000 of these IDPs went to Goma city, bringing the number of IDPs in Goma to over 635,000 (UNICEF 19/02/2024). The fighting also displaced an estimated 60,000 people southwards towards Minova and Bunyakiri in South Kivu province (UNICEF 19/02/2024; OCHA 08/02/2024). As at 11 February, the number of M23-related displacements across North Kivu province had risen to 1.7 million, an estimated 14% (around 238,000) of whom were aged between 0–5. This brought the total number of IDPs in the province to 2.5 million (IOM 14/02/2024; UN 14/02/2024). Many of these IDPs have experienced repeated displacement, including from collective centres in Bweremana, Kirotshe, and Shasha in Masisi territory and Katsiru in Rutshuru territory (IOM 14/02/2024; OCHA 08/02/2024 and 13/02/2024). IDP figures are likely underreported because of limited humanitarian access and a rapidly evolving conflict context.

The priority needs of IDPs in North Kivu include access to food, shelter, WASH, NFIs, and healthcare (IOM 14/02/2024; OCHA 08/02/2024). Formal and informal

IDP sites are overcrowded and lack WASH facilities, leading to a rise in cholera and diarrhoea cases since the recent influx of IDPs (UNSC 21/02/2024).

Anticipated scope and scale

The increased use of sophisticated weapons and aerial assets by the M23 shows that it can maintain hostilities with the FARDC and allies for several more months, increasing the likelihood of further internal displacement (UNSC 30/12/2023; IPIS 06/02/2023). Many of these displacements will likely affect already displaced populations.

Diplomatic relations between the DRC and Rwanda are becoming increasingly tense. In December 2023, before the presidential elections, the Congolese President declared that he could declare war on Rwanda and march to its capital should he be re-elected. Rwanda, for its part, continues to deny any support for the M23 but has increased its military presence along its border with the DRC (UNSC 30/12/2023; ICG 26/01/2024; AP 12/12/2023). Escalating tensions between these two countries could lead to a military confrontation, displacing even more civilians in the region.

Continued heavy fighting near Sake could lead to the takeover of the town by the M23, cutting off Goma, the capital of North Kivu, from the rest of the country. The prolonged presence of the M23 on the Goma-Bukavu road section would also particularly disrupt South Kivu's supply routes. If the city of Goma were to fall into the hands of the M23 again, as it did in 2012, many protection concerns would arise for local and displaced populations (ACLED 23/03/2023; RFI 19/02/2024).

The FARDC's focus on new fronts with the M23 has left a security vacuum in other parts of North Kivu, leading to increased activity by armed groups entering from South Kivu province, including the Allied Democratic Forces and Mayi Mayi groups, which frequently perpetrate human rights violations against civilians (UNSC 21/02/2024). There is a risk that the continued FARDC-M23 conflict will allow these armed groups to increase activity, leading to further violations and protection risks.

KEY FIGURES

1.6M

DISPLACED PEOPLE
SINCE MARCH 2022

200,000

NEWLY DISPLACED
PEOPLE

High risk

OF INCREASED
CHOLERA
TRANSMISSION

7.6

INFORM CLIMATE
CHANGE RISK SCORE

MONUSCO is withdrawing from South Kivu by the end of April (UNSC 19/12/2023). This may allow the above-mentioned South Kivu-based armed groups to further expand their activity.

To counter the M23, the DRC Government is mobilising proxy militias known as Wazalendo (or True Patriots). These armed groups have perpetrated attacks on civilians in the past and are currently using their affiliation with the Wazalendo to gain legitimacy and improve their position in the event of possible integration into the FARDC. The use of these armed groups could lead to human rights violations against civilians suspected of supporting the M23, particularly the Rwandophone community. Hate speech and incitement to violence have increased in recent years, with some targeting Rwandophone communities. These could intensify further and put more people at risk of displacement and protection concerns (UNSC 30/12/2023; FIDH 24/04/2023).

Humanitarian constraints

As at 20 February, the M23 controlled all major routes to Goma. Fighting between Bukavu and Sake is preventing the transport of basic supplies, while fighting between Sake and Bweremana is blocking the only route to Minova. As a result, IDPs near Minova are only accessible by boat (UNICEF 19/02/2024). The blocking of the main roads could lead to serious consequences for the population's access to basic needs and increase food prices throughout Goma and the surrounding area (IOM 23/02/2024).

Violence and insecurity is preventing humanitarian access to IDP sites and has prompted the withdrawal of local humanitarians from Minova, South Kivu (UNICEF 19/02/2024). In early February, MSF was forced to relocate some of its staff because of attacks on a hospital in Mwesu, Masisi territory (MSF 14/02/2024). As at 13 February, humanitarians were unable to assist around 630,000 pre-existing and new IDPs in Masisi because of insecurity (OCHA 13/02/2024). Clashes on the Sake-Bweremana route also pose a protection issue for humanitarian workers operating in the region (MSF 07/02/2024; UNICEF 19/02/2024). Violence targeting or affecting humanitarian responders had already increased significantly in North Kivu in the last quarter of 2023 (UNSC 21/02/2024).

MONUSCO's withdrawal in South Kivu may affect the access and supplies of humanitarian responders that collaborate with the mission (Logistics Cluster 13/02/2024).

BACKGROUND

The M23, which claims to represent the Congolese Tutsi population, was initially formed in response to the poor implementation of a 2009 peace treaty between the Government of the DRC and the M23's predecessor, the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP). Currently, the armed group primarily comprises former Congolese army soldiers who joined after accusing the Government of discriminating against their Tutsi ethnic minority (ACLED 23/03/2023).

Between 2012–2013, the group's armed activity and clashes with the FARDC displaced around 800,000 people in North Kivu (IDMC 14/11/2013). The M23 quickly took control of large swaths of territory in the province, including the capital, Goma. From November–December 2012, it held the town for ten days before withdrawing following agreements with the Congolese Government. M23 activity continued around Goma, especially in Rutshuru and Nyiragongo provinces, up to November 2013. Following a strong counteroffensive by the Congolese army and UN peacekeepers, the group suffered heavy losses, and the number of violent incidents associated with them decreased significantly (ACLED 23/03/2023).

In December 2013, the Congolese Government and the M23 signed the Nairobi Agreement. This agreement stipulated that, in return for the M23's disengagement from hostilities, the Congolese Government would disarm, demobilise, and socially reintegrate former combatants (DW 12/12/2013; Reuters 12/12/2013). In November 2021, the M23 resumed hostilities, complaining that the Government had failed to implement the Nairobi Agreement (BBC 21/02/2024; CFR accessed 22/02/2024; IPIS 16/11/2023).

In March 2022, the M23 launched a major large-scale aerial and artillery offensive. Over the following year, the group gained control of large parts of North Kivu, including almost all of Rutshuru and parts of Masisi territory (Al Jazeera 15/02/2024; CFR accessed 22/02/2024; IPIS 16/11/2023). In early March 2023, the M23 and FARDC agreed on a ceasefire, which allowed for the M23's withdrawal from Rutshuru and Masisi. Both sides, however, repeatedly violated the ceasefire, which expired on 28 December 2023 (IPIS 16/11/2023; UNSC 21/02/2024). Since December 2023 and the emergence of the Alliance du Fleuve Congo (AFC), a new umbrella organisation against the Congolese Government, the M23 has openly declared its intention to overthrow the national authorities, although it does not appear to be likely at present (ICG 26/01/2024). In November 2022, the East African Community sent troops to eastern DRC to fight the M23. Their mandate officially ended on 8 December 2023. The Congolese Government chose not to extend it, considering the force ineffective and not sufficiently offensive in its approach against the M23 (Africanews 03/12/2023; Foreign Brief 07/12/2023). Following the end of this mandate, on 15 December, the Southern African Development Community deployed troops to support the FARDC in eastern DRC, including North Kivu. It is yet unclear how these troops will affect the trajectory of fighting, security, and associated needs in the province (Al Jazeera 15/02/2024; Reuters 12/02/2024).

CRISIS IMPACTS

Shelter

As at 12 February, 54% of the IDPs in North Kivu province were staying with host communities, and 46% were in formal and informal IDP sites, including camps, churches, and schools. The recent influx of IDPs has aggravated overcrowding and poor shelter conditions in these IDP sites (IOM 14/02/2024; STC 08/02/2024; UNSC 21/02/2024). Many IDPs are forced to sleep in the open air (Oxfam 22/02/2024).

WASH

There is a lack of potable water in the crowded IDP sites in Goma (UNSC 21/02/2024). In Rusayo 1 camp, IDPs have access to only 3L of water per day, well below the international standard of 15L. There was also only one shower for every 500 people (NRC 15/02/2024). There are reports that IDPs in host communities have been forced to pay a fee equivalent to USD 0.40 to use hosts' showers and latrines, which many cannot afford. These constraints force people to travel several hours for water, exposing women in particular to violence (Oxfam 22/02/2024). There are also limited systems in IDP camps for the collection and treatment of waste (UNICEF/WASH Cluster 22/02/2024).

Even prior to the recent spike in IDPs, people across North Kivu had access to only an average of 6.3L of water per day, one latrine between 138 people, and one shower between 249 people (WASH Cluster 20/02/2024).

Health

The poor WASH conditions in IDP sites have contributed to a rise in cholera and diarrhoea cases since the recent influx of IDPs (UNSC 21/02/2024; Oxfam 22/02/2024). In 2023, North Kivu province was already experiencing the most severe effects of the worst cholera crisis in eastern DRC since 2017 (UNICEF 18/08/2023). Between 1 January and 25 December 2023, there were around 33,000 cholera cases in North Kivu, which constituted almost two-thirds of cases nationwide. Goma was the worst affected health zone in the province in November–December 2023. North Kivu also experienced the second-highest rate (after South Kivu) of diarrhoea-related dehydration cases (around 36,500) between January and 25 December 2023 (Govt. DRC/WHO 08/01/2024). Further, in 2023, North Kivu was one of the provinces worst affected by the largest measles epidemic in the DRC since 2019 (WHO 22/09/2023; Crisis24 08/05/2023).

Medical facilities in Goma and other North Kivu towns are not equipped to deal with increased disease transmission and civilian casualties from fighting, as they lack medical items and beds for patients (ICRC 09/02/2024; UNICEF 11/12/2023). An influx of people injured by bullets and explosions is already overwhelming hospitals, particularly in Mweso and other parts of Masisi territory. There are also increasing numbers of patients affected by sexual violence (MSF 14/02/2024 and 07/02/2024). As at 7 February, patients from southern North Kivu were being referred to South Kivu, where hospitals were also becoming overwhelmed (MSF 07/02/2024).

Further, hospitals have become a place of refuge for IDPs. About 10,000 people sought shelter in Mweso hospital (Masisi territory) following the recent escalation of clashes. While most had fled after increased fighting in Mweso, around 2,500 remained as at 7 February (ICRC 09/02/2024; MSF 14/02/2024 and 07/02/2024).

Protection

Since the escalation of fighting, heavy artillery positioned near IDP sites and a heightened military presence around these sites have increased protection risks (UNICEF 19/02/2024). On 12 February, indirect fire killed five people, including three children, in Zaina IDP camp outside Sake (UNSC 21/02/2024; UNICEF 19/02/2024). Following the attack, nearly 14,000 camp inhabitants were displaced onwards to other parts of Sake. Protection risks because of attacks on villages are particularly high in Beni territory, where people have been killed, abducted, and prevented from fleeing since early January (OCHA 13/02/2024).

There are increased reports of children being separated from their parents because of fighting and displacement, although the total number of unaccompanied and separated children is unknown (STC 08/02/2024). There are also reports that the M23 has forcibly recruited children during fighting in Rutshuru and Masisi territories (Radio Okapi 30/01/2024). Children in North Kivu are at high risk of experiencing grave violations, including sexual violence and forced recruitment by armed groups, including the M23. Between the first half of 2022 and the same period in 2023, there was a 41% increase in violations against children across the DRC, mostly in North Kivu (UNICEF 15/10/2023; UNGA/UNSC 05/06/2023).

Gender-based violence (GBV) cases are also rising in IDP camps, continuing a steady increase since mid-2023. In the first half of 2023, more than 10,000 GBV survivors received support from the Protection Cluster, a figure that may not be representative of all GBV cases (Protection Cluster 30/06/2023; PHR 20/12/2023). Women are also vulnerable to GBV when leaving IDP sites to collect food and firewood (CARE 19/02/2024 and 31/03/2023).

Livelihoods, food security, and nutrition

Restricted access to M23-controlled areas has isolated Goma, disrupting food production and supply chains (UNSC 21/02/2024). As at 20 February, blocked supply routes contributed to insufficient food and increased prices in Goma markets (UNICEF 19/02/2024; CARE 19/02/2024; OCHA 08/02/2024). Increased conflict and displacement have also limited access to livelihoods. In Masisi territory, where agriculture is the primary livelihood activity, a growing number of checkpoints and 'tax points' throughout 2023 already restricted people's access to fields and crops (MSF 26/10/2023). Conflict in the coming months may disrupt the planting and harvest of corn and rice, which are common crops in North Kivu (USDA accessed 22/02/2024).

Limited access to markets and livelihoods is likely to aggravate food insecurity in North Kivu, where over 2.7 million people, or 31% of the province's population, were projected to experience Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse food insecurity levels between January–June 2024. These include nearly 170,000 people in Goma, or 20% of its population (IPC 29/09/2023).

Increased fighting and displacement may also aggravate malnutrition, which was already critical in North Kivu, particularly in Masisi territory. Between January–October 2023, an average of 800 children per month were admitted to hospitals for severe acute malnutrition in the province, almost twice the average for the same period in 2022 (MSF 26/10/2023).

Education

Schools in areas of Masisi territory, including Sake, have been closed because of the growing insecurity in the area following the reports of munitions landing in a school courtyard. In safer places, schools are providing refuge for displaced families (STC 08/02/2024; NRC 15/02/2024). This is aggravating an existing education deficit in eastern DRC, where armed groups occupied about 119 schools, insecurity forced 1,700 to close, and IDPs were using 300 for shelter between January 2022 and March 2023 (UNICEF 29/03/2023). Between January–May 2023, there were attacks on around 150 of the 6,800 schools in North Kivu alone. Armed groups occupied 18 of these schools, and IDPs used 113 for shelter (STC 09/05/2023). Children affected by school closures are more vulnerable to the protection risks prevalent in North Kivu, including forced recruitment and early marriage (UNICEF 15/10/2023).

COMPOUNDING/AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Climate and natural hazards

The DRC is highly vulnerable to climate change, with an INFORM Climate Change Risk score of 7.6/10.0 ('very high') and a score of 8.1/10.0 ('very high') for lack of coping capacity (EC accessed 22/02/2024).

Floods have been one of the most frequently occurring natural hazards in the DRC for the past 30 years, second only to epidemics, with an average of 35 floods per year across the country (WB accessed 18/01/2024). South Kivu experienced heavy rainfall and flooding in May and December 2023, increasing humanitarian needs and likely limiting the capacity of communities to cope with the present influx of IDPs from North Kivu (AA YouTube 29/12/2023; USAID 28/12/2023; FloodList 08/05/2023). Floods and landslides in Kalehe territory, South Kivu, killed at least 400 people from 2–4 May 2023. Over 3,000 houses were also destroyed (WFP 11/05/2023).

Economic crisis

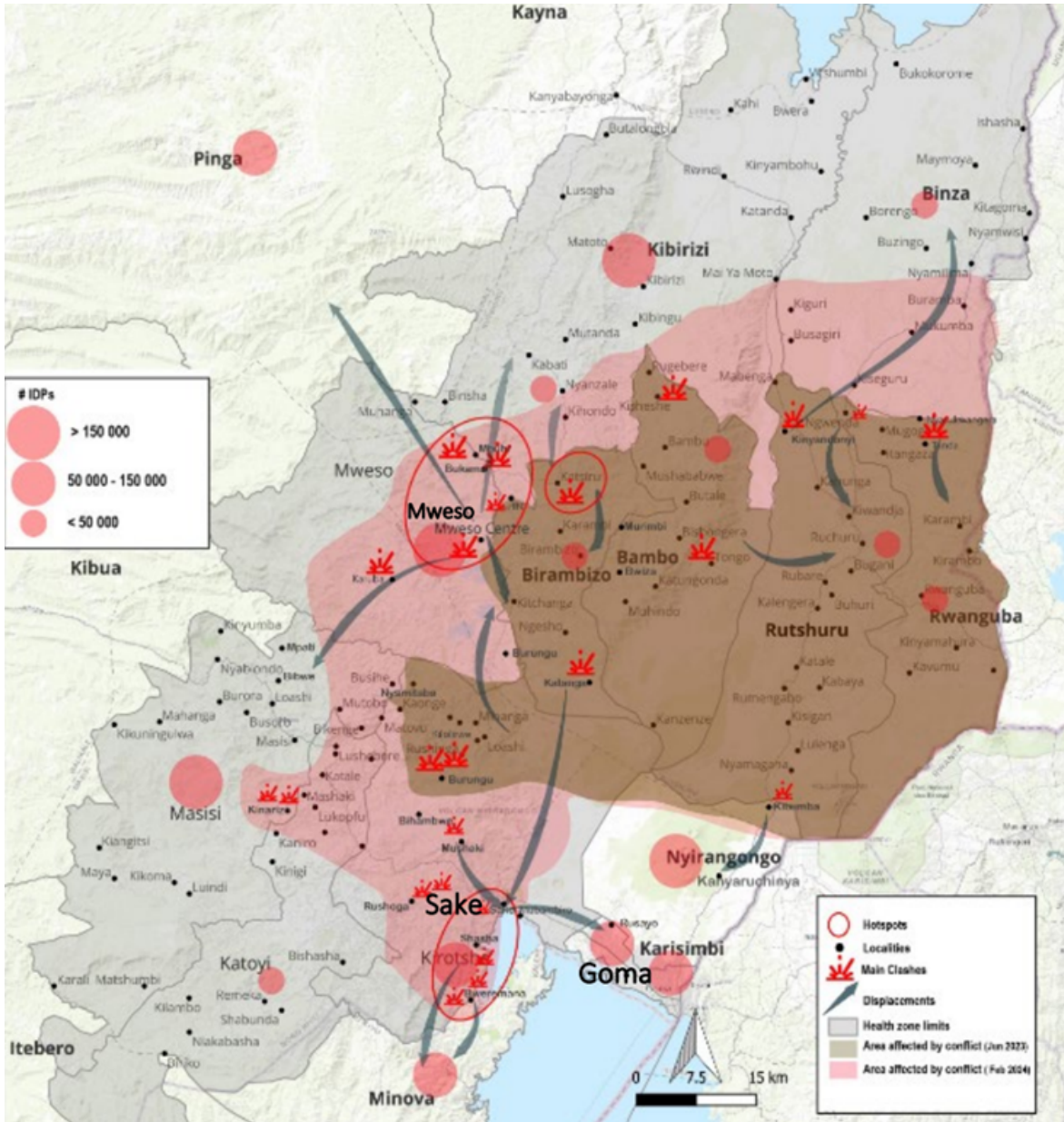
The DRC ranks among the five most impoverished nations globally, alongside Burundi, the Central African Republic, Somalia, and South Sudan (WB accessed 22/02/2024). In 2022, approximately 60 million Congolese people, or nearly 62% of the population, lived on less than USD 2.15 per day (WB accessed 22/02/2024; Global Finance 01/01/2024).

Extensive presence of armed groups

Aside from the M23, armed groups active in eastern DRC include the Islamic State-affiliated Allied Democratic Forces, the Mayi Mayi groups, and the Nyatura militias (CFR accessed 22/02/2024; UNSC 21/02/2024). As at 2020, at least 45 armed groups were operating in North Kivu alone (KST 28/02/2021). Conflict caused by these groups, along with frequent natural hazards, has internally displaced nearly seven million people in DRC, 97% of whom were located in the eastern provinces (CARE 19/02/2024).

Protracted displacement

Before the resurgence of the M23, North Kivu province was already hosting over 1.8 million IDPs, according to figures from August 2021. These figures rose to 2.5 million by January 2024, making it the most affected province in terms of internal displacement in the DRC (OCHA 21/09/2021 and 22/02/2024).



Source: UNICEF (19/02/2024)