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DR Congo: Rwanda-Backed M23 Target Journalists, Activists

Armed Group Threatens, Harasses, Attacks Civilians in Occupied East

- The Rwanda-backed M23 armed group and the allied Alliance Fleuve Congo have threatened, detained, and attacked journalists, critics, and civil society activists since capturing Goma in January.
- Restoring a measure of normalcy to the M23 occupied cities of Goma and Bukavu will mean allowing journalists and activists to do their jobs without threats, violence, or worse.
- The European Union, its member states, and other concerned governments should urgently adopt further targeted sanctions against the M23 and high-level Rwandan and Congolese officials responsible for serious abuses.

(Nairobi) – The [Rwanda](#)-backed M23 armed group and the allied Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC) have threatened, detained, and attacked journalists, critics, and civil society activists since capturing Goma

ecoi.net description:

Article on how the Rwanda-backed M23 militia and allied Alliance Fleuve Congo have persecuted journalists, critics, and civil society activists since capturing Goma in January 2025

Country:

Congo, Democratic Republic

Source:

[HRW – Human Rights Watch](#)
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in eastern [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) in late January 2025, Human Rights Watch said today. The Alliance Fleuve Congo is a politico-military coalition that includes the M23.

In North and South Kivu provinces, M23 fighters have raided homes, made death threats, and threatened reprisals, undermining independent media and the work of civil society groups. M23 fighters have also detained civil society leaders and committed summary executions, including killing a singer and activist at his home and five men doing forced labor.

“The Rwanda-backed M23 is harassing and attacking activists, journalists, and peaceful critics in areas the armed group controls in eastern Congo,” said [Clémentine de Montjoye](#), senior Great Lakes researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Restoring a measure of normalcy to the captured cities of Goma and Bukavu will mean allowing journalists and civil society activists to do their jobs without threats, violence, or worse.”

Since late January, Human Rights Watch has interviewed over two dozen Congolese activists as well as domestic and foreign journalists in the cities of Goma, Kinshasa, and Bujumbura, and reviewed audio recordings of phone calls, screenshots of messages, and video and audio recordings of speeches given by AFC and M23 officials. Human Rights Watch received credible information that over 200 activists have sought protection support since the M23 began its offensive on Goma in January and later captured South Kivu’s provincial capital, Bukavu, in February.

The M23 and AFC authorities as well as the Rwandan government are obligated to abide by international humanitarian law in areas they occupy. They should permit civil society activists and journalists to work and move freely except for imperative reasons of security, and hold to account their personnel responsible for abuses.

On March 5, Human Rights Watch emailed its preliminary findings to Rwandan authorities and asked for comment, but has received no replies at time of publication.

After the M23 and Rwandan forces captured Goma on January 27, the AFC replaced the police and other national government institutions across the city. Since then, M23 fighters have beaten and summarily executed alleged supporters of the Congolese armed forces and its allies, as well as alleged criminals, and looted homes.

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A Goma resident said that a group of M23 fighters came to his home on January 29 and accused him of helping their enemies kill their “friends” on the front line. “They beat me with sticks on my back all day,” he said. “I can’t walk anymore. They beat me, attacked me, and looted my house.”

On February 13, M23 fighters fatally shot the singer and activist Delphin Katembo Vinywasiki, known as Delcat Idengo, at his home in an apparently noncombat situation. On February 20, the AFC spokesperson, Lawrence Kanyuka, accused Idengo of being a member of the youth movement Lutte pour le Changement (Struggle for Change, or LUCHA) and told Human Rights Watch that the fighters killed him for wearing “military insignia.” In a separate incident, an independent source said M23 fighters summarily executed a LUCHA activist along with four other men after they carried out forced labor for the armed group.

The M23 has long used [threats](#) and [intimidation](#) to restrict the population’s access to information and to control criticism. Journalists have already faced difficulties reporting on the situation in Goma.

The Rwandan government has arrested Congolese civilians without evident legal basis. In February, after Rwandan authorities arrested a Congolese activist who had crossed into Rwanda, they handed him over to the M23 military intelligence in Goma, which detained him for seven days. Kanyuka confirmed that the activist was arrested in Rwanda at the M23’s request and held in military intelligence facilities for “being against our regime” and had “produced a lot of criticism against us.” AFC and M23 officials have detained and threatened several Congolese activists.

The Congolese armed forces and its allied armed groups have also been responsible for serious abuses. Amid the fighting in eastern Congo during 2024, several armed groups aligned with the Congolese army [increased attacks on human rights defenders](#). Journalists [reported](#) that both the M23 and Congolese national authorities pressured them to publish only positive stories on their military engagements.

The Congolese government also has threatened action against journalists who cover the country’s conflict. On January 7, the president of the Communication and Broadcasting Board (Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel et de la communication, CSAC) announced that Radio France Internationale, France 24, and TV5Monde’s Africa program faced suspension for reporting on “alleged advances of terrorists.” Justice Minister Constant Mutamba [warned](#) that anyone, including

journalists, who shares information about the M23 and Rwandan forces would face severe legal consequences, including possibly the death penalty.

The parties to the armed conflict in eastern Congo, including Rwanda and the M23, and Congo and its allied armed groups, are bound by international humanitarian law, or the laws of war. Relevant law can be found in the Geneva Conventions of 1949, including Common Article 3, the Hague Regulations of 1907, and customary international law. The law of occupation concerning the protection of civilians applies to areas, including Goma and Bukavu, that Rwandan or M23 forces control. While occupation law permits occupying forces to impose security restrictions on civilians, it also requires them over time to restore and ensure public order and civil life for the occupied population.

The European Union, its member states, and other concerned governments should urgently adopt further targeted sanctions against the M23 and high-level Rwandan and Congolese officials responsible for serious abuses.

On February 20, the United States [imposed financial and property sanctions](#) on Gen. James Kabarebe, Rwanda's minister of state and former military commander, and on Kanyuka, the AFC spokesperson. Governments should also press Rwanda to ensure that civilians, including journalists and activists, have freedom of movement in M23-controlled territory, in accordance with international humanitarian law.

The EU should also suspend its [deal on minerals](#) with Rwanda in light of its forces' involvement in abuses with the M23, and review military and security cooperation with Rwanda, including under the [European Peace Facility](#).

"During this difficult time in M23-controlled cities, the local population needs access to essential information and reliable news," de Montjoye said. "Governments should press Rwanda to ensure that the M23 will allow journalists and activists to function without unnecessary restrictions that are putting civilians at greater risk."

For additional detail, please see below.

Activists, Journalists under Threat in Goma

The M23's [military offensive](#) in 2024 led to the closure of numerous local radio stations as a result of [direct attacks, looting, M23 takeovers](#), and journalists fleeing the fighting. Reporters Without Borders [reported](#) that more than 25 radio stations in North Kivu province ceased operations due to fighting and looting.

Since early February, new AFC administrative authorities have made statements threatening civil society, saying it is “cleaning up” Goma. Such statements have heightened journalists and activists’ fears of being targeted.

Days after taking the city, M23 fighters began harassing journalists, activists, and civil society leaders whom they deemed a threat. On January 27, Col. Erasto Bahati Musanga, an M23 commander who has since been appointed governor of Goma, phoned an activist in the city to tell him they were looking for him because they had been tracking his human rights work on M23 abuses. “After that I didn’t spend two nights in the same place,” the activist said. Another activist told Human Rights Watch that Musanga had similarly threatened him.

Local media reported that on February 10, Ephraïm Kabasha, the administrator of Nyiragongo territory, just north of Goma, [said](#) during a meeting with local chiefs that “civil society and the Youth Territorial Council [Conseil Territorial de la Jeunesse, CTJ] are the main troublemakers and instigators of conflict in the territory of Nyiragongo. We have therefore decided to remove them under our governance.”

Human Rights Watch reviewed screenshots of messages that Kabasha sent threatening an activist prior to the capture of Goma. After the M23’s takeover, Kabasha phoned at least one other activist. “He threatened me badly and said, ‘I know where you are, you can’t escape,’” the activist said. “Since then, I’m in hiding. I don’t know how we can leave Goma. Some unknown men also visited my family’s house.”

In early March, M23 fighters in North Kivu separately detained two civil society leaders, according to credible information. Both men had received threats from the M23 because of their work on the conflict. Kabasha allegedly detained Jacques Niyonzima, a civil society leader from Rutshuru, after he

arrived at the administrative office of Nyiragongo territory. On March 4, Kabasha took him to a military detention site. He was released later that day after being questioned about his work on M23 abuses. He was severely beaten and was told others would also be arrested.

Kabasha replied to Human Rights Watch's request for a response to the allegations against him by saying that Human Rights Watch was not the judicial police and to stop asking him questions.

On March 3, David Muisha, a civil society leader in Masisi, was detained in Goma and transferred to a police post, according to sources. He was released on March 6 after being beaten and threatened in detention. On March 4, the M23 in Goma took into custody Didace Jimmy Butsitsi Nchimiyimana, an activist working for an organization documenting crimes related to the M23 and the Rwandan military offensive in eastern Congo. Sources said that he is being held by the M23 in Goma in military detention.

On February 2, the AFC member Jean-Louis Kulu Musubao, now the mayor of Kirumba commune, gave a speech at the CBCA Virunga Church and said that the M23 "no longer wants civil society, citizen movements, and pressure groups, such as the youth movement, LUCHA. If you end up in those, you'll have problems with us."

When asked about these private and public threats, Kanyuka, the AFC spokesperson, told Human Rights Watch: "There are scores to be settled with people who are against our struggle, that's quite normal.... There are small conflicts with civil society working with the central government ... [but] citizen movements are different from civil society." Kanyuka also said that local neighborhood leaders and "focal points" in Goma and Bukavu were being taken to Bunagana, where the M23 has a base, and given "ideological training."

Over a dozen activists and journalists told Human Rights Watch that M23 fighters threatened them and that they were concerned for their security. "All the activists who came from Rutshuru [a territory in North Kivu] are in greater danger because they are known to many of these M23 elements, especially those who are still in Goma," said an activist who is now in Kinshasa. "The threats date back to when the activists fled Rutshuru, and now that the M23 is in Goma, they are asking all the activists there to join the movement and to hand over copies of all the reports they have made against the M23." Another activist from Rutshuru provided screenshots and audio

recordings of threats he received from an M23 commander and some fighters while he was in Goma, prompting him to flee before the city was captured.

Several activists and journalists said that M23 fighters and commanders had gone to their houses since the M23 took control of Goma. One activist said men he believed to be M23 visited his house on two occasions. He said an M23 commander also phoned him and accused him of working for Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi: “He said ... if I turn myself in, nothing will happen to me except for a few days in prison to make me agree to be one of them, but that if I refuse and the M23 catches me, I may die.” A journalist in hiding said that four M23 fighters in a jeep came to his house in early February.

Two journalists who had reported from M23-controlled Bweremana, Jonas Kasula from Labeur Info and Jonathan Mupenda from Molière TV, said they had received anonymous threatening messages. A message received on January 9 [said](#): “You were in Bweremana on December 31 and we had the opportunity to kill you. You should know that we are watching your every move. When we get to Goma, we will finish you off.”

On February 18, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [expressed concern](#) for the safety of lawyers and other judicial staff, particularly those who were prosecuting individuals for serious crimes who have since escaped from prisons in Goma and Bukavu. On February 17, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders expressed “[extreme concern](#)” about the situation of human rights defenders in eastern Congo.

On March 5, the Special Rapporteur [said](#) she had “received credible reports of human rights defenders being detained incommunicado, forcibly disappeared and tortured in Rutshuru and Masisi in North Kivu, while at least six human rights defenders are reported missing following their attempt to flee Goma after the city was taken by M23.”

Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions requires the authorities to treat civilians humanely at all times and prohibits violence to their life and person, murder, and outrages against personal dignity. The Fourth Geneva Convention, which addresses the legal obligations of occupying forces, permits the detention of civilians only for “[imperative reasons of security](#).” To prevent arbitrary deprivation of liberty, the authorities [are obligated](#) to inform the person arrested of the reasons for

it; bring the person arrested for a criminal offense promptly before an independent authority; and provide the person with an opportunity to challenge the lawfulness of the detention.

Ensuring the Safety of Activists, Journalists

During the recent fighting, thousands of Congolese civilians sought to reach safer areas, either within Congo or across the border to Rwanda or Burundi. Rwanda has not blocked most civilians trying to enter the country. Since the M23 and Rwandan forces' capture of Goma on January 27 and the closure of Goma's airport, and their capture of Bukavu on February 16, there are no safe pathways to travel from Goma to other parts of Congo.

Activists concerned about their security in M23-controlled areas have been among those trying to leave Goma and Bukavu. Thomas D'Aquin Muiti Luanda, an activist and known critic of the Rwandan government, and Clovis Munihire, the North Kivu coordinator of a Congolese [government-led disarmament program](#) with whom Luanda has worked, were [detained](#) in Gisenyi, Rwanda, on February 4 after crossing the border, a credible source told Human Rights Watch. The authorities detained them for several hours, then transferred them to M23 custody. They were released on February 11 without being given the reasons for their arrest or an opportunity to contest their detention.

When asked about their detention, Kanyuka, the AFC spokesperson, said: "When we were in Rutshuru, Masisi, Kirumba, Kanyabayonga ... they were against our regime. They produced a lot of criticism against us. Now we are the only rooster crowing, we don't have a choice." He said that M23 military intelligence handled their case.

Another activist attempting to flee to Burundi through Rwanda was taken into custody on February 12 at the Congo border by Rwandan officials, who accused him of traveling with false travel documents, several sources said. The activist is a member of an organization that documents abuses committed by Rwandan forces and the M23. They said that the activist's travel documents were authentic and expressed concern that he was being targeted because of his work.

Several Congolese activists who fled to Bujumbura, Burundi's largest city, told Human Rights Watch they were concerned about the risk of forcible return. Since the M23's capture of Bukavu, over

60,000 people were [reported](#) to have fled into Burundi. Human Rights Watch learned on February 15 that Burundian authorities had detained several activists among Congolese men and boys and threatened to send them back to Congo.

Rwanda and Burundi, as parties to both the UN and African refugee conventions, are prohibited from expelling or returning refugees to places where their lives or freedom would be threatened, including because of their political opinions. The governments have the responsibility, in collaboration with the United Nations Refugee Agency, to provide effective physical protection to asylum seekers and refugees within their territories.

Summary Killings by the M23

The M23 has a [long history](#) of grave human rights and humanitarian law abuses in areas that they control, including summary executions of civilians and captured combatants. Since taking control of Goma in late January, domestic civil society organizations, the media, and the UN have reported killings by the M23. The apparent summary executions of two known critics of the M23 have heightened concerns among activists and journalists that those deemed critical of M23 and AFC authorities may be targeted.

Pierre Katema Byamungu

On February 12 in Kalehe territory, South Kivu province, the M23 forced Pierre Katema Byamungu, a member of the activist movement LUCHA, and seven other men, including members of a local youth council, to carry out unpaid labor, an independent source told Human Rights Watch.

After transporting wounded and dead M23 fighters from the village of Muhongoza, they were taken to the village of Buziralo. The M23 accused Byamungu and the others of being members of the Wazalendo, a coalition of armed groups allied to the Congolese army. The source said that the M23 fighters then executed Byamungu and four others.

The AFC spokesperson, Kanyuka, told Human Rights Watch on February 20 that the M23 was not responsible for the killings.

Delphin Katembo Vinywasiki (Delcat Idengo)

On February 13, in Goma, M23 fighters shot and killed Delphin Katembo Vinywasiki, a singer and activist known as Delcat Idengo.

Audio and video witness accounts that Human Rights Watch reviewed indicate that when jeeps arrived at Idengo's house, Idengo tried to flee, and armed men shot him. Videos and photographs of the aftermath show multiple wounds to Idengo's head, arms, and right hand. Independent forensic experts concluded that Idengo appears to have been covering his head with his arms when he was shot.

Kanyuka confirmed that M23 fighters killed Idengo and accused him of being a member of LUCHA. "We had forbidden the population from wearing military insignia," Kanyuka said. "We found him at his house wearing military insignia during a sweep."

The information about the clothes that Idengo was wearing when he was killed is contradictory. The media reported that Idengo was filming a music video when he was shot. Some photographs taken after the killing and circulated on social media show him in military-style camouflage pants; others show him wearing white pants with an embroidered Congolese flag. This suggests that someone changed Idengo's pants after he was killed. No weapons are visible in the photographs.

A LUCHA member said Idengo was active in the movement between 2018 and 2020 in Beni. In 2021, Idengo was prosecuted, but eventually acquitted, for insulting President Tshisekedi and spreading "false rumors" in songs that accused Tshisekedi of not fulfilling his promises. Idengo also released songs criticizing the M23 and other armed groups. He was awaiting trial after being jailed in 2024 for allegedly inciting an armed uprising to force UN peacekeepers to leave the country. He had escaped from Goma's prison during the M23 offensive on the town, according to [media reports](#). On February 12, the day before he was killed, he [released](#) a song criticizing the "Tutsi occupation," and the M23.

Media Restrictions in Eastern Congo

Restrictions Imposed by Rwanda and the M23

Under international humanitarian law, journalists reporting in areas of armed conflict must be protected and respected. However, occupying powers can take measures to ensure the security of their forces so long as they are proportionate and lawful.

Several journalists said that Kanyuka, the AFC spokesperson, required foreign journalists to show Rwandan press accreditation to be allowed to cross the border into Goma. With Goma's airport closed, everyone traveling to Goma needs to go through Rwanda. Kanyuka told Human Rights Watch that journalists could travel to M23-held areas with Rwandan or Ugandan press accreditation.

Witnesses said they saw senior Rwandan officials, including from the Rwandan Office of the Government Spokesperson, and Vincent Karega, Rwanda's Great Lakes ambassador-at-large, in Gisenyi, Rwanda, arranging transfers for journalists to Goma. Rwanda's decision to process press accreditations to M23-controlled areas is indicative of the country's proximity with the armed group.

Sources said that Kanyuka requested that some journalists fill out a detailed form, reviewed by Human Rights Watch, providing information, including on the topic and nature of their reporting and the locations where they wished to work. Kanyuka told Human Rights Watch that payments for accreditation did not exceed US\$500. However, sources said Kanyuka had required payments for accreditation ranging from \$600 to \$1,000, which Kanyuka confirmed.

Congolese Government Restrictions on Media, Freedom of Expression

The Congolese government has [often restricted](#) the media and the right to freedom of expression in eastern Congo for apparent politically motivated reasons.

During the M23 offensive on Goma in late January 2025, Congolese authorities [shut down the Internet](#), and in February, they [blocked access](#) to social media such as TikTok and X.

Long before the recent fighting, Congolese authorities targeted perceived critics of the government, carrying out politically motivated arrests, detentions, and prosecutions. In May 2021, the government imposed martial law in North Kivu and Ituri provinces, which facilitated restrictions on independent reporting of the conflict, including restrictions imposed by the government's [media regulator](#).

In February 2024, the media regulator, the Communication and Broadcasting Board (Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel et de la communication, CSAC), issued a directive [informing the media](#) not to broadcast debates on Congolese army operations without the presence of at least one “expert on the matter.” It also told journalists to avoid radio phone-ins discussing the conflict and interviewing “negative forces.”

In April, the media regulator [said](#) that media outlets should no longer “broadcast information relating to the rebellion in eastern DRC without referring to official [government] sources.”

In [July](#), the CSAC [suspended the journalist Jessy Kabasele](#) following a radio interview with Koffi Olomide, a singer, in which Olomide criticized the army's response to the M23. The media regulator said that Kabasele had inadequately reframed Olomide's statement, which “undermines the enormous efforts and sacrifices made by the government.”

In July, unidentified men [abducted](#) the activist Fortifi Lushima after he criticized the government's response to the conflict on television. He was released several days later.

Associated documents

Document ID 2122883 Translation / language version

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Congo, Democratic Republic

Article on how the Rwanda-backed M23 militia and allied Alliance Fleuve Congo have persecuted journalists, critics, and civil society activists since capturing Goma in January 2025

[RD Congo : Le M23 soutenu par le Rwanda cible des journalistes et des activistes](#) (Appeal or News Release, French)

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