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NEWS

27 January 2025

DRC: Warring parties must prioritize civilian protection and humanitarian access in Goma

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)'s regional and international partners must exert pressure on all parties to the conflict in the east of the country — including the Rwandan-backed M23 fighters, the Rwandan and Congolese armies, and their allies — to prioritize the protection of civilians in the aftermath of the recent fighting in Goma, Amnesty International said today.

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“Thousands of Congolese civilians are once again fleeing for their lives, in desperate need of safety and humanitarian aid. Amnesty International calls on all parties to the conflict to prioritize the protection of civilians amid this devastating violence

**Tigere Chagutah, Amnesty International's Regional Director for East and Southern
Africa**

On 27 January, the M23 declared that it had seized control of Goma, the DRC's third-largest city, provincial capital of North-Kivu and home to nearly two million people. This

development occurred despite the UN Secretary General's call for Rwanda to withdraw its troops from the DRC and cease its support for the M23 fighters. Reports from the city described ongoing gunfire and explosions, alongside unverified reports on social media and by journalists of looting, indiscriminate shooting, and shelling in the city. The DRC government has not officially acknowledged losing control of Goma.

"Thousands of Congolese civilians are once again fleeing for their lives, in desperate need of safety and humanitarian aid. Amnesty International calls on all parties to the conflict to prioritize the protection of civilians amid this devastating violence," said Tigere Chagutah, Amnesty International's Regional Director for East and Southern Africa.

Serious human rights violations, including killings of civilians, sexual violence, and the targeting of activists and human rights defenders, have often accompanied past conflicts in eastern DRC, such as during the M23's takeover of Goma in 2012. Some of these violations could amount to war crimes when committed in armed conflict.

'Devastating consequences for civilians'

Humanitarian organizations, including Medecins Sans Frontieres, report that over 400,000 people were displaced in January due to the ongoing conflict in the region. Many sought refuge in and around Goma, a city that was already sheltering over 600,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs).

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The M23, backed by Rwanda, must comply with international humanitarian law. They must ensure the safety of civilians, including human rights defenders and journalists, including those critical of Rwanda and the M23. They must also guarantee safe passage for fleeing civilians and allow and facilitate humanitarian access.

Tigere Chagutah

"Civilians face a grave risk of human rights violations amid this latest escalation. Over the past year, both sides have ramped up their use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas, with devastating consequences for civilians. Neither side must deploy explosive weapons with wide-area effects into densely populated civilian areas, such as camps for IDPs," said Tigere Chagutah.

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Reports from Rwandan media indicated that Rwanda has received several civilians seeking refuge, while others fled Goma to Bukavu, provincial capital of South Kivu, via Lake Kivu. Following the capture of Goma, the M23 ordered the suspension of all activities on the lake, which could hinder the movement of people fleeing the fighting in Goma. Certain areas of the city are without access to water and electricity, as the conflict has damaged critical infrastructure.

“With thousands in and around Goma seeking shelter, food, water, sanitation and healthcare, the parties to the conflict must allow the passage of safe and unrestricted humanitarian access to all those in need,” said Tigere Chagutah.

Background

On 18 January, the M23, backed by Rwandan forces, launched a military operation to expand its territory, violating a ceasefire agreement between Rwanda and the DRC established through the Luanda Peace Process. On 21 January, the M23 claimed to have captured several cities, including the strategically important supply city of Minova in South Kivu province, located about 20 kilometres from Goma across Lake Kivu.

On 24 January, heavy fighting was reported near Sake, more than 20 kilometres north-west of Goma, where the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC), supported by the Southern African Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIRDRC), UN forces (MONUSCO), and a coalition of militia groups, were seeking to halt the M23’s advance toward Goma. The same day, a spokesperson for the M23, as well as Rwandan media, said the military governor of North Kivu, General Peter Cirimwami, was shot while visiting troops on the frontlines near Sake. His death was later confirmed by Congolese officials.

According to a [statement](#) issued on 25 January by the South African National Defence Force, nine South African soldiers deployed under SAMIRDRC and UN forces were killed in the fighting. Malawi authorities also reported the deaths of three of their soldiers serving in the SAMIRDRC.

The [UN Security Council](#) met on 26 January to assess the situation in North-Kivu. The next day, M23 rebels said they had taken control of Goma. In its statement, the Security Council condemned M23’s advances in North-Kivu and called on the armed group to stop its offensive as it gave rise to a major humanitarian crisis and called for the protection of civilians. The Security Council also called for the withdrawal of the external forces from DRC and re-affirmed the sovereignty of the DRC. The Security Council’s decisions should be respected and implemented by all parties.

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