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NEWS

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DR Congo: Rwandan-backed armed group and Congolese army must stop using explosive weapons in densely populated areas

- Inaccurate explosive weapons with wide area effects used in densely populated areas more than 150 times in a seven-month period, killing over 100 people.
- Amid fresh uptick in fighting, warring parties must immediately cease attacks on civilians and stop using explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas.
- The ICC should consider investigating these attacks as war crimes.

Between January and July 2024, in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Rwandan-backed M23 armed group and the Congolese army (FARDC) launched explosive weapons with wide area effects into densely populated areas more than 150 times. These attacks, which killed more than 100 civilians and wounded hundreds, violated international humanitarian law and likely constitute war crimes, Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International interviewed 60 people, visited several strike sites and analysed dozens of verified photos, videos and statements from the warring parties and others. Amnesty documented the M23 and Congolese army repeatedly using ground-launched unguided rockets, including 122mm Grad rockets. These weapons systems are inherently inaccurate and their use in populated areas poses an extremely high risk of civilian casualties.

“The devastating escalation in the use of explosive weapons is a new and dangerous development in a three-decade conflict already rife with human rights and humanitarian

law violations,” said Agnès Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

“Amid a fresh uptick in fighting, the M23 and the Congolese army must stop firing rockets, mortars and other explosives with wide area effects into densely populated areas. The warring parties must comply with international humanitarian law by taking all feasible precautions to avoid or minimize civilian harm during attacks.”

Bombings by both sides

Under international humanitarian law (IHL), parties to a conflict must always distinguish between combatants and civilians. IHL prohibits disproportionate or indiscriminate attacks and demands parties to a conflict take feasible precautions to avoid, and in any event, to minimize harm to civilians. Launching an indiscriminate attack which kills or injures civilians is a war crime.

When used in populated areas, explosive weapons with wide-area effects are very likely to have indiscriminate effects and cannot be narrowly directed at a specific military target as required by IHL. In recent armed conflicts, explosive weapons have been the main cause of suffering of the civilian population, routinely used in blatant disregard of the clear rules of international humanitarian law for the protection of civilians. This situation prompted 83 Member States to endorse in 2022 the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas.



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Agnès Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International

In eastern DRC, the increased use of explosive ordnance coincided with a large-scale offensive by the M23, which has been substantially supported by the Rwanda Defence Force according to UN reports, against the Congolese army on several fronts in North Kivu province in January 2024. As fighting escalated, both sides stepped-up attacks and used explosive ordnance with little regard for civilians. After a short-lived ceasefire in late July, heavy fighting resumed in October, including a significant uptick in the past month with explosive attacks in civilian areas by both sides.

Amnesty’s research found a handful of the many bombings had particularly deadly consequences for civilians, underscoring the dangers of using explosive weapons with wide area effects in such circumstances.

Three attacks alone resulted in over 50 civilian deaths, more than half the total.



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Family members mourn one of the victims of a bombing attack, during a burial ceremony in Kibati, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, May 15, 2024. On May 3, 2024, bombs struck huts in a camp for displaced people on the outskirts of Goma.

On 25 January 2024, an artillery round most likely fired by the FARDC struck a house in the Bukama neighbourhood of Mweso, a town about 100km north-west of North Kivu's capital Goma, killing at least 19 people and injuring at least 25 others, including 15 children, according to medical sources.

Amnesty found no evidence of military targets at or near the impact area, and medical sources confirmed there were no fighters among the casualties.

Four witnesses told Amnesty the firing came from Katsiru district to Mweso's east, which was under FARDC control at the time. Two witnesses in Katsiru described seeing Congolese troops firing a rocket launcher mounted on an army pick-up toward Mweso on 25 January. In addition, four security and humanitarian sources told Amnesty that during briefings in Goma, military officials acknowledged "a blunder" and pledged that the unit's commander would be held accountable.

On 4 March 2024, a munition hit a column of civilians fleeing on foot from an M23 assault on Nyanzale town, killing at least 17 civilians and injuring a dozen more, according to eyewitnesses and medical sources. All victims were civilians running away, including children. Some of them had previously fled to Nyanzale to escape fighting elsewhere.

Three witnesses and a local UN monitor told Amnesty the munitions were launched from a hill called Kihondo, west of Nyanzale, an area controlled at the time by the M23.

In another incident, on 3 May 2024, several rockets landed near Goma, most likely fired by M23 in response to rocket fire from the Congolese army, which had taken up positions close to internally displaced persons (IDP) camps by the town. One of the rockets hit a camp called 8ème CEPAC, north-west of Goma, killing at least 18 civilians, including 15

children, six under five years old, according to medical sources. Of the 30 wounded civilians, 28 were women and children.



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The shell of a rocket which landed in the 8ème CEPAC camp for displaced people in Goma, North Kivu province of Democratic Republic of Congo, on 3 May 2024 at 10:15am.

Amnesty interviewed numerous survivors and verified 27 photos and three videos taken after the attack, which showed the munition to be an unguided 122mm Grad rocket. The M23 owns numerous Grad-P launchers, which can fire 122m Grad rockets, and the distance from the M23's position at the time and the impact was within that weapon's range.

Congolese authorities and M23 leaders did not respond to Amnesty's preliminary findings shared in December 2024.

"Amnesty International examined attacks between January and July 2024 before the ceasefire, but we know that these types of bombings have not stopped," said Agnès Callamard. "Civilians, including IDPs crammed in makeshift camps across the region, remain at serious risk of death or injury from rockets and other explosive weapons used by the warring parties."

'What have we done to deserve this?'

Survivors and relatives of victims of these indiscriminate attacks told heartbreaking stories of terror and loss.

John*, a 46-year-old father of seven whose eldest daughter was seriously injured in the 8ème CEPAC attack, said: "The explosion was deafening... Dozens of tents had been blown away. Bodies of the dead, many of them children, were torn into pieces, as wounded people were desperately calling for help. It was apocalyptic."

Angèle, who lost her four daughters in the same attack, said the explosion reduced her children to just “ruins and torn bodies.” She recounted their names to Amnesty, showing their favourite dresses one by one: “15-year-old Gisèle, 12-year-old Furaha, 10-year-old Lumoo, and 6-year-old Ndoole. All killed in seconds.”

One man, whose wife was killed in a rocket attack, expressed dismay about the two sides fighting so close to IDP camps. “We fled our villages hoping to find some safety,” he said. “Here we have nothing except our children. But they are chasing us here and killing our children. The M23 is killing us, the government is killing us, what have we done to deserve this?”

Besides the death toll, last year’s uptick in use of explosive weapons resulted in a sharp increase in wounded civilians too.

A doctor at a Goma-based trauma hospital told Amnesty that their facility treated more people for explosives-related injuries between February and May 2024 than for the entirety of 2023, with 37% of total injuries from explosive weapons.



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A woman who lost her leg in an explosive attack in eastern DRC in the first seven months of 2024.

In early March, the International Committee of the Red Cross similarly **reported 40% of wounded civilians** in North Kivu were victims of shelling or other heavy weapons used in densely populated areas.

Survivors suffer deep mental trauma. Twelve-year-old Christine, wounded in the face, chest and leg, told Amnesty she fears leaving her mother to play with other children because “I think a bomb is going to strike again and hurt me.”

Explosive attacks also damaged countless civilian objects including critical health facilities, disrupting economic activity and delivery of life-saving humanitarian aid.

Ensuring justice

All the survivors of explosive attacks who spoke to Amnesty demanded authorities quickly and sustainably restore security so people can return to their homes and live without fear.

They also expressed desire for truth and justice. However, investigations into the deadly bombings that were promised by the authorities appear to have stalled, leaving victims in the lurch and allowing attacks to continue.

The Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, which renewed its investigations into the situation in eastern DRC following a referral by Kinshasa, should consider investigating attacks on densely populated civilian areas using explosive weapons with wide area effects as war crimes, with a view to bringing to justice those suspected of responsibility, as the Congolese authorities have shown they are unwilling or unable to do so.



**As the long history of conflict in eastern DRC has shown us,
without accountability, human rights and humanitarian law
violations will continue**

Agnès Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International

The M23 and FARDC, as well as their allies such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the DRC, the Rwanda Defence Force and the myriad militia allied to the Congolese army, must stop using populated areas, including IDP camps, as battlefields.

All states involved in the conflict in eastern DRC should also endorse the 2022 Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas.

The DRC government must further ensure victims of bombardments receive adequate medical and psychological care, as well as remedies including sufficient material and financial support to rebuild their lives.



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The ruins of an explosion following bombardment of the 8ème CEPAC camp for displaced people in Goma, North Kivu province of Democratic Republic of Congo, on 3 May 2024 at 10:15am.

The international community—including Angola who is mediating between DRC and Rwanda and has military observers on the ground, as well as the East African Community, SADC, African Union, UN, EU and United States of America—must publicly condemn the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in densely populated civilian areas, urge the warring parties to stop attacking civilians and demand accountability.

Anyone with military cooperation with the DRC and Rwanda, such as the EU, Belgium, SADC, the UN and others, should also do more to ensure their military support does not contribute to human rights and humanitarian law violations and actively support investigations and prosecutions into suspected perpetrators.

“As the long history of conflict in eastern DRC has shown us, without accountability, human rights and humanitarian law violations will continue,” said Agnès Callamard. “The M23 and Congo’s army must stop bombing civilians immediately.”

***All names changed for protection**

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