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DR Congo: Army Units Aided Abusive Armed Groups; Vetting, Demobilization Program Needed

Vetting, Demobilization Program Needed

(Goma) – Congolese army units backed armed groups implicated in serious abuses in the recent conflict with M23 rebel forces in eastern [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), Human Rights Watch said today.

Between May and August 2022, the Congolese army with a coalition of Congolese militia as well as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) fought against Rwandan-backed [M23 rebels](#) in North Kivu province. At times, some Congolese army officers provided the armed groups with direct support. Since late August, most groups have withdrawn from their front-line positions.

“Congolese army units are again resorting to the discredited and damaging practice of using abusive armed groups as their proxies,” said [Thomas Fessy](#), senior Congo researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The Congolese government should end this support, which leads to military complicity in abuses, identify officers responsible, and hold them accountable.”

The M23 offensive in May and the takeover of Bunagana, a trading town at the Uganda border, in June displaced tens of thousands of people. Despite a lull in the fighting since mid-August, the [humanitarian situation](#) in Rutshuru territory, North Kivu, remains critical, adding to an already dire situation in eastern Congo. Over the past year, armed groups and at times government soldiers have committed widespread abuses, including unlawful killings, sexual violence, and theft, causing the security situation to deteriorate.

Since June, Human Rights Watch has interviewed five fighters from armed groups, seven witnesses of abuses and family members of victims, as well as activists, Congolese civilian and military officials, United Nations staff, and aid workers.

On May 8 and 9, leaders of several Congolese armed groups, some of them rivals, met in the remote town of Pinga and agreed to a non-aggression pact forming a “patriotic” coalition to join forces with the Congolese army against “the aggressor,” namely the M23. The groups included the Patriots’ Alliance for a Free and Sovereign Congo (Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain, APCLS) of Janvier Karairi, the Coalition of Movements for Change (Coalition des mouvements pour le changement, CMC/FDP) of Dominique Ndaruhuste, known as “Domi,” the Nduma Defense of Congo-Renovated (Nduma défense du Congo-Rénové, NDC-R) faction of Guidon Mwisa Shimirai, and the Nyatura Abazungu’s Alliance of Congolese nationalists for the defense of human rights (Alliance des nationalistes congolais pour la défense des droits humains, ANCDH/AFDP) of Jean-Marie Bonane.

Members of the groups and witnesses circulated pictures of the meeting, which several Congolese army officers attended, led by Col. Salomon Tokolonga, who oversees operations and military intelligence at the 3411th regiment. Two FDLR senior commanders were also reportedly present.

All of these armed groups [are](#) known human rights abusers in their strongholds. Human Rights Watch has [previously documented](#) widespread abuses by forces under the command of NDC-R leader Guidon, who remains under UN sanctions. Congolese authorities issued an arrest warrant against him in 2019 for recruiting children, insurrection, and the crime against humanity of rape.

The coalition of armed groups is commonly referred to as the *forces amies* or friendly forces. Colonel Tokolonga told Human Rights Watch by phone that he attended the Pinga meeting “by coincidence” because he was “visiting troops deployed in the area.” At the time, Tokolonga was under the command of Gen. Peter Cirimwami, himself in charge of Sokola II military operations in North Kivu between early April and early July. Cirimwami was then reassigned to Ituri province “following persistent allegations of the [Congolese army] using local armed groups as proxies in Rutshuru territory,” UN investigators reported.

Human Rights Watch received credible information that Congolese army members from Tokolonga’s 3411th regiment provided more than a dozen boxes of ammunition to FDLR fighters in Kazaroho, one of their strongholds in the Virunga National Park, on July 21. Two months earlier, dozens of FDLR and CMC/FDP fighters reportedly

took part in a large counteroffensive with government soldiers in the area around Rumangabo and Rugari.

One FDLR fighter told Human Rights Watch that he witnessed four transfers of ammunition. “It’s the government [troops] that would always provide us with ammunition,” he said. “They also gave us uniforms and boots.”

Two fighters from the Mai-Mai Kabidon (FPP-AP) militia also said that the Congolese army supplied them with ammunition. “The army contacted us,” a 42-year-old commander said. “They provided us with ammunition in Kiwanja and we went straight to the front line. ... once there, collaboration happens thanks to communication devices as each group deploys to a position.”

In an unpublished July report submitted to the UN Security Council that [leaked](#) to the media, the UN Group of Experts on Congo found that on May 30, an APCLS senior commander “met with a commander of the 34016th regiment in Kitchanga, and received arms and ammunition as well as food stuff.” The investigators stated that “members of the coalition of armed groups received weapons and ammunition from some [Congolese army] members on several occasions.”

Several witnesses and fighters told Human Rights Watch that once near or at the front line, these armed groups would need to find their own food and supplies. Some illegally taxed civilians as a result. “We try to avoid contact with them [the armed groups], but they have requested a contribution from every household for their survival,” a man from Kabaya said. “It can be beans or even a cow for herders.”

Human Rights Watch also documented several other cases of abuses against civilians, including at least three killings by FDLR fighters in May and July and two cases of rape by Congolese soldiers in July.

On July 7, FDLR fighters executed Kaseba Nyangezi, 25, who was born in an ethnically mixed Hutu-Tutsi family. He and his family fled Bunagana following the takeover by M23 rebels and sought refuge in Kabaya. A family member said that fighters from both FDLR and Nyatura armed groups accused Nyangezi of collaborating with the M23 and harassed him. Feeling threatened, he fled to Goma, where fighters eventually picked him up. “They took him away and sent him to the FDLR in Rugari,” the family member said. “[FDLR fighters] killed him and we have yet to find his body.”

The FDLR is a largely Rwandan Hutu armed group, some of whose leaders took part in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. FDLR fighters [have killed](#) hundreds of civilians over the years in eastern Congo, at times hacked them to death with machetes or hoes, or burned them in their homes. The fighters have committed countless rapes and other acts of sexual violence. Congolese armed groups that formed the coalition in May also have a long history of attacks against civilians, including summary killings, recruitment of children, extortion, and sexual violence.

President Felix Tshisekedi, [spoke](#) against any alliance between military commanders and armed groups before an audience of senior army officers in Kinshasa on May 12. “I will not accept that individuals act unethically to make schemes with negative forces to fight other negative forces,” he said. “One does not put out a fire by throwing oil on it.”

Human Rights Watch has received credible information that General Cirimwami, who headed military operations in North Kivu until July, has been recalled to Kinshasa since September 21 but could not confirm whether he was being investigated. A day earlier, Lt. Gen. Philemon Yav, in charge of eastern provinces, [was arrested](#) for reasons not made public and remains in detention in Kinshasa. In 2008, UN investigators [found](#) that Yav actively collaborated with and funnelled weapons to armed groups, including the FDLR. Tokolonga has remained in North Kivu and has not been investigated.

Tshisekedi’s administration should carry out a security sector overhaul, including adopting a [plan](#) to address impunity for grave human rights violations, with a vetting mechanism for the military and other security services, an internationalized justice entity, and a comprehensive reparations program for victims of abuses, Human Rights Watch said. Such systemic reform as well as an effective demobilization program aimed at militia and armed group fighters should be central in ongoing regional discussions regarding the security threat posed by the M23 and other armed groups.

“Congolese officers who collaborate with abusive armed groups undermine the armed forces’ duty to protect all Congolese,” Fessy said. “With regional initiatives underway, Tshisekedi and regional leaders have an opportunity to address impunity and break these cycles of abuse.”

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implicated in human rights
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