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Massacre in Goma Clouds DR Congo's Elections and UN Mission's Future

On 30 August, elite troops slaughtered over 50 civilians planning to protest perceived foreign interference in the eastern DR Congo, three months ahead of elections. The government has asked the UN for an “accelerated” withdrawal. Crisis Group experts Richard Moncrieff and Onesphore Sematumba explain the stakes.

What happened in Goma on 30 August and afterward?

In the early morning of 30 August, soldiers from the Republican Guard and other army units stormed a church and a radio station belonging to a sect known as Agano la Uwezo/Wazalendo (Church of the Patriots, in Kiswahili) in Goma, capital of North Kivu province in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The sect had announced its intention to demonstrate against the UN peacekeeping mission, or MONUSCO, as well as the East African Community force, which deployed to stem armed group violence in the eastern DRC in August 2022, and Western NGOs operating in the area. Although provincial authorities had prohibited the protest, the sect's members had nonetheless gathered in the church that morning. Eyewitnesses reported that elite soldiers, equipped as if they were facing armed opponents, shot dead dozens of civilians, injured and arrested many more, and threw the bodies of the dead into the back of military trucks before setting fire to the church.

As video footage of the carnage began to circulate on social media, the provincial authorities put the provisional death toll at six civilians plus a policeman who had been lynched by locals. Meanwhile, the military governor of North Kivu, General Constant Ndima, [labelled](#) the sect a group of armed bandits in an apparent bid to justify the massacre. The following day, the government revised the casualty tolls upward, announcing that there were 43 dead, 56 injured and 138 detained; it stated that those arrested would be tried for the acts of criminal conspiracy and participation in an insurrectionary movement. (Provincial authorities subsequently adjusted the number of fatalities again, to 51.) In an inflammatory [press release](#), government spokesman Patrick Muyaya sought to incriminate the sect by accusing its members of undermining public order, saying they had stoned a police officer to death, which prompted the security forces to intervene. Many observers believe that, to the contrary, the lynching happened after the soldiers had opened fire.

Rather than easing public outrage at the brazen attack, the authorities' fumbled response fanned the flames. Goma residents were at a loss to explain the viciousness of the raid, which was extraordinary even by the country's poor human rights standards. Sensing the public mood, Kinshasa changed tack. On 1 September, President Félix Tshisekedi demanded that his government shed light on the “[appalling tragedy](#)”. After key government ministers paid a hasty visit to Goma the following day, authorities [arrested](#) two senior Republican Guard officers and four soldiers for their alleged involvement in the raid, saying they would be tried imminently. Kinshasa also [recalled](#) the military governor, Ndima, to Kinshasa “for consultations”. Ndima has served as the highest authority in North Kivu since May 2021, when Tshisekedi put the province, along with adjacent Ituri, under martial law (referred to as a “state of siege”) in order to tackle the dozens of foreign and local armed groups operating in the area.

When the soldiers' trial opened on 5 September, the DRC's public prosecutor said the defendants had acted independently of the state in their “[macabre undertaking](#)”. But the proceedings have increasingly focused on Rwanda's role in the eastern DRC, notably its backing for the M23 rebel movement that resurfaced after nearly a decade of dormancy, attacking army positions in North Kivu in 2021. On 8 September, the commander of the Republican Guard in Goma, Colonel Mike Mikombe, said he had been told by military intelligence that those planning the march were “[M23 auxiliaries](#)”. Days earlier, Interior Minister Peter Kazadi had already [justified the army's deployment](#) on 30 August as warding off a threat from Rwanda, noting that “the Rwandan Special

Forces had been deployed all along the border [with the DRC]”. The Republican Guard’s special forces, he said, therefore sprang into action “to reassure the population and create a deterrent effect”.

By casting their actions as part of efforts to counter the M23 and Rwanda, the accused and the government are trying to justify the 30 August raid as linked to protecting Goma. But as the trial progressed, this line of defence began to crumble, with testimony by various witnesses highlighting [serious problems in the army’s chain of command](#). For example, at his hearing on 9 September, the military intelligence chief for North Kivu [accused the Republican Guard](#) of killing unarmed civilians, after he himself had been disarmed on the orders of Colonel Mikombe: “The commander of the Republican Guard asked me to stop talking to the demonstrators. The demonstrators were unarmed when I was talking to them. I was there, and we counted 42 dead and 33 wounded on the spot”.

Why does the incident bode ill for the national elections anticipated for December?

The crackdown comes amid widespread tensions in Goma. Heavily armed M23 rebels have periodically advanced upon the city, displacing thousands. Many residents are resentful of MONUSCO, the 16,000-strong UN force, which they see as toothless in the face of ever worsening insecurity. In June and July 2022, [violent anti-MONUSCO](#) demonstrations led to the deaths of five peacekeepers and 30 civilians in Goma as well as the towns of Beni, Butembo and Kasindi, also in North Kivu. Since then, the UN force has kept a low profile. Popular anger with foreign forces on Congolese soil is now also directed at the East African force, which residents believe is just as ineffective as the UN mission. Discontent with Tshisekedi, who came to power promising to bring security to the east, is palpable as well. His popularity in North Kivu, an important electoral constituency, has plummeted ahead of the presidential election slated for December.

On top of that, Goma residents [complain](#) that martial law has narrowed civic space and severely restricted political liberties. Since May 2021, [members of the national parliament](#) and civil society activists have been arrested, tried and imprisoned for criticising or peacefully demonstrating against the state of siege. Provincial authorities have also responded to notifications of planned protests by warning organisers that they would “[face the rigours of the law](#)” if they went ahead. The mayor of Goma issued similar warnings prior to the 30 August massacre.

The popularity of the religio-political movements in question complicates matters further. The Wazalendo sect is one of many Congolese messianic groups whose religious message is intertwined with a political discourse focused on how outsiders are supposedly undermining Congolese sovereignty. Its leaders have denounced the government’s agreements with “foreign forces” (ie, security partners and NGOs) and the imposition of martial law. They claim to draw inspiration from historical figures such as the former prime minister Patrice Lumumba and the late religious leader Simon Kimbangu.

The government worries that these sects could scale up their protests, galvanising opposition to Kinshasa and worsening the already significant security challenges. This concern is not new, and nor is the Wazalendo massacre the first of its kind. In 2020, police launched an [assault](#) on places of worship of Ne Muanda Nsemi’s Bundu dia Kongo religio-political movement, killing at least 55 people in Kongo Central province and Kinshasa before setting fire to the group’s churches. No member of the security forces has been disciplined for the incident.

With preparations well advanced and elections now likely to take place in December, the 30 August massacre casts serious doubt upon the government’s ability to handle the inevitable demonstrations during the forthcoming campaign (between November and December) and the period following the announcement of results, from late December onward. The incident follows violent crackdowns on opposition marches, for example in [Kinshasa on 20 May](#).

Why is the UN force being drawn into the events?

The UN military presence in the DRC dates back 24 years. Between 1999 and 2010, a UN force deployed to monitor a ceasefire between government troops and foreign-backed rebels controlling swathes of the east; it then took part in efforts to reunify the country. In 2010, MONUSCO took over, attempting to consolidate peace, particularly by protecting civilians. But thirteen years on, armed groups are still roaming the countryside, looting the region's natural resources and killing civilians. Although it would be unfair to blame the insecurity on MONUSCO, or to suggest that the mission offers no benefits to the region (as discussed below the force is in some places the only source of security for highly vulnerable communities), it is undeniable that the UN mission has been ineffective in doing its main job. The region is not secure, leaving Goma residents deeply frustrated and making ever louder [calls](#) for the peacekeepers to depart.

Kinshasa has long had a rocky relationship with the UN mission, though it improved for a while after Tshisekedi was sworn in as president in January 2019. On 20 December 2021, the government and MONUSCO agreed to a [transition plan](#) for an “orderly and responsible” withdrawal by the end of 2024, in the words of Bintou Keita, the UN Secretary-General's special representative in the DRC and head of MONUSCO.

Ties appear to have frayed badly, however, following the 30 August incident. As Kinshasa realised that blaming the killings on the sect's alleged subversive methods was unlikely to work, it, too, turned its ire upon the UN force. On 1 September, Foreign Minister Christophe Lutundula [asked](#) the UN Security Council to immediately move forward with an accelerated transition plan that sets MONUSCO's withdrawal in motion by late 2023. In a long letter to the Council, Lutundula cites, among other things, “the latest unfortunate incidents in Goma on 30 August 2023, which resulted in the loss of human life” among reasons to request the UN force's speedy departure. The Council has yet to reply. While the letter leaves room for interpretation, the primary effect may be to bring forward the withdrawal's start date to before the elections rather than afterward, and even that arrangement may not hold given that priorities may change as the campaign gets under way in November. But the change of tone is striking and may colour relations between Kinshasa and New York throughout 2024.

Asking for an acceleration of MONUSCO's withdrawal in the wake of the Goma killings is a political opportunity that could boost Tshisekedi's popular standing. Mali's decision to direct the withdrawal of the UN mission mandated to operate there appears to be resonating favourably with many Congolese, at least if social media posts are any guide. Yet the hasty withdrawal of UN troops from areas in the eastern DRC where they constitute the only bulwark, however weak, against abuses by armed groups could have harmful consequences. Particularly at risk would be the tens of thousands of internally displaced people grouped in camps around MONUSCO bases in Ituri, as well as other vulnerable communities. As the UN steps down, and especially if the withdrawal is in any way precipitous, and with the national army unable to stop the fighting in the east, the DRC's next president will face a huge immediate challenge in filling the security gap left by the UN force.

Will the massacre have political consequences, and what can be done to prevent a repeat?

The events of 30 August shone a spotlight on the huge flaws in Tshisekedi's security arrangements for the east of the country and threaten to cloud his campaign for a new term in office. While the Congolese people were broadly sympathetic toward the army in its fight with the M23, the illusion was broken when soldiers – and not just any soldiers, but members of the Republican Guard, which comes under Tshisekedi's direct authority – turned so shamelessly against their compatriots, including children and women.

Realising the potentially harmful impact on his bid for a second mandate, Tshisekedi quickly countered the military governor's attempts to justify the security forces' abuses and the subsequent accusatory messaging of his government spokesman. By hauling the six military officers involved in the bloodletting into court, Tshisekedi is likely seeking to distance himself from the Republican Guard. It remains to be seen whether this move will convince observers of the government's professed innocence in the matter. Many Congolese wonder how a military unit that reports to the presidency could have deployed so massively and with so many vehicles, shooting people and

carting off the dead and wounded to a military camp without scrutiny from their superiors in the capital.

The [state of siege](#), meanwhile, adds to the population's many grievances in the east, with the president showing no sign of loosening the military's grip. Although the constitution provides for states of siege lasting for fifteen days, renewable upon evaluation, the current one has been in place continuously since May 2021 – without bringing any noticeable improvement in the overall security situation. International human rights organisations and others have made [repeated calls](#) for it to be reversed. Between 14 to 16 August, Tshisekedi organised a roundtable in Kinshasa bringing together political actors and members of civil society in the east, the majority of whom urged authorities to immediately lift the state of siege. The government has so far ignored their calls and on 30 August extended the measure for a fortnight. Many suspect the military of using the control afforded by the state of siege to enrich itself by [further preying on the population](#).

Tshisekedi's immediate priority should be to put in place the measures needed to secure as much as possible of North Kivu as the elections approach, while putting an immediate end to martial law, which only stirs local grievance. He should also make a renewed push to stamp out violence and impunity among his own security forces, lest something like the 30 August tragedy happen again – the risk of which can only increase amid the heightened tensions of the election campaign. It is a positive step that the military justice system has quickly begun the trial of the alleged perpetrators of the Goma killings. But the authorities should ensure, through a serious investigation, that all those involved, including members of the military hierarchy in Goma and Kinshasa, will be held accountable for their actions. As for the withdrawal of MONUSCO, all parties concerned – the government and the UN – should maintain their commitment to ensuring that it takes place smoothly through a consensual transition plan. Acting precipitously just as a potentially perilous election gets under way is in nobody's interest.