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HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

"Death Was Everywhere"

Arbitrary Detention, Killings, and Forced Recruitment by the M23 and the Rwanda Defence Force

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Arbitrary Detention, Killings, and Forced Recruitment by the M23 and the Rwanda Defence Force

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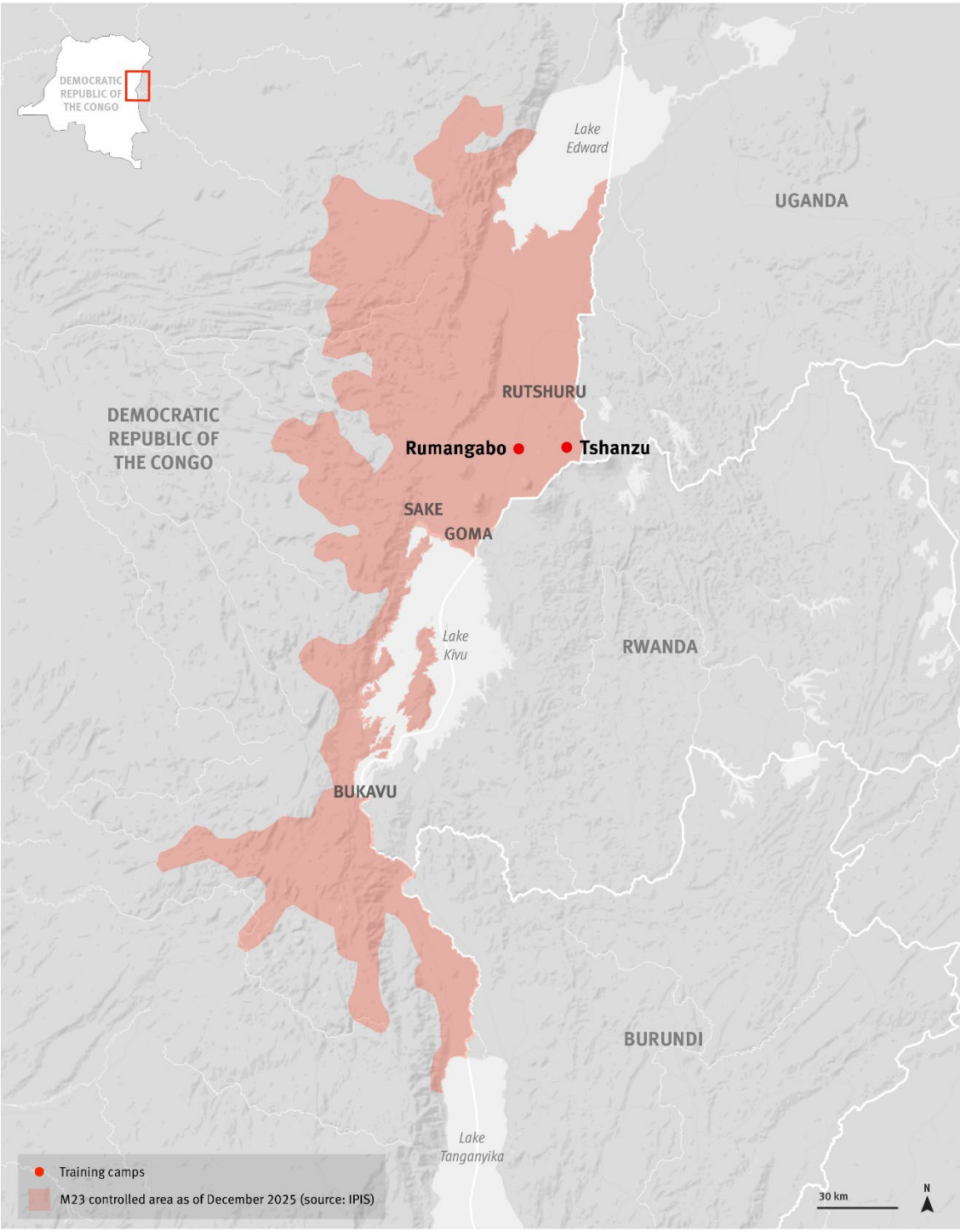

Graphic © 2026 Human Rights Watch

Summary

In early 2025, the Rwanda-backed M23 armed group captured Goma and Bukavu, the provincial capitals of North and South Kivu in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Since then, the armed group has carried out large-scale forced recruitment and other operations in areas under its control, detaining thousands of Congolese soldiers and militia members, and increasingly civilians, subjecting them to inhumane and life-threatening treatment.

As soon as Rwandan military forces and the M23 took control of Goma in late January 2025, trucks filled with soldiers of the Congolese army (Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo, FARDC), members of the national police (Police nationale congolaise, PNC), and alleged fighters of armed groups allied to the Congolese government drove north to Rutshuru territory. Many went to Rumangabo for training and integration into the M23. Some had volunteered or surrendered, but most were forced or coerced. Other alleged armed group fighters, civilians, and Congolese civil servants were taken to Tshanzu, also in Rutshuru territory, for "re-education" and military training.

The M23's apparent aim was to take security measures to track down soldiers, militia fighters, and civil servants opposed to the M23 and the Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC), the political-military coalition that includes the M23. This progressively expanded into a broad, systematic campaign of mass arrests and incommunicado detentions targeting civilians with real or perceived military ties, particularly young men and teenage boys.

In Goma, Bukavu, and parts of Nyiragongo, Rutshuru, and Masisi territories, M23 fighters rounded up and forcibly recruited thousands of alleged Congolese army soldiers and allied fighters. Witnesses and former detainees described people being abducted from the street or from their homes, rounded up at meetings, churches, or schools, and held in makeshift detention facilities, military camps, or transferred to undisclosed locations. While the early operations primarily targeted Congolese army soldiers and national police who were trapped in Goma and Bukavu after those cities fell, subsequent roundups and recruitment operations carried out throughout 2025 seemed increasingly aimed at civilians.

The Congolese army has supported armed groups opposed to the M23, including the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), a mostly Rwandan Hutu armed

group formed by participants in Rwanda's 1994 genocide, and the Wazalendo, a loose coalition of militias fighting in North and South Kivu. Many civilians forcibly recruited or detained were accused by the M23 of being aligned to these groups.

This report, based on interviews with 102 former detainees and dozens of other sources, documents the M23's detention of thousands of captured combatants and civilians, some as young as 12, at training sites or military camps, where they were held in inhumane conditions for weeks or months and subjected to beatings, severe ill-treatment, and summary executions.

The M23 imposed brutal ideological, physical, and military training lasting several months on those forcibly recruited and transferred to Rumangabo or Tshanzu. Survivors said thousands of men, as well as some women and children, were forced to perform hard labor, including digging and clearing roads, cutting wood, transporting supplies, and fetching water from long distances. Detainees were unable to communicate with their families throughout their detention.

M23 fighters and Rwandan soldiers at the centers coerced thousands of people into joining the M23 under threat to their lives. Former detainees recounted seeing captured soldiers and fighters and civilian men, women, and boys beaten, sometimes fatally, as punishment, or to compel others to enlist, as well as summary executions of people who tried to escape the training centers, or who committed minor disciplinary infractions, such as trying to drink water, relieve themselves, or eat food without permission.

People held in two buildings used as detention cells in Rumangabo were subjected to frequent abuse, beatings, extreme overcrowding, dehydration, and starvation. Former detainees and other witnesses reported seeing dozens of people die from detention conditions, executions, and abuse between February and November 2025. Some in Tshanzu were detained in holes in the ground and subjected to regular beatings.

Former detainees identified high-ranking M23 officers present in the camps as well as Rwandan military units in the vicinity. They said many instructors and guards were Rwandan nationals, including some wearing Rwanda Defence Force uniforms. Training occurred mainly in English, Kinyarwanda, and sometimes Kiswahili, with speakers of

Lingala, one of the primary languages of Congo, routinely punished. Detainees spent long hours learning songs and "ideology" in Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili.

Conditions in these camps are brutal and life-threatening. Former detainees reported receiving minimal food and water, being denied virtually all medical care, and having almost no access to basic hygiene facilities. Beatings were widespread, and many said detainees frequently died from injuries, exhaustion, dehydration, or hunger.

The total number of deaths at these camps could best be determined if all mass graves were found and excavated, but interviews with former detainees indicate that hundreds, perhaps more, died from harsh conditions, beatings, and executions in both camps throughout 2025. Graduation ceremonies showing new recruits were still being filmed into 2026, and big M23 roundups targeting hundreds of people, mainly civilians, continue to be reported.

Some of those interviewed managed to escape or were released, but others were sent to the front line as M23 fighters against Congolese and allied forces. In April 2026, the M23 and Congolese authorities agreed to hand over to the International Committee of the Red Cross several thousand detained combatants held by both parties, including combatants held at Rumangabo.

Rwanda's extensive military presence and direction of M23 operations in eastern Congo show that it exercises effective control over the area, meeting the legal threshold for belligerent occupation under international humanitarian law. Rwandan officials could be held criminally liable for the actions of M23 forces, including in the training centers.

The grave abuses by M23 fighters and Rwandan military personnel—including murder, torture and other ill-treatment, corporal punishment, forced unlawful recruitment and abusive labor, and use of child soldiers—are war crimes. Many of these abuses, if demonstrated to have been carried out as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population, would also amount to crimes against humanity. Rwandan and Congolese authorities should credibly investigate these abuses and hold those responsible, including as a matter of command responsibility, to account.

The Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) is investigating alleged crimes under the jurisdiction of the court committed in eastern Congo, with a particular focus on North Kivu since January 1, 2022. The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights is also currently considering a case brought by Congo alleging that Rwanda bears responsibility for human rights violations in eastern Congo linked to its support to the M23 and involvement in the conflict. Both proceedings should address alleged violations committed by M23 forces in the context of forced recruitment campaigns and the detention of recruits in so-called training camps in North and South Kivu.

Recommendations

To the Government of Rwanda:

- Cease all forms of support to the M23 facilitating or otherwise materially contributing to its operations in Congo.
- Conduct prompt, transparent, independent, and impartial investigations into all alleged violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law committed by the Rwanda Defence Force, the M23, and other armed groups, especially at so-called "training camps" at Rumangabo and Tshanzu, and appropriately prosecute those responsible in fair, transparent proceedings.
- Grant access to investigators, including the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on the Human Rights Situation in the South and North Kivu Provinces and the International Criminal Court (ICC), to carry out investigations into occupied territories in Congo.

To the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) and Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC)/M23:

- Ensure humane treatment of all detainees, including prisoners-of-war, captured combatants, and civilians; ensure detainees have communication with families and disclose their whereabouts; and grant independent monitors access to all places of detention, including the "training camps."
- Immediately end the recruitment of boys and girls, and release all persons recruited before the age of 18.
- Release civilians arbitrarily or unlawfully detained.

To the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo:

- Conduct prompt, transparent, independent, and impartial investigations into all alleged violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law committed by all armed forces and armed groups in eastern Congo, including in Rumangabo and Tshanzu, and appropriately prosecute all those responsible in fair, transparent proceedings.

- Seek assistance from the UN, African Union, and partner governments to conduct proper exhumations of mass graves in Rumangabo and Tshanzu, and return remains to families.
- Ensure former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees who return to Congolese-controlled territory, whether by surrendering or through capture, are provided with appropriate medical and psychosocial support. Ensure pathways for demobilization for civilians detained or forcibly recruited and provide support to individuals in re-establishing contact with their relatives.
- Cooperate with the ICC's investigations into serious international crimes committed in eastern Congo.
- Cease all forms of material support to abusive armed groups engaged in the current conflict.

To the African Union Peace and Security Council:

- Request periodic briefings from the AU Commission; the UN Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo; the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on the human rights situation in the South and North Kivu Provinces; and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

To the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights:

- Adopt a resolution condemning mass forced recruitment and incommunicado detention, explicitly recognizing these acts as violations of articles 4, 5, 6, and 7 of the African Charter.

To the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child:

- Issue a public statement recognizing the recruitment of children under 18 as a grave violation of the African Children's Charter and the absolute prohibition of child recruitment by state and non-state actors.
- Open an investigation under article 45 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child into forced recruitment and use of children by the AFC/M23 and any involvement by the government of Rwanda.

To Concerned Governments:

- Sanction RDF and M23 commanders responsible for serious abuses perpetrated in "training centers" and military and unofficial detention sites, including RDF Special Force commander Brig. Gen. Stanislas Gashugi, and M23 camp commanders and instructors Léon Kanyamibwa and Bertin Masozera, identified in this report.
- Promptly review military assistance and cooperation programs with Rwanda to ensure they are not fueling serious violations of humanitarian law in eastern Congo. Under the 2008 Child Soldiers Prevention Act, the United States should withhold proscribed military assistance to Rwanda.
- Support the work and rapid operationalization of the Independent Commission of Inquiry mandated by the UN Human Rights Council to enable it to fulfill its mandate.
- Strengthen support for the ICC and its investigations into serious international crimes committed in eastern Congo, as well as for domestic efforts to investigate and prosecute past and ongoing serious violations by all parties to the conflict in eastern Congo.

To the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court:

- Investigate alleged serious international crimes committed in the context of the M23 forced recruitment campaigns and detention in "training camps" in eastern Congo.

Methodology

This report is based on 102 in-person and remote interviews with former detainees, and 29 more interviews with relatives of former detainees, witnesses, and United Nations, M23, military, intelligence, media, and diplomatic sources with information about forced recruitment between mid-2024 and December 2025.

Human Rights Watch researchers conducted in-person interviews with former detainees in Kampala and Mbarara, Uganda, and Beni, Bunia, Kinshasa, and Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo. Phone interviews were also conducted with people in Bambo, Bukavu, Goma, Rutshuru, and Sake in Congo.

Researchers explained to each interviewee the purpose of the interview and its voluntary and confidential nature. Interviews were conducted in French, Kiswahili or Lingala, at times with the help of an interpreter.

Human Rights Watch researchers interviewed former detainees who had fled the Rumangabo or Tshanzu training camps, were deployed with the M23, or had surrendered to the Congolese army after being deployed. As part of this research, the Congolese army granted access to Human Rights Watch to interview a number of former detainees who had surrendered. These interviews were conducted across two locations, in a private setting, and the independent, confidential, and voluntary nature of the interviews was described to each person. All information provided in interviews conducted with people who had surrendered to the Congolese army was corroborated by interviewees identified through other channels.

The report is also based on eight verified and geolocated videos and photographs of men being recruited and taken away in trucks in Goma and Bukavu and videos showing thousands of new recruits in both camps during graduation ceremonies.

Human Rights Watch analyzed satellite imagery from different dates of Rumangabo and Tshanzu and used 3D reconstruction (using photogrammetry, the process of generating 3D models from a series of 2D photographs or videos) to estimate the number of people loaded in trucks and in the detention cells in Rumangabo. Satellite imagery, maps, and

photographs of the camps were shown to former recruits interviewed by Human Rights Watch who helped identify locations of events and graves and label the different buildings.

Unless otherwise specified, all the abuses documented in this report and the mapping of both camps were based on more than three primary and secondary sources. Names and other identifying information of detainees and other sources have been withheld to protect interviewees from possible reprisals.

On October 28, 2025, Human Rights Watch requested to visit the M23 in Goma to discuss our preliminary research findings, but the request was denied. Human Rights Watch sent a letter to the M23's president, Bertrand Bisimwa, on February 6, 2026; to Rwanda's justice minister on January 23, 2026; and to Rwanda's defence minister on February 17, 2026; and requested in person or virtual meetings to discuss the report's findings, but received no response.

A former detainee describes the different buildings and areas in Tshanzu on a printed satellite imagery of the camp during an interview with a Human Rights Watch researcher. © 2026 Human Rights Watch

Background

In November 2021, the M23 armed group, with Rwanda's support, resumed military operations in North Kivu eight years after its earlier defeat. The M23 said it was renewing its offensive because of the stalled implementation of the 2013 Nairobi Declarations.[1] The armed group also said it was acting to protect Tutsi populations in eastern Congo, although its resurgence has since aggravated ethnic tensions in the area.[2]

Since 2022, Rwanda has provided recruitment, logistical, and military support to the M23, allegedly to safeguard its perceived security and economic interests, particularly against the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda, FDLR), a mostly Rwandan Hutu armed group formed by participants in Rwanda's 1994 genocide. In response to the M23's offensive, the Congolese government called for popular mobilization, triggering the rapid rise of the Wazalendo ("patriots" in Kiswahili) movement, with dozens of abusive Congolese armed groups rebranding themselves under this banner and aligning with government forces against the M23.[3] Authorities subsequently sought to institutionalize this mobilization by creating the Armed Defense Reserve (Réserve armée de défense, RAD) and by arming, financing, and coordinating operations with Wazalendo factions and other militias, including the FDLR, although the extent of the army's command-and-control over these groups is unclear.[4]

Government backing of these militias, including armed groups led by individuals implicated in past abuses, contributed to significant new violations and further eroded

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[1] UN Security Council, "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2022/479, June 14, 2022, https://docs.un.org/en/s/2022/479 (accessed April 8, 2026).

[2] James Karuhanga, "M23 says 'will not passively watch' as DR Congo bombs, massacres Banyamulenge," *The New Times*, March 4, 2025, https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/24542/news/africa/m23-says-will-not-passively-watch-as-dr-congo-bombs-massacres-banyamulenge (accessed April 1, 2026). Jacobs Seaman Odongo, "M23 Accuses Kinshasa of Genocide Against Banyamulenge," *The Nile Post*, May 26, 2025, https://nilepost.co.ug/news/260661/m23-accuses-kinshasa-of-genocide-against-banyamulenge (accessed April 1, 2026). Archie Bland, "Monday briefing: Why the brutal fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo could spiral into wider war," *The Guardian*, February 10, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/10/monday-briefing-why-the-brutal-conflict-in-the-democratic-republic-of-congo-could-spiral-into-wider-war (accessed April 1, 2026).

[3] "DR Congo: Army Units Aided Abusive Armed Groups," Human Rights Watch news release, October 18, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/18/dr-congo-army-units-aided-abusive-armed-groups.

[4] "DR Congo: Rwandan Forces, M23 Rebels Shell Civilians," Human Rights Watch news release, September 26, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/26/dr-congo-rwandan-forces-m23-rebels-shell-civilians.

already fragile accountability efforts.[5] They also blurred the line between combatants and civilians, as weapons and uniforms were massively distributed without much oversight, training, or control mechanisms in place.[6]

As Rwandan military forces and the M23 gained ground and consolidated control around Goma throughout 2024, over half a million people sought refuge in displacement camps surrounding the city, pushing the number of displaced people in North Kivu to about 2.4 million.[7] These forces used heavy artillery in attacks that indiscriminately struck densely populated areas in apparent violation of the laws of war.[8] Congolese forces and their allies carried out grave abuses, including killing, rape, arbitrary detention, and extortion against displaced people around Goma.[9] Attempts at brokering a peace agreement between the parties stalled, and by the end of 2024, an estimated 7.8 million people, nearly half of them children, were displaced.[10]

By late 2024, the M23, led by Bertrand Bisimwa, and its political coalition, the Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC), led by Corneille Nangaa Yobeluo, expanded their territorial control across Rutshuru, Nyiragongo, and much of Masisi, including key mining areas, amid widespread reports of serious human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law.

On January 23, 2025, the M23 and Rwandan military launched an attack on the strategic town of Sake, west of Goma, defeating Congolese government troops backed by the Wazalendo, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo, MONUSCO), the Southern African Development

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[5] "DR Congo: Army-Backed Militias Abuse Civilians in South Kivu," Human Rights Watch news release, May 23, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/23/dr-congo-army-backed-militias-abuse-civilians-south-kivu.

[6] "DR Congo: Rwandan Forces, M23 Rebels Shell Civilians," Human Rights Watch news release.

[7] "UNHCR calls for urgent support for 6.2 million people forcibly displaced by conflict in DR Congo," UNHCR press release, June 3, 2023, https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/unhcr-calls-urgent-support-6-2-million-people-forcibly-displaced-conflict-dr (accessed December 9, 2025). OCHA, "RD Congo : Situation humanitaire dans la province du Nord-Kivu (15 septembre 2024)," September 16, 2024, https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/rd-congo-situation-humanitaire-dans-la-province-du-nord-kivu-15-septembre-2024 (accessed December 9, 2025).

[8] "DR Congo: Rwandan Forces, M23 Rebels Shell Civilians," Human Rights Watch news release.

[9] Ibid.

[10] "UNHCR and partners urgently seek funding as Congolese refugee numbers soar," UNHCR press release, May 6, 2025, https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/unhcr-and-partners-urgently-seek-funding-congolese-refugee-numbers-soar (accessed March 8, 2026).

Community Mission (SAMIDRC), the Burundian army, and private military contractors.[11] Days later, M23 and Rwandan forces entered Goma, leading to intense fighting and heavy shelling, killing civilians, and prompting thousands to seek refuge in UN bases.[12] Many Wazalendo fighters, police, civil servants, and Congolese soldiers were unable to flee. In early February, the M23 advanced into South Kivu, capturing Bukavu days later without resistance.[13]

The AFC/M23 sought to consolidate their authority in Goma and Bukavu, appointing new administrators and replacing civil servants and customary leaders who refused to cooperate. They levied new taxes, including on mining operations, and pillaged mining depots.[14] They also forcibly removed tens of thousands of people, perhaps many more, from displacement camps around Goma made up of people who had fled their advance. They ordered the camps to be dismantled and gave residents 72 hours to leave.[15]

A June 27, 2025 initial peace agreement between Congo and Rwanda, followed by a July 19 Declaration of Principles between the Congolese government and M23, pledged to neutralize the FDLR, end foreign military involvement, and eliminate support to non-state armed groups. Fighting has continued, however, with Rwandan and M23 forces continuing to clash with Congolese, Wazalendo, and FDLR forces across North and South Kivu. After the agreement was signed, M23 forces carried out major offensives in Bwito and Binza groupements, Bwisha chefferie, an area with a longstanding FDLR presence. Human Rights Watch and the UN documented the mass killings of over 140 primarily Hutu civilians, including women and children, in July 2025.[16]

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[11] Wedaeli Chibelushi and Marina Daras, "Rebels kill DR Congo governor as fighting intensifies," *BBC*, January 25, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckgy6qlv5kro (accessed December 9, 2025).

[12] "Rwanda: Ensure Humanitarian Aid Reaches Goma," Human Rights Watch news release, January 31, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/31/rwanda-ensure-humanitarian-aid-reaches-goma.

[13] Carlos Mureithi, "Rwanda-backed M23 rebels capture eastern DRC's second-largest city," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/17/rwanda-backed-m23-rebels-capture-drc-city-bukavu (accessed December 9, 2025).

[14] UN Security Council, "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2025/446, July 3, 2025, https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/446 (accessed April 3, 2026).

[15] "DR Congo: M23 Drives Displaced People From Goma Camps," Human Rights Watch news release, February 13, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/13/dr-congo-m23-drives-displaced-people-goma-camps. See also Human Rights Watch's satellite imagery analysis, Human Rights Watch's X account, @hrw, February 20, 2025, https://x.com/hrw/status/1892511590332740043 (accessed April 8, 2026).

[16] "DR Congo: M23 Mass Killings Near Virunga National Park," Human Rights Watch news release, August 20, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/08/20/dr-congo-m23-mass-killings-near-virunga-national-park.

A final peace agreement was signed in December 2025. However, Rwandan and M23 forces launched soon after a major offensive in South Kivu and captured Uvira, the second largest city in the province, on December 10, 2025.[17] Following intense diplomatic pressure, the M23 withdrew from Uvira in January 2026.[18]

[17] "DR Congo: Fall of Eastern City Puts Civilians at Risk," Human Rights Watch news release, December 15, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/15/dr-congo-fall-of-eastern-city-puts-civilians-at-risk.

[18] "DR Congo: Civilians in South Kivu City at Serious Risk," Human Rights Watch news release, January 20, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/20/dr-congo-civilians-in-south-kivu-city-at-serious-risk.

Arbitrary Arrest and Transfer by M23 Forces

Since 2024, the M23 has carried out forced recruitment drives among both civilians and enemy combatants to build up its ranks.[19] Throughout 2025, after capturing large swathes of territory and key eastern cities, the M23 increased these efforts and organized massive recruitment activities in areas under their control in eastern Congo. Thousands of Congolese soldiers, Wazalendo militia, police, and civilians were recruited, sometimes voluntarily, although often forcibly.[20]

These roundup operations began as soon as Goma was taken over. While the M23 carried out most arrests, several recruits identified Rwandan soldiers—because of their uniforms, equipment, accents, and inability to speak French or Kiswahili—taking part in these operations in Goma and Bukavu.[21] "Those who took me were Rwandan; they wore the helmets and uniforms of the Rwandan army," said a civilian who was taken to Tshanzu in February 2025. "They spoke the Kinyarwanda of Rwanda."[22]

On January 30, 2025, at least 11 trucks filled with captured or surrendered combatants and civilians left the Unity Stadium (Stade de l'Unité) in Goma and headed north, apparently towards Rumangabo.[23] Human Rights Watch geolocated four photos and three videos received from a journalist and recorded on January 30, 2025, showing these trucks filled with hundreds of men in civilian clothes leaving Unity Stadium. Men wearing apparent Rwandan military gear can be seen patrolling around in the trucks alongside men in uniforms more typical of M23 fighters. After using photogrammetry and 3D modelling to

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[19] UN Security Council, "Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2023/990, December 30, 2023, https://docs.un.org/en/s/2023/990 (accessed April 23, 2026). UN Security Council, "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2024/432, June 4, 2024, https://docs.un.org/en/s/2024/432 (accessed December 9, 2025). UN Security Council, "Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2024/969, December 27, 2024, https://docs.un.org/en/S/2024/969 (accessed April 23, 2026). UN Security Council, "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2025/446, July 3, 2025, https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/446 (accessed April 3, 2026).

[20] UN Security Council, "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2025/446, July 3, 2025.

[21] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Tshanzu and Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 25-27, 2026.

[22] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

[23] According to three sources present at the time, review of photographs and videos showing the trucks, and Patricia Huon, "À Goma, on prie pour un retour au calme," *Tribune de Genève,* February 1, 2025, https://www.tdg.ch/rdc-a-goma-on-prie-pour-un-retour-au-calme-887851335649 (accessed January 6, 2026.).

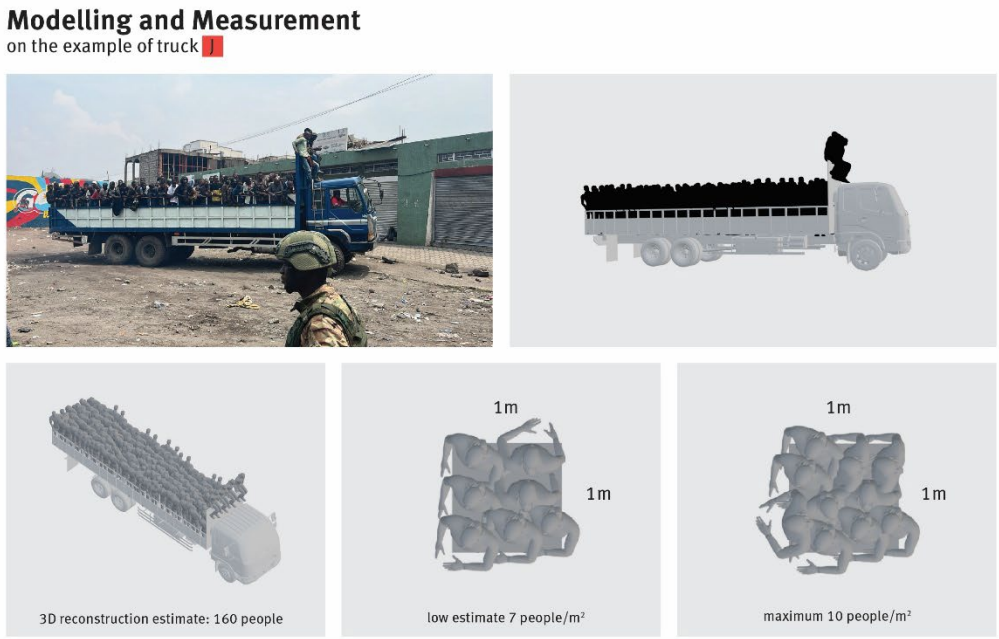
reconstruct the size and capacity of the trucks, Human Rights Watch estimated that about 1,700 people were on the 11 visible trucks.

As part of these efforts the M23 and Rwandan forces detained thousands of civilians, police, civil servants, FARDC, and Wazalendo fighters.[24]

Throughout 2025, Human Rights Watch documented arrests, abductions, coercion through local authorities, and large-scale sweeps across Goma, Sake, Minova, Bukavu, in Rutshuru, Nyiragongo, Masisi territories, and in surrounding areas. M23 fighters set up ambushes or checkpoints on roads, apprehended people at hospitals, churches, and schools, or summoned residents under false pretenses or with threats before transporting them in trucks to the two camps.

Photograph recorded on January 30, 2025, shared with Human Rights Watch by a journalist and geolocated to the Unity Stadium in Goma, shows a truck full of men in civilian clothes. The man in the foreground is wearing military gear including a helmet consistent with those worn by RDF soldiers. © 2025 Private

[24] UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission on the situation in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo," A/HRC/60/80, September 5, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/ffmk-drc/a-hrc-60-80-auv-en.pdf (accessed April 24, 2026).



Using photogrammetry and 3D modelling, Human Rights Watch estimated that about 1,700 people were on the 11 trucks seen on photos and videos in front of the Unity Stadium on January 30, 2025. Each truck carried between 120 (smaller truck with lower estimate) and 190 (larger truck with higher estimate) people. Analysis and graphics © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

In the initial weeks after capturing Goma, Bukavu, and their outskirts in late January and February 2025, M23 commanders held meetings and led house-to-house operations to convince the population to support their activities.[25] Although some people turned themselves in, many others were rounded up and taken forcibly, including three Congolese soldiers interviewed by Human Rights Watch taken directly from hospitals.[26] M23 fighters quickly began taking young men and boys by force. Those interviewed also said they were arrested at checkpoints as they tried to flee from Goma or Bukavu. Two boys taken to Tshanzu for training in 2025 and former recruits confirmed the presence of children in both camps.[27]

"When I left my house in Goma, some M23 fighters stopped me and asked why I wasn't doing the '*salongo*' [forced community work]," said a 16-year-old boy forcibly recruited in January 2025. "Then they took my motorbike, drove me to a detention cell, and then took me to Tshanzu."[28]

Human Rights Watch interviewed 48 people apprehended from different Goma neighborhoods who described large-scale sweeps.[29] Thirty-four former detainees interviewed were first taken to Unity Stadium, close to the international airport, including some who had been transferred from Bukavu, between January and August 2025.[30] They described being held with up to hundreds of others, stripped of phones and voter cards, in

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[25] Human Rights Watch interviews with a former detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 21, 2025; with a former Sake resident (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 17, 2025; with a former local neighborhood leader in Goma (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 17, 2025; with a former Goma resident (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 21, 2025; and with former detainees (names withheld), by phone, June 7 and 8, 2025.

[26] Human Rights Watch interviews with two former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Beni, DR Congo, November 25, 2025, and Kisangani, DR Congo, January 25, 2026. See also: "DRC: M23's rampant human rights abuses demand concerted international action," *Amnesty International*, March 18, 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/03/m23s-rampant-human-rights-abuses-demand-concerted-international-action/ (accessed January 6, 2026).

[27] Human Rights Watch interviews with two children and former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24 and 27, 2026.

[28] Human Rights Watch interview with a child and former Tshanzy detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

[29] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Goma residents (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25 and June 17 and 20-22, 2025; Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026; and by phone, June 7 and 8, 2025.

[30] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Goma residents (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25 and June 17 and 20-22, 2025; Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026; and by phone, June 7 and 8, 2025.

some cases beaten, and told they must "help liberate the country."[31] Witnesses said the M23 accused youths of supporting the Wazalendo or the Congolese army.[32] Some local neighborhood leaders urged men to attend meetings at the stadium or face consequences if they were caught.[33]

Others transited through government buildings or other unofficial detention sites.[34] These temporary detention locations in Goma included the former police headquarters in Mugunga, the provincial assembly building, a compound near Mount Goma, the National Intelligence Agency, Muzenze Prison, and the 34th Military Region compound, as well as private houses.[35] The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented two additional detention locations.[36] People were then loaded onto trucks and driven toward Rutshuru.

Two people who were detained at the provincial assembly confirmed seeing trucks filled with people leaving for Rumangabo and Tshanzu.[37] They also said they witnessed executions and the torture of people who refused to agree to the training or admit that they were combatants.[38]

Those who surrendered or attended the M23's recruitment meetings in the initial days and weeks after the capture of Goma and Bukavu were considered to have done so voluntarily and were often promised money and an opportunity to "fight for their country."[39] But

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[31] Due to the absence of a functioning national ID system, the voter's card is the only documentation available to many people in Congo, if they are of voting age and registered.

[32] Human Rights Watch interview with a refugee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 17, 2025. Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Goma resident, June 7, 2025.

[33] Human Rights Watch interview with two former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 26 and 27, 2026.

[34] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Goma residents (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25 and June 17, 20-22, 2025; Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026; and by phone, June 7 and 8, 2025.

[35] Human Rights Watch telephone interviews with six former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), November 16 and 28 and December 23, 2025.

[36] UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission on the situation in North and South Kivu Provinces of Congo." A/HRC/60/80.

[37] Human Rights Watch interviews with two former detainees held at the provincial assembly in Goma (names withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 31, 2026.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Human Rights Watch interviews with five former detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24-27, 2026.

others rounded up, particularly after March 2025, were considered reluctant and often treated abusively during their arrest, transfer, and training.[40]

M23 fighters dressed in civilian clothing picked up a 35-year-old man on July 8, 2025, on the streets of Sake. He denied accusations of having been part of the Congolese military, and was taken to Mubambiro military camp where he said he was whipped for an hour. He said that in the ensuing days, he was transferred to a private house in Goma, then to the 34th Military Region compound, and then to a compound near the state-owned Radio-Télévision Nationale Congolaise building on Mount Goma.[41] In most of these locations he was held in inhumane conditions in containers filled with other men. "In [the compound on] Mount Goma, they whipped me every 48 hours and said they would keep doing so until I admitted I was in the military," he said. After three weeks, he was transferred to Rumangabo.[42]

A 29-year-old delivery man said he was tortured at the detention facility on Mount Goma before being transferred to Tshanzu: "They beat us with sticks and whips every day.... [A]fter a month, we said we were Wazalendo."[43]

Witnesses recounted how M23 fighters demanded lists of men from village chiefs or local leaders known as "*nyumba kumi*," which refers to a cluster of 10 households in Kiswahili. Many chiefs and customary leaders were themselves taken for "training," returning to order each household cluster to supply young people, sometimes "10 per week."[44] A former nyumba kumi leader said that when five M23 fighters came to his house in Rubaya, Masisi territory, and could not find him, they took his son instead.[45]

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[40] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, November 25 and 28 and December 7, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24-28, 2026, and Beni, DR Congo, January 29-February 1, 2026.

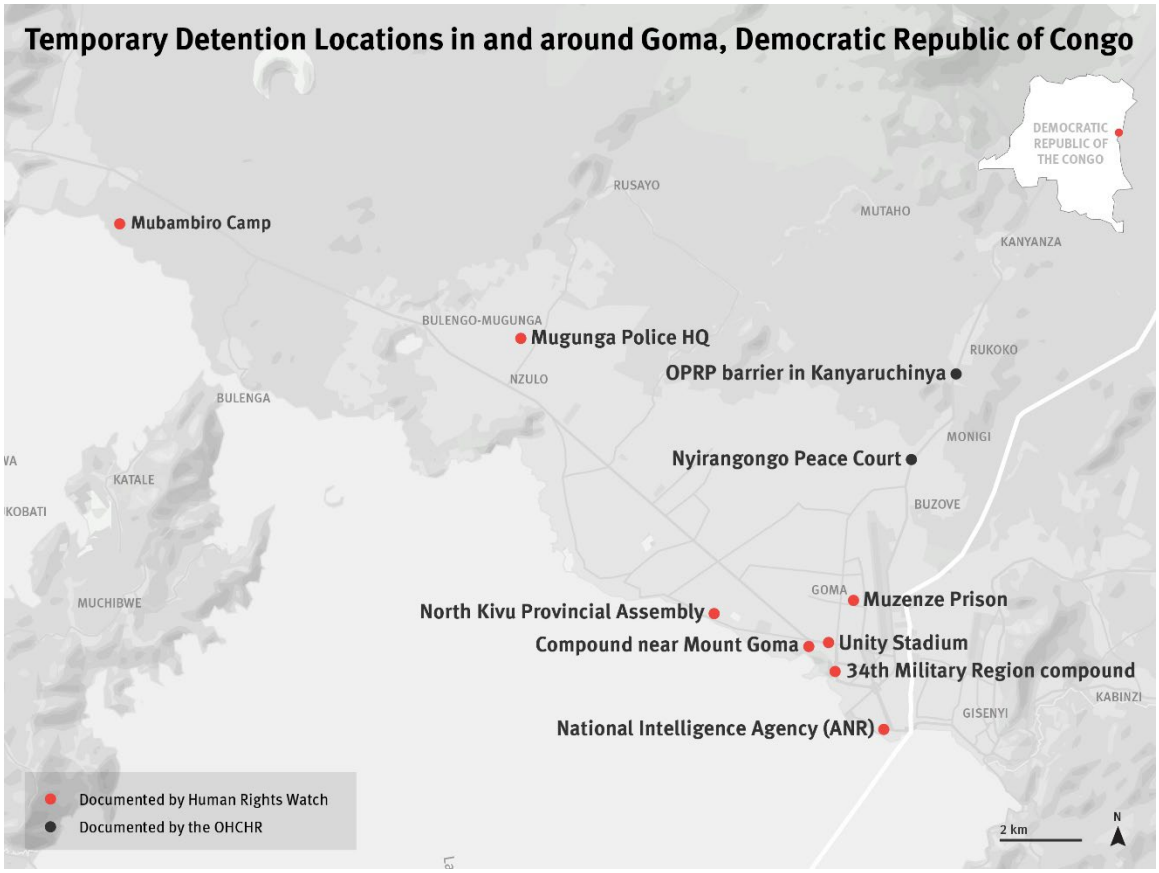
[41] For more information on M23 detention sites in Goma, see "DRC: M23 kill, torture and hold civilians hostage at detention sites – new investigation," *Amnesty International*, May 27, 2025, https://amnesty.ca/human-rights-news/drc-m23-kill-torture-and-hold-civilians-hostage-at-detention-sites/ (accessed April 1, 2026).

[42] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), November 25, 2025.

[43] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), December 23, 2025.

[44] Human Rights Watch interviews with two former village chiefs (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25 and June 21, 2025, and with a witness, Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

[45] Human Rights Watch interview with a former *nyumba kumi* leader (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 17, 2025.



Map of the temporary detention locations near Goma documented by Human Rights Watch and other organizations. Graphic © 2026 Human Rights Watch

"The nyumba kumi leaders went around [Himbi] neighborhood [in Goma] on February 3, 2025, with speakerphones. They said we would be given money at a meeting nearby and that the country needed us," said a 24-year-old civilian who was later transferred to Tshanzu. "When the meeting was over, [the M23] blocked the exits and stopped us from leaving."[46]

In Bukavu, the M23 carried out roundups of youths and men throughout the year. Civilians described being detained without basis in Bukavu in the weeks after the M23 captured the city, being transferred to Goma by boat, and then being detained at the Unity Stadium until their transfer to Rumangabo or Tshanzu.[47]

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[46] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

[47] Human Rights Watch interviews with eleven former Rumangabo and Tshanzo detainees (names withheld), by phone, January 17, 2026; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24 to 28, 2026.

On October 30, 2025, the M23 forcibly apprehended several hundreds of men from Panzi neighborhood on the outskirts of Bukavu.[48] Human Rights Watch verified and geolocated a video posted on social media on October 30, 2025, showing a large group of men gathered on empty ground next to Bukavu's Panzi hospital. Another video posted the same day shows six trucks filled with men driving out of the same ground and into the main street. A third video was taken from inside a room, where six men believed to be forcibly recruited during this sweep gave details about their identities in an attempt to notify their families that they were being taken.[49] Human Rights Watch could not confirm where this last video was recorded.

Human Rights Watch documented two other large-scale roundup operations in Funu stadium and Irambo neighborhood in late September and mid-October 2025.[50]

Human Rights Watch verified and geolocated a video posted on social media on October 30, 2025, showing a large group of men gathered on empty ground next to Bukavu's Panzi hospital. Another video posted the same day shows six trucks filled with men driving out of the same ground and into the main street. Videos © 2026 Private. Analysis and graphic © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

[48] Human Rights Watch telephone interviews with a local civil society representative, a UN staff member, and two residents of Bukavu, DR Congo, November 2025.

[49] Videos on file with Human Rights Watch.

[50] Human Rights Watch telephone interviews with a local civil society representative, a UN staff member, and two residents of Bukavu, DR Congo, November 2025.

Map of the locations of roundup operations documented by Human Rights Watch in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo. Graphic © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

Outside of the main cities, M23 roundups were often accompanied by violence. In villages across Masisi, Nyiragongo, and Rutshuru territories, witnesses described fighters killing people who resisted or tried to flee, beating men with sticks, electric cables, and machetes, and executing those deemed too old or unwilling to serve.[51] On March 25, 2025, in a village near Kitchanga, Masisi territory, a man said M23 fighters rounded up men:

> When they arrived, I tried telling them I don't want to join the military. They cut me with a machete. Anyone who tried to escape was shot. Those who were slow were whipped. They made us sit down and tied us up. My brother … got up and tried to flee, and he was shot. My neighbor … was

[51] Human Rights Watch interviews with six witnesses and relatives of victims (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 23-25 and June 16 and 17, 2025. Confidential footage, Masisi, DR Congo, March 20 and June 10, 2024.

> epileptic. When they beat us, he had a fit. When it was time to leave he couldn't follow us, so they shot him in the chest.[52]

He was taken to an M23 military position in Bukombo and fled from there.[53]

In Burungu, Masisi territory, a man watched the killing of his 56-year-old father as well as two women after refusing recruitment in November 2024: "They told us to choose between joining the military and going home. My father asked to go home, and they said he deserved to die and killed him with a machete."[54] He was transferred to Tshanzu in January 2025. In Rutshuru, witnesses described groups of men tied, beaten, and marched to waiting vehicles.[55]

Roundups continued throughout 2025 and into 2026. In January 2026, M23 fighters organized "curfew" operations in Sake, meaning they closed off access to a neighborhood and searched every house. "They took 17 men over the course of three curfew operations," said a local civil society leader. "First, they were taken to Sake stadium and from there they go for training."[56] Human Rights Watch documented another forced recruitment operation in Bambo, Rutshuru territory, when three trucks filled with people were taken away in late January 2026.[57]

In many accounts, Rumangabo and Tshanzu consistently appear as the destinations for recruits: large camps where men, women, girls, and boys were delivered, often in truckloads, to undergo military training or further detention under harsh and coercive conditions.

Several former detainees said that they were first taken to Rutshuru prison before transiting to one of the training camps.[58] They described severe overcrowding, lack of legal

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[52] Human Rights Watch interview with a refugee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 26, 2025.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 26, 2025.

[55] Human Rights Watch interviews with four former detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25 and June 17, 20, and 22, 2025.

[56] Human Rights Watch interview with a local civil society leader (name withheld), and two Sake residents (names withheld), eni, DR Congo, January 30, 2026, and by phone on February 3, 2026.

[57] Human Rights Watch interviews with Bambo residents and witnesses (names withheld), February 1 and March 2, 2026.

[58] Human Rights Watch interviews with seven former detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24 and June 20, 2025; Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 31-February 1, 2026.

safeguards, and deaths from untreated torture injuries. One detainee reported that scores of people were held together in cells and said he saw seven people die after being brought in from Nyamilima, Nyongera, or Kiseguru already critically injured. “They had whipped and beaten youths to get information, and then they send them to prison, even though they only had suspicions about them,” he said. [59] Another detainee, arrested with nine others at a local bar, described being held for a week and denied food for five days. He said M23 fighters accused them of “plotting against us.” His family tracked him down and were able to bring him food after five days.[60]

[59] Human Rights Watch interview with a refugee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24, 2025. Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a UN source, November 14, 2025.

[60] Human Rights Watch interview with a refugee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 20, 2025.

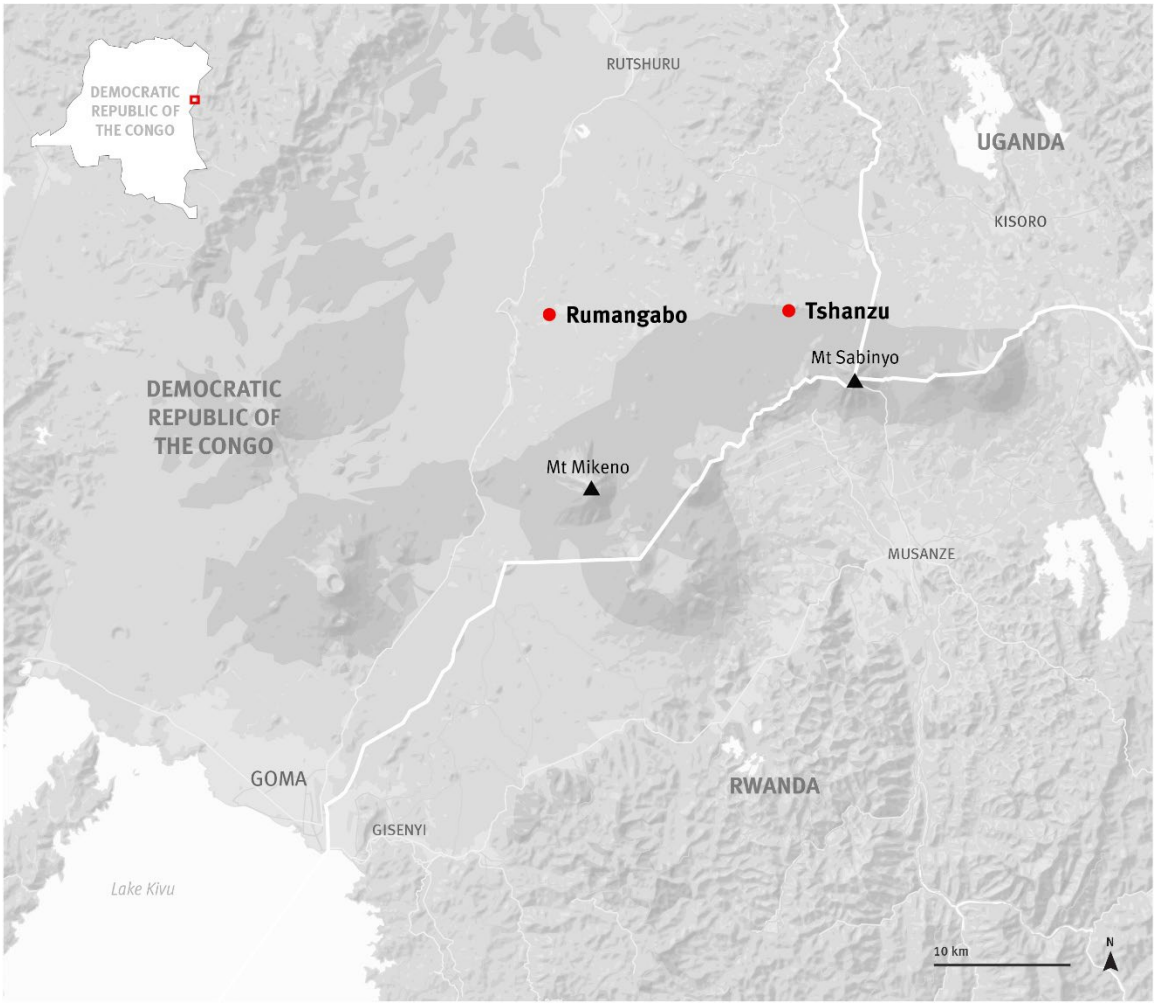
Mass Killings and Inhumane Treatment

"They executed people in front of everyone and the body was brought before everyone.... Some died from whipping, others were shot."

–Former Rumangabo detainee, December 7, 2025

"Whipping people there is normal. Seeing a dead body is normal. We would wake up and find dead bodies around us. We buried them in big graves with up to 50 others."

–Former Tshanzu detainee, January 31, 2026



Location map of Rumangabo and Tshanzu camps, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo. Graphics © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 54 former detainees who were held at Rumangabo and 48 who were held at Tshanzu for periods ranging from several days to 10 months between March 2024 and December 2025.[61] Among those, 78 were forcibly recruited in 2025 after Rwandan forces and the M23 captured Goma and Bukavu. Interviewees were former detainees who had either escaped from the camps or who had been deployed and then fled and surrendered to the Congolese army. Former detainees from both training centers described how camp officials and instructors subjected detainees to life-threatening conditions and carried out severe beatings and executions.

According to former detainees and other corroborating sources, hundreds, and possibly more detainees, could have died in the camps throughout 2025. Only exhumations and a comprehensive independent investigation will enable the full accounting of deaths in both camps. To reflect the scale of the horror that unfolded in the camps, four former Rumangabo detainees and five former Tshanzu detainees said that they saw dogs coming to eat bodies at night.[62] "We dug shallow graves, often people's knees, feet, or hands would be left sticking out," said a former Rumangabo detainee. "At night, dogs would come and eat the bodies."[63]

Rumangabo, a former Congolese military base, and Tshanzu, a former army position, have been repurposed by the M23 as their two main training centers. Tshanzu has been used for training since it was captured by the M23 in 2022, initially hosting both military and civilian recruits.[64] In 2024, Human Rights Watch received a video geolocated to a village in Rutshuru territory showing the M23 marching columns of youths to Tshanzu, who had been taken by force for failing to show up for forced labor or on threat of receiving 150 lashes.[65] Some "local defense" forces were trained in Tshanzu for two months and then directed to carry out police functions in M23-governed territories.[66]

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[61] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees, Kampala and Mbarara, Uganda, and Beni, Bunia, Kinshasa, and Kisangani, DR Congo, and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

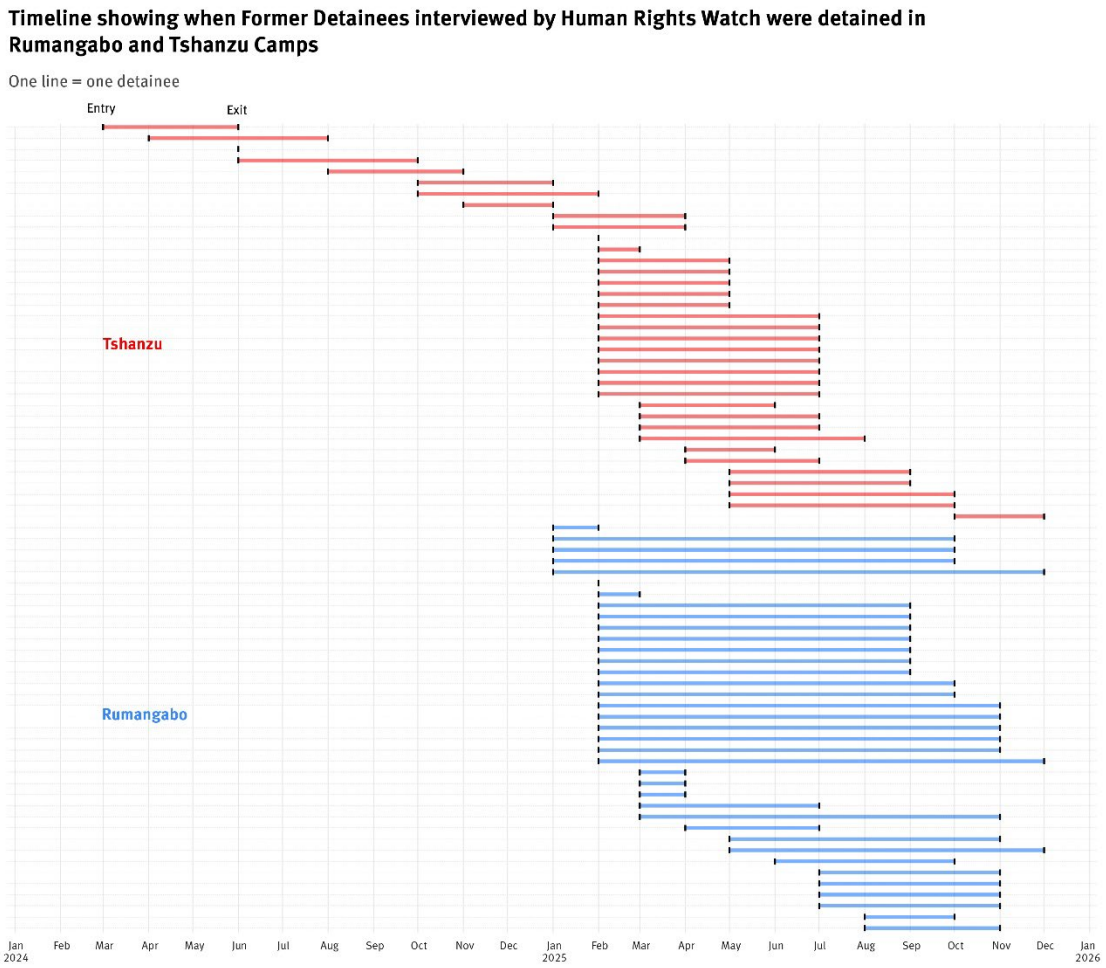
[62] Human Rights Watch interviews with four former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23 and 25, 2026; Beni, DR Congo, February 1, 2026; and by phone, March 9, 2026. Human Rights Watch interviews with five former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 26 and 27, 2026. Independent confirmation through former detainees in Uganda, March 26, 2026.

[63] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 25, 2026.

[64] UN Security Council, "Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2022/967, December 16, 2022, https://docs.un.org/en/s/2022/967.

[65] Confidential video footage, Rutshuru, DR Congo, June 10, 2024.

[66] Confidential video footage, Masisi, DR Congo, March 20, 2024.



Timeline showing when former detainees interviewed by Human Rights Watch were held in Rumangabo and Tshanzu camps. Only the detainees who could recall with precision the month when they entered and exited the camp are displayed in the chart. Graphic © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

Rumangabo was captured in late 2022 and initially used as a detention facility.[67] It was handed over to the East African Community Regional Force in 2023, which withdrew at the end of that year, and began being used for military training by the M23 in late 2024.[68] After the fall of Goma and Bukavu, Tshanzu became a center for "volunteers," local defense forces, and civil servants. Training courses were required for civilian officials including

[67] Human Rights Watch interview with former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25, 2025.

[68] "M23 rebels attack military positions in eastern Congo," *Reuters*, March 28, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/m23-rebels-attack-military-positions-eastern-congo-2022-03-28/ (accessed December 9, 2025).

heads of state-owned companies, community leaders, and low-level administrators.[69] Wazalendo fighters were also transferred to Tshanzu for training. Rumangabo became the main training center for military personnel and captured police forces. The United Nations and Human Rights Watch found that thousands of civilians were forcibly recruited throughout 2025.[70]

Although some may have surrendered or volunteered for training, especially in the first weeks after the M23 captured Goma and Bukavu, all former recruits interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they were taken against their will.[71] "Among our group of 60, everyone was taken by force," said a former Tshanzu detainee. "Some were motorcycle taxi drivers, others shop owners.... [T]hey had to abandon everything."[72]

In both centers, former detainees described brutal beatings, punishments, and executions for asking for food or water, walking too slowly, struggling with daily labor, failing military exercises, attempting to go to the bathroom at night, and attempting to escape.

Rumangabo

Rumangabo consists of dozens of buildings aligned around a central courtyard, where mainly military and police recruits were held. Human Rights Watch interviewed 58 former detainees: 25 police officers, 20 military officers, and 13 civilians, who were taken to Rumangabo in 2025.[73] Military and police officers who "surrendered" in the early days after the M23 captured Goma and Bukavu were immediately sent for training in Rumangabo. Most of those sent to Rumangabo shared large rooms with 20 to 50 others on the southwestern or northeastern sides of the camp. Several thousand civilians and military and police officers were also held in the camp's detention cells (see below).

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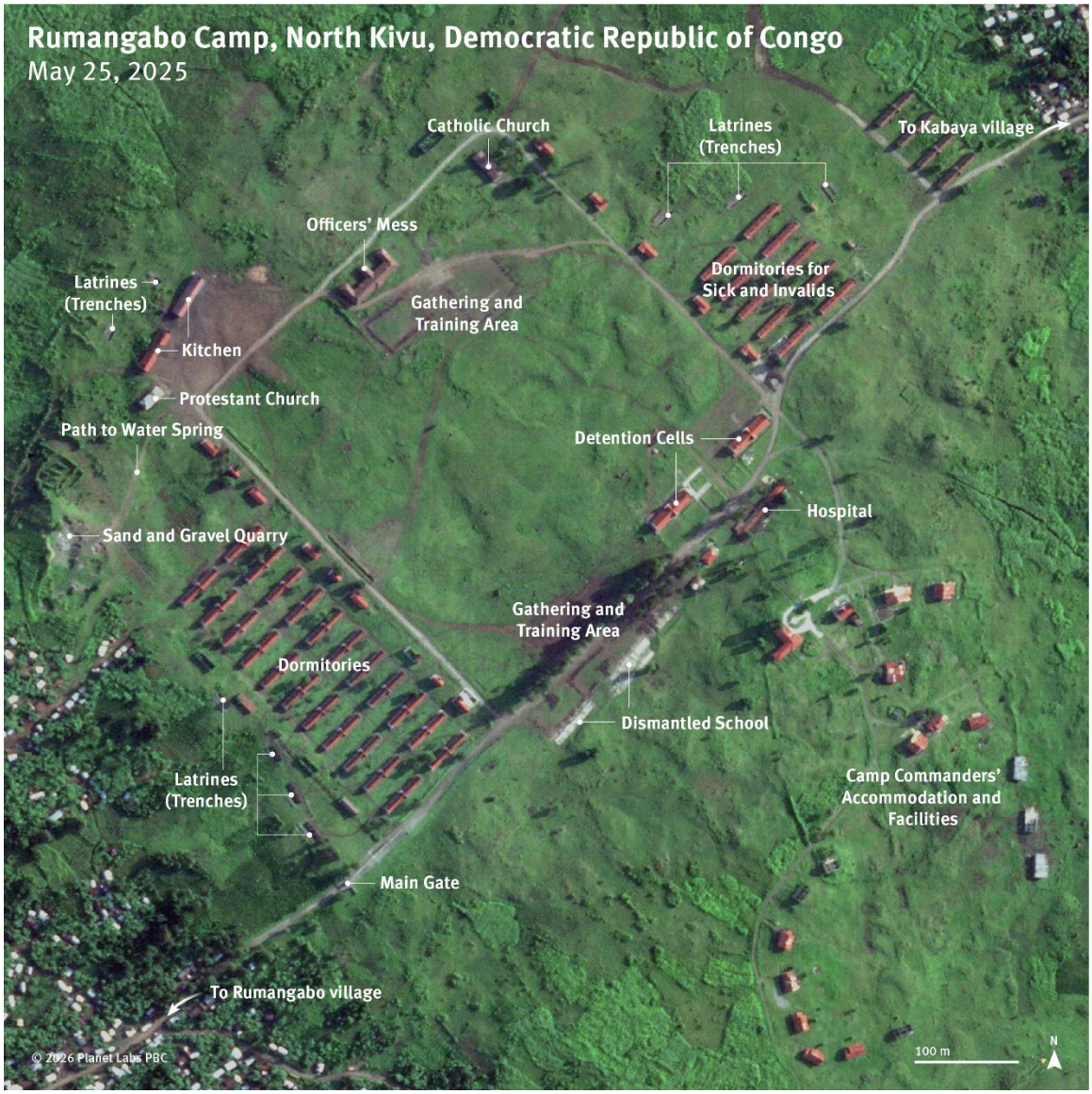
[69] "M23 rebels entrench their rule in east Congo even as Trump claims peace," *Reuters*, December 8, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/investigations/m23-rebels-entrench-their-rule-east-congo-even-trump-claims-peace-2025-12-08/ (accessed December 18, 2025).

[70] UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission on the situation in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo," A/HRC/60/80, September 5, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/ffmk-drc/a-hrc-60-80-auv-en.pdf (accessed April 24, 2026).

[71] Human Rights Watch interviews with 102 former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees, DR Congo, Uganda, and over the phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

[72] Human Rights Watch interview with former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25, 2025.

[73] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Rumangabo detainees, Mbarara, Uganda, and Kisangani and Beni, DR Congo, and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

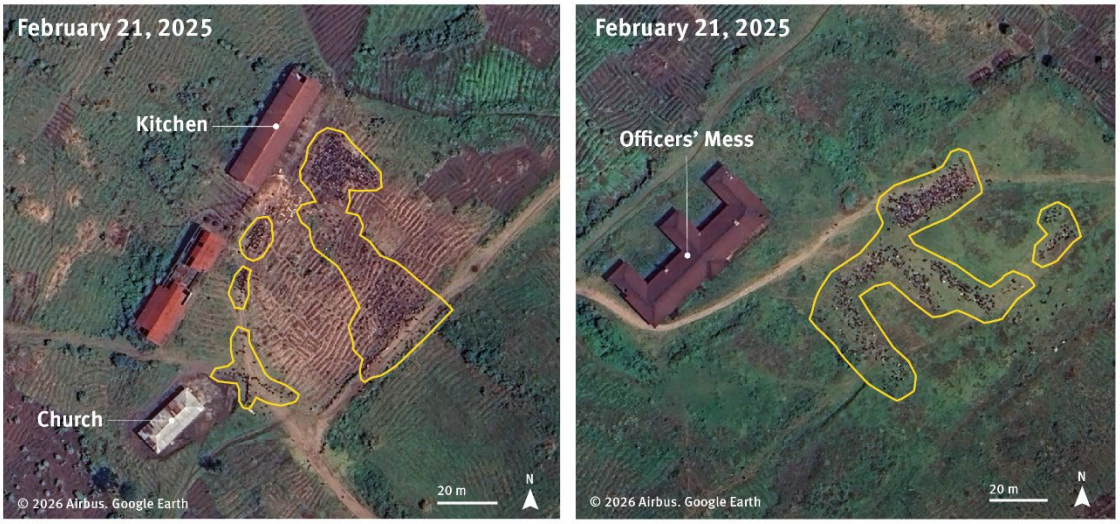


Satellite imagery from May 25, 2025, of Rumangabo camp. The different buildings and areas were labelled based on accounts from former detainees. Image © 2026 Planet Labs PBC. Analysis and graphics © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

Recruits at Rumangabo were given minimal military training, only practicing parades and basic infantry exercises without firearms.

Very-high resolution satellite imagery from February 21, 2025, shows crowds of hundreds of people at different locations inside the camp.

Crowds of People in Rumangabo Camp



Satellite imagery from February 21, 2025, shows two crowds of hundreds of people each in front of the kitchen and the officers' mess in Rumangabo camp. Images © 2026 Airbus. Google Earth. Graphics © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

Mass Killings

Former detainees said that throughout their time at Rumangabo, M23 fighters struck them with rifle butts, sticks, and whips made from tree branches for moving too slowly, falling out of line, asking questions, asking for or attempting to drink water, attempting to find food or get a second helping of food, being unwell, or speaking Lingala.[74] They said some detainees were beaten to death.[75]

Based on incidents they witnessed, former detainees estimated that significant numbers of detainees died in Rumangabo.[76] For example, nearly two dozen former detainees remembered between 5 and 20 people dying on a single day.[77] Former detainees said

[74] Human Rights Watch interviews with 10 former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 20-22, 2025; and by phone, November 16, 25, and 28 and December 7, 2025. Human Rights Watch interviews with six former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24-26, 2025; and by phone, December 23, 2025.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Human Rights Watch interviews with nine former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, and Beni and Kisangani, DR Congo, and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

[77] Human Rights Watch interviews with 22 former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, and Beni and Kisangani, DR Congo, and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

many people died from beatings, extreme dehydration, malnourishment, and lack of medication and health care (see more information on camp conditions below).[78]

"What we experienced was extreme suffering. Many of us died because of it. The bodies are still buried in the camp; there is no cemetery," said a Congolese soldier taken to Rumangabo in March 2025. "We dug a little and put the body in. All around the houses, it's like a field, that's where we buried the dead."[79]

Many former detainees said they were made to bury the bodies of deceased detainees, often between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m., to do so before the rest of the camp awoke. Some said they were told to do so a handful of times, while others said they were called upon regularly. Some reported burying people in shallow, individual graves or in mass graves where up to 25 bodies were buried.[80] They gave detailed descriptions of the graves' location or identified their location on satellite images and photographs of the camp presented to them by researchers during interviews.[81] "We buried people everywhere. People died in the hospital, the kitchen, the detention cell. We dug mass graves," said a former detainee who was held there for 10 months in 2025. "I did it many times. We did it at 3 a.m."[82]

Another former detainee who was held at Rumangabo for 10 months in 2025 said: "The bodies were buried all over the camp, but there was a mass grave on a hill near the camp. We were burying [up to] 6 or 8 bodies a day, sometimes 16. They made us plant trees and bushes to mask the graves. People died … from executions, whippings, and illness."[83]

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[78] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, and Kisangani and Beni, DR Congo, and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

[79] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, November 25, 2025.

[80] Human Rights Watch interviews with 18 former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, and Kisangani and Beni, DR Congo, and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

[81] Human Rights Watch interviews with 22 former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, and Kisangani and Beni, DR Congo, and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

[82] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 30, 2026.

[83] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), December 7, 2025.

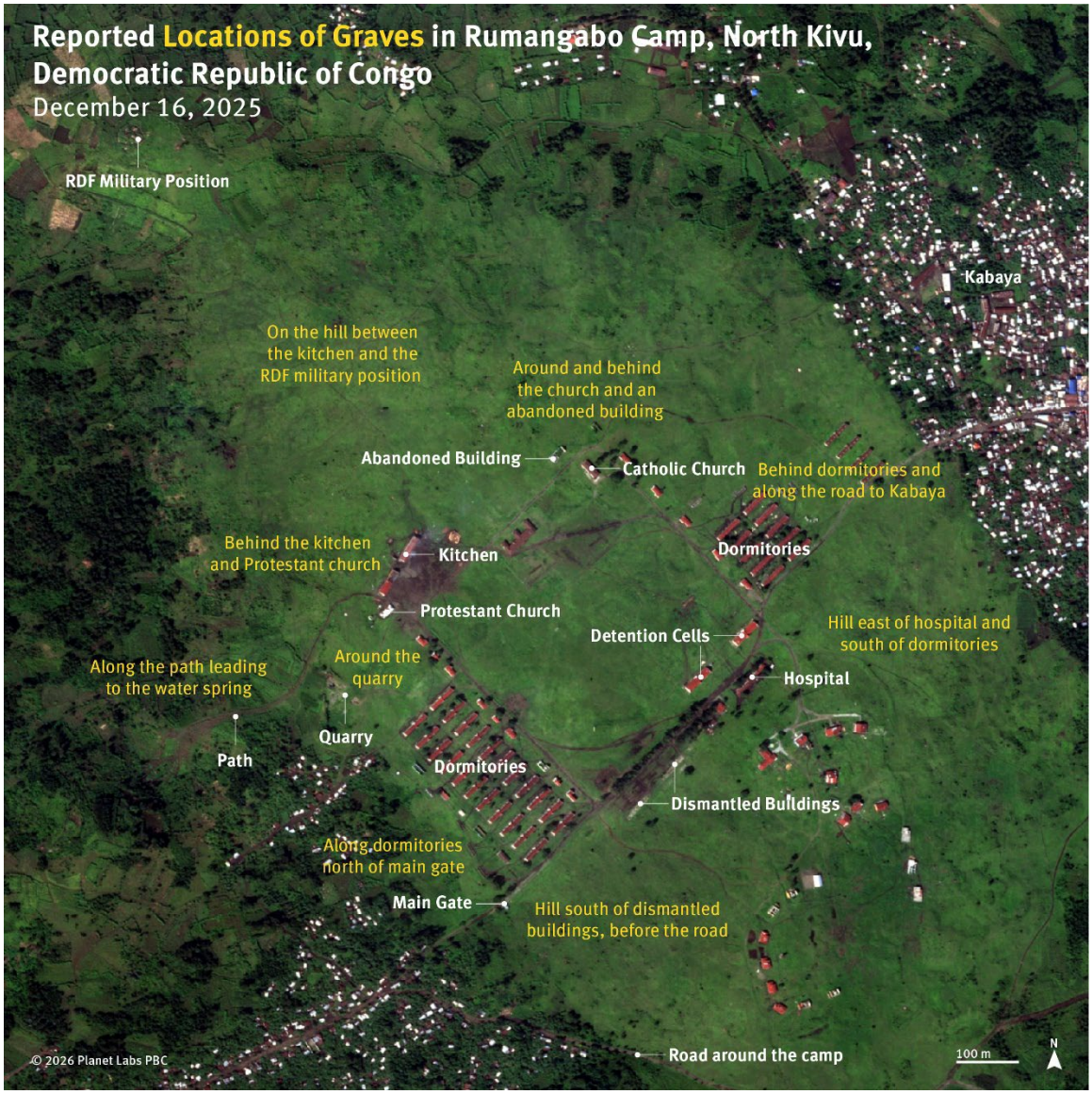
A former detainee identifies the hill south of the camp on a printed satellite imagery of Rumangabo camp as a recurrent area for burials during an interview with a Human Rights Watch researcher. © 2026 Human Rights Watch

Many former detainees either identified on satellite imagery or gave precise descriptions of the hill south of the camp as a location filled with shallow graves.[84] A number mentioned the area behind the kitchen and the Protestant church.[85] Several identified the areas around the quarry, along the western dormitories, and of the hill on the north towards a Rwandan military position.[86] The map below shows areas identified by at least two interviewees as a place where bodies were regularly buried.

[84] Human Rights Watch interviews with 16 former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-25 and 28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30 and February 1, 2026.

[85] Human Rights Watch interviews with 10 former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, December 7, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23, 24, and 28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 20, 2026.

[86] Human Rights Watch interviews with six former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 25 and 28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30, 2026.



Map of the reported locations of graves in Rumangabo camp. Each area was identified by at least two interviewees as a place where bodies were buried. Image © 2026 Planet Labs PBC. Analysis and graphics © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

New soil perturbations are visible on satellite imagery captured throughout 2025 at the reported locations. These may be consistent with graves. However, due to the absence of precise coordinates, dates of digging, or photographs of graves, Human Rights Watch was unable to determine with certainty whether all these disturbances are graves or other unrelated ground features. Large open trenches dug alongside the dormitories and behind the kitchen also appear on satellite imagery in April 2024. Three former detainees said that these were used as latrines and that an excavator was brought to dig them up.

Former detainees reported regular beatings, which in many cases led to the deaths of detainees. “There was a boy who was regularly beaten because he wasn’t able to keep up with the exercises,” said a motorcycle taxi driver taken to Rumangabo in May 2025. “One day, a commander came and told us he was dead because he couldn’t handle the tasks he was assigned.”[87]

Many people said they buried bodies behind the kitchen, where detainees were made to cook food for the camp in large vats.[88] All the interviewees who were told to cook for the camp said they did so with freshly cut and sometimes wet wood that smoked up the kitchen and was difficult to keep alight (see below for more information on camp conditions and forced labor). They said that people struggled to breathe due to the smoke and some saw people die as a result. Those who were not able to cook or keep their fire going were beaten.

“We buried everyone who died near the kitchen behind it,” said a former detainee. “Those who couldn’t keep their cooking fire going were shot dead. I had to bury a man who was shot in the head [for that reason] but was still alive. He begged for us to take him to the hospital, but the guards said to bury him alive.”[89]

Executions and beatings were also reported to take place near the kitchen area, where detainees were given food once or twice a day. “[A detainee] was in the kitchen around 11 p.m. and tried to steal a bit of food because he had spent the day without eating. He tried to hide the food in his clothes,” said a former detainee. “An M23 fighter saw what he had done. He said: ‘Didn’t we tell you not to touch the food before it was ready? You FARDC understand nothing. Today you will understand.’ He made him go outside and shot him dead.”[90]

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[87] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 20, 2025.
[88] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Beni and Kisangani, DR Congo, January 2026.
[89] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.
[90] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, November 25, 2025.

A former detainee points to the location of graves behind the kitchen on a printed satellite imagery of Rumangabo camp during an interview with a Human Rights Watch researcher. © 2026 Human Rights Watch

Summary Executions and Beatings

Many former detainees from Rumangabo said that even minor infractions—such as responding late to a whistle, searching for food, asking for water, moving without permission, asking to go to the latrines, speaking Lingala, or taking too long to walk—resulted in brutal punishment.[91]

Half a dozen men who were detained at Rumangabo in 2025 said they saw public executions.[92] A 28-year-old man who was held from May to November 2025 said: "They execute in front of everyone, at around 4 a.m. Some died from whipping, others from

[91] Human Rights Watch interviews with 20 former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Beni, DR Congo, November 25, 2025; and Mbarara, Uganda, May 23-26 and June 19-22, 2025; and by phone, August 19, November 16, 25, and 28, and December 7, 2025.

[92] Human Rights Watch interview with five former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, November and December 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23, 2026.

gunshots. Six men from my cell were executed. Some were from Mubambiro and one was from Sake. I knew three of them."[93]

After killings, bodies were sometimes left on display as a warning. A man who began training in Rumangabo with around 2,000 other recruits in October 2025 said that several men attempted to escape due to the horrific conditions. He saw three caught and executed: "They brought the bodies to show to us and said, 'You see what happened to your friends?'"[94] Other Congolese soldiers taken to Rumangabo in early 2025 described detainees shot dead for trying to steal some food or dropping a jerrican of water.[95] One M23 commander, "Captain Gaston," was named by a dozen former detainees as having been particularly brutal in his treatment of recruits.[96] Detainees often referred to Gaston by the nickname Longangi, the name of a ruthless Congolese agent of the colonial administration in eastern Kivu.[97]

Several witnesses said that Gaston executed a Colonel Amurabi in Rumangabo around June 2025.[98] Amurabi was a legal defender (défenseur judiciaire) in the military justice system in Goma, according to a former detainee and judicial and Congolese military intelligence sources.[99]

The former detainees said that Gaston was taken away and reprimanded after Amurabi's summary execution, but returned to the camp in the following month and continued executing, beating, and abusing recruits.[100]

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[93] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), November 16, 2025.

[94] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), December 1, 2025.

[95] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, November 25, 2025.

[96] Human Rights Watch interviews with 13 former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, August 19 and December 7, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-25, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30 and February 1, 2026.

[97] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, December 7, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-25, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30 and February 1, 2026.

[98] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, December 7, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-25, and 28, 2026.

[99] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 25, 2026. Human Rights Watch telephone interviews with a judicial source, February 10, 2026, and with a FARDC military intelligence source, February 6, 2026.

[100] Human Rights Watch interviews with six former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, December 7, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-25, and 28, 2026.

Detention Cells

Several thousand people who were captured later in 2025 were first placed in the camp's detention cells where they were subjected to inhumane treatment, executions, and otherwise punished.[101]

Human Rights Watch interviewed six civilians and three police officers who were held in the detention cells (also referred to as *cachot*) throughout 2025, as well as fourteen witnesses who had brought food and water to the cells, buried bodies of people who died there, or had seen inside of them.[102] Former detainees identified the two buildings used as detention cells either from pictures or satellite imagery of the camp.

The detention cells are located in two buildings in the center of the camp and former detainees estimated they housed between 1,000 and 2,500 detainees.[103] They described people being held either in smaller cells of 200 to 300 individuals each or being held in one large room holding up to 1,000 people. Every person held in the cells said they were severely overcrowded, making it difficult to lie down.

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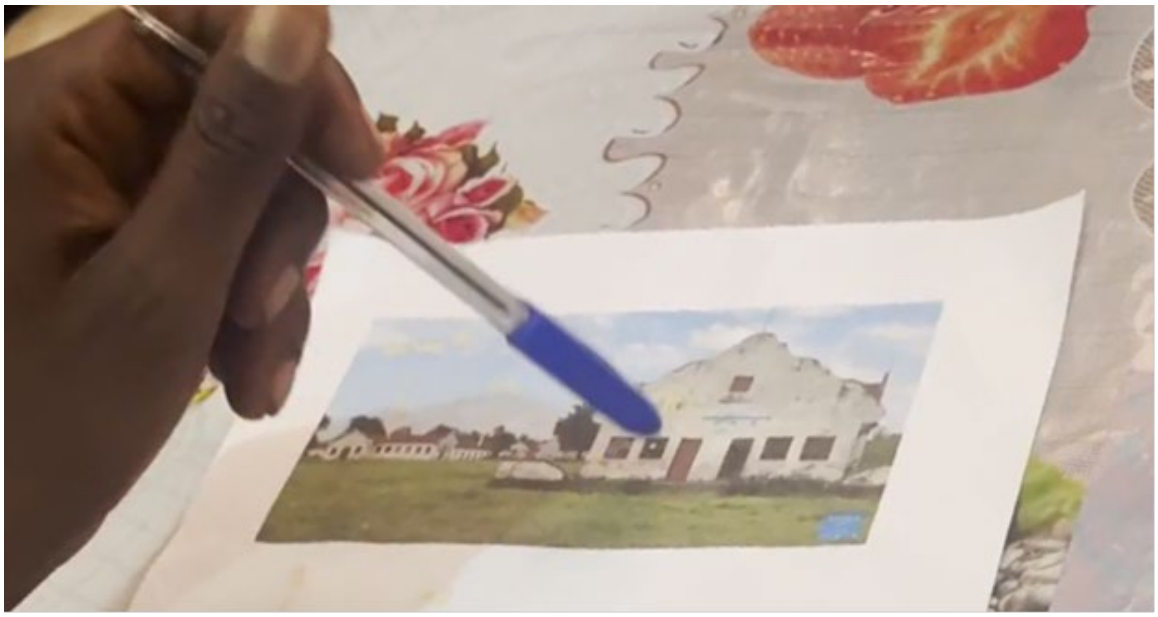
[101] Human Rights Watch interviews with 23 former Rumangabo detainees captured after March 2025 (names withheld), by phone, November 16, 25 and 28 and December 7, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

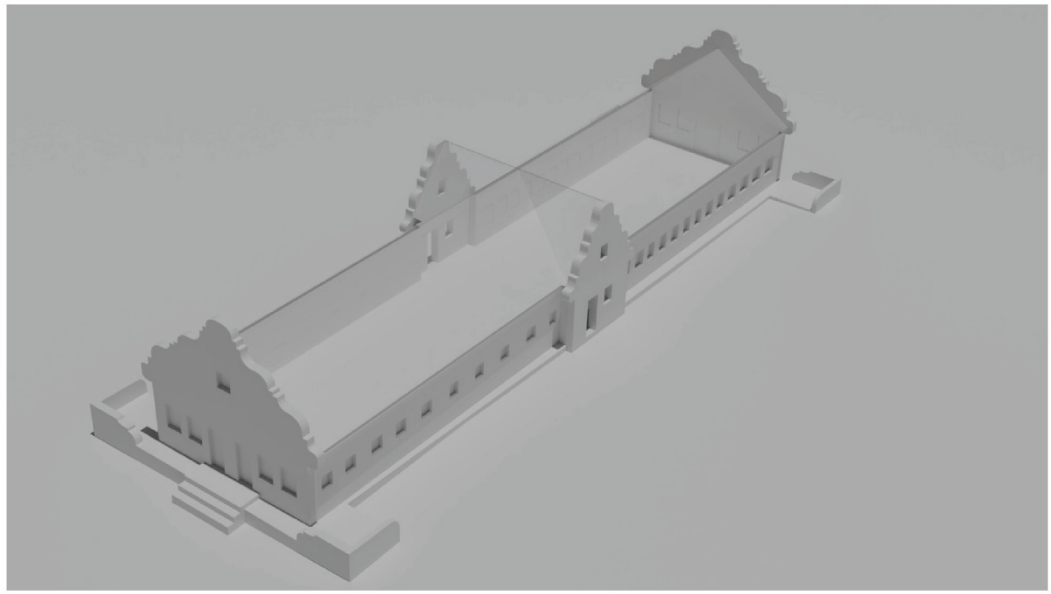
[102] Human Rights Watch interviews with 20 former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, December 7, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

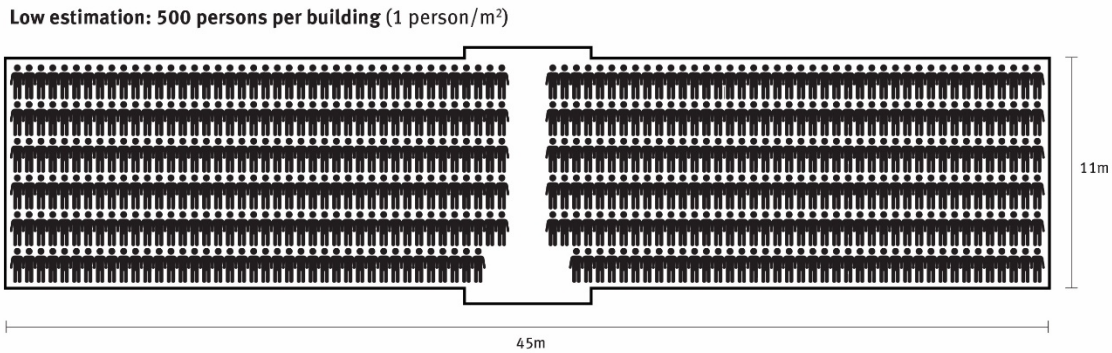
[103] Human Rights Watch interviews with 23 former Rumangabo detainees captured after March 2025 (names withheld), by phone, November 16, 25 and 28 and December 7, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

The Congolese military base at Rumangabo, Democratic Republic of Congo, January 6, 2023. The building in the front is one of two identified by former detainees as the detention cells. © 2023 Alain Uaykani/Xinhua via Getty Images



A former detainee identifies a photo of a building used for detention, during an interview with a Human Rights Watch researcher. © 2026 Human Rights Watch.





3D modelling by Human Rights Watch of one building used as a detention cell shows severe overcrowding, even with a low estimate of 500 people per building. Analysis and graphics. © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

Former detainees said civilians suspected of being Congolese army or Wazalendo fighters were also transferred to the detention cell alongside confirmed military and police officers, often accused of having failed to turn themselves in after the M23 captured Goma and Bukavu.[104] Some of the detainees who survived began a later training cycle in November 2025.[105] Former detainees at Rumangabo also confirmed the presence of dozens of children

[104] Human Rights Watch telephone interviews with civilians held at Rumangabo (names withheld), November 16, 25, and 28, 2025. Human Rights Watch interviews with other detainees in Rumangabo who identified civilians among the recruits (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

[105] Human Rights Watch interviews with former detainees held at Rumangabo (names withheld), by phone, November 16, 25, and 28, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

and youth, mostly ages 15 to 18.[106] A former detainee said there were 10 children in the detention cells in Rumangabo where he was held between July and November 2025.[107]

"The *cachots* were for people who continued to deny they were in the military and those who took too long to turn themselves in," said a former Rumangabo detainee. "There were several hundred civilians who were held there from July to November, while [the M23] checked if they were Wazalendo members. Some were released in November."[108]

Satellite imagery from February 21, 2025, shows the two buildings used as detention cells in Rumangabo camp. Image © 2026 Airbus. Google Earth. Analysis and graphics © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

[106] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25, 2025; and by phone, November 28, 2025.

[107] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), November 28, 2025.

[108] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 25, 2026.

Many former detainees and witnesses described horrendous and even life-threatening conditions in the detention cells. A dozen said they had seen between 5 and 20 bodies taken out of the cells on a single day. "Sometimes when we left the cell, we saw that some people remained on the ground," said a former detainee. "When we touched them, we saw they were dead."[109]

"We ate a cup of terrible food a day. People died because of the lack of water. Those who were ill especially needed water. We shared one cup a day among three people," said a civilian detained at Rumangabo from July to November 2025. "Many people died, every day, either in our room or in the others. I saw them transporting the bodies out every day."[110]

"Many people died in the detention cells, at least 10 to 15 [could die in a single day].... They became so thin, and turned yellow. They were about 200 per room, and they received half a cup of food per person twice a day," said a former recruit who brought food to the detainees. "I had to remove six bodies ... they were tortured. I could see signs that they were beaten on their chests, and blood stains on the ground."[111]

Another former detainee said a friend was taken to a detention cell during an evening ideology session because he was suspected of having aided a detainee that had fled the camp. "I went looking for him that night, but the guard told me that those gunshots we'd heard, those were for him," he said. "I only found his shirt."[112]

Detainees estimated between 1,000 and 2,000 people were held in each of the two buildings, sometimes several hundred per room. Nine former detainees and witnesses said children were imprisoned in the detention cells.[113] They said people inside could not lie down and had to either stand or sit on top of each other. "Every morning, we woke up and there were dead bodies around. They removed the bodies while we went to the latrines."[114]

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[109] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), November 28, 2025.

[110] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), November 25, 2025.

[111] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 28, 2026.

[112] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 30, 2026.

[113] Human Rights Watch interviews with nine former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, November 16, 25, and 28, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-25, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, February 1, 2026.

[114] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 28, 2026.

A former detainee who was held in the dormitories closest to the detention cells described being regularly called to bury the dead: "When people died in the cells, they came to get us. I prayed every day to be moved to a different room.... [O]ne day, they took us to the cells and I saw 25 dead bodies. They tried separating them so we couldn't count how many had died."[115]

A former civilian detainee who began the military training in late October 2025 after being held in the detention cell for 4 months said he fled after he saw around 60 men die in the first 3 days of training. "When the training started, they made us run, do exercises, crawl through the mud," he said. "But because of the condition we were in [after months of detention], people were dying. I knew I had to leave."[116] Two other former detainees said that in the days after the November training cycle began, they saw scores of men formerly held in the detention cells die, apparently as a result of illness, weakness, and the treatment they had suffered.[117]

Forced recruitment often occurred after weeks of this coercive treatment, with many detainees agreeing to join out of fear for their lives or to avoid further abuse. "They held us there as punishment. They told us that when they arrived, we didn't support them," said a former detainee who was held from July to November 2025.[118]

According eight former detainees, four of whom were from Sake, Masisi territory, and two men who had access to the cells or knew people in them, a group of civilians from Sake was taken there and treated particularly abusively.[119] Interviewees believed this was due to the fact that Sake was seen as a hotbed of resistance and a city where many youths had joined the Wazalendo.

[115] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 31, 2026.
[116] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), December 1, 2025.
[117] Human Rights Watch interviews with two former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Beni, DR Congo, February 1, 2026.
[118] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), December 1, 2025.
[119] Human Rights Watch interviews with 10 former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, November 25, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 25, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, February 1, 2026.

Several former detainees identified three civilians from Mubambiro and Sake who were executed during their time in the detention cells.[120] A relative in Sake confirmed he had learned about the executions: "My [relative] was taken with lots of other youths. After three months, we found out he was in Rumangabo. After two months, a former detainee told us he'd been killed. He said they kept asking if he was military. He said [my relative] was very sick and whipped until he died.... He'd never been with the Wazalendo."[121]

"There were many people from Sake in the cells. They called them the Wazalendo.... [I]t's true there were some Wazalendo but many in there were civilians," said a former detainee and police officer from Sake, who recognized many of the youths in the detention cells.[122] Another said he saw M23 officials, including a senior M23 intelligence officer, enter the cells looking for people who had posted photographs on social media after the M23 were attacked in Sake in 2024.[123]

"One day they brought around 10 people from Sake. They had their hands and feet bound. They lay them down on the floor, and we were so squeezed that we trampled them all night. The next morning, they were dead," said a man detained in the cells for several months in the first half of 2025. "The guards executed those who survived the suffering they inflicted."[124]

This pattern was confirmed by two other former detainees and two civil society sources with knowledge of the detention cells.[125]

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[120] Human Rights Watch telephone interviews with three former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), November 25, 2025.

[121] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with the relative in Sake of an executed civilian (name withheld), January 31, 2026.

[122] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee from Sake (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, February 1, 2026.

[123] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 28, 2026.

[124] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, February 1, 2026.

[125] Human Rights Watch interview with two former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 25, 2026; and with two civil society representatives (names withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 31, 2026.

Tshanzu

> "I was just a student, I had never seen a dead body before. They made me bury bodies seven times, we put them in a big grave."
>
> –Former Tshanzu detainee, January 27, 2026

Former detainees described Tshanzu as a forested training center between Mount Sabinyo and Mount Mikeno, where "life was inhumane" and marked by hunger, disease, and death from abuse.[126]

Human Rights Watch interviewed 40 civilians, including 2 children, 4 Wazalendo fighters, and an M23 trainer, who were taken to Tshanzu for training. Among them, 34 were in Tshanzu in 2025.

Recruits sent to Tshanzu were mainly civilians, including children, and Wazalendo fighters. Four former Tshanzu detainees said they saw Rwandan refugees from Uganda and Burundi as well as refugees recruited from camps in Rwanda among the recruits.[127] "Some recruits came from Rwanda and Burundi. They went to collect them from Bunagana [a town on the border of Congo and Uganda]," said a former recruit.[128]

Satellite imagery analyzed by Human Rights Watch shows the first signs of deforestation around an existing military position in Tshanzu in May 2023. The camp expanded until it covered an area of about 20 hectares in the forest by January 2026. The camp is located about six kilometers from both the Rwandan and Ugandan borders.

Human Rights Watch geolocated a video of a ceremony showing thousands of recruits, recorded on October 1, 2025, to one of the deforested clearings inside the camp and interviewed former recruits who graduated from this ceremony.[129] A banner on stage reads "Cyanzu Basic Military Training Center."

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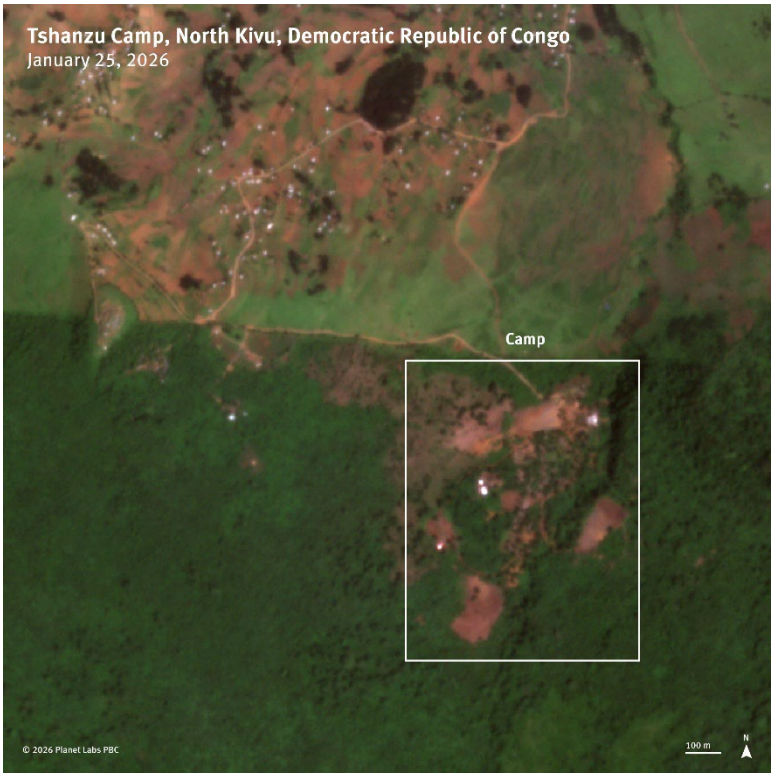
[126] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), by phone, June 8, 2025; and in Mbarara, Uganda, May 24, 2025.

[127] Human Rights Watch interviews with four former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, January 26 and 27, 2026; Mbarara, Uganda, May 25, 2025; and telephone interview with a Rwandan military source (name withheld), March 2, 2026. Confidential note from a UN source (name withheld), received February 13, 2026.

[128] Human Rights Watch interviews with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

[129] Human Rights Watch interviews with three former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24 and 27, 2026.



Satellite imagery comparison between April 10, 2023, and January 25, 2026, shows new clearings and buildings at the location of the camp in Tshanzu, Democratic Republic of Congo. Images © 2026 Planet Labs PBC. Graphics © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

High-resolution satellite imagery of the camp from July 29, 2025, shows dozens of buildings and large clearings in the camp, connected by roads. Former detainees described the use of three training grounds, including one where they practiced the use of firearms.[130] Large makeshift hangars are used as dormitories by hundreds of detainees.[131] The camp also contains a kitchen, a hospital, and accommodation for commanders and "friends" (see section Rwanda's Role in Abuses).[132]

Satellite imagery from July 29, 2025, of Tshanzu camp. The different buildings and areas were labelled based on accounts from former recruits. Image © 2026 Airbus. Apollo Mapping. Analysis and graphics © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

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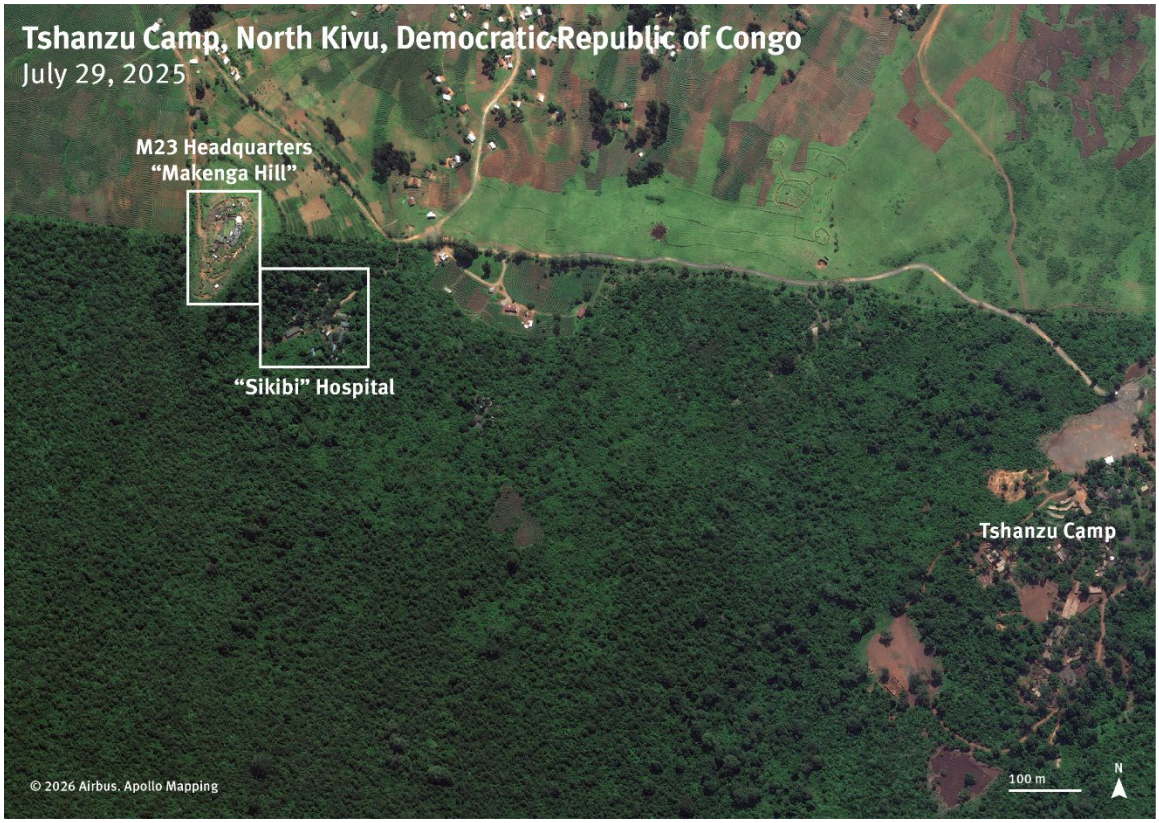
[130] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Tshanzu detainees, Mbarara, Uganda, Beni and Kisangani, DR Congo, and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid.

About one kilometer west of the camp, a military position on top of a hill was identified by former detainees as an M23 headquarter used by Maj. Gen. Sultani Makenga and a weapons depot. Human Rights Watch geolocated a photograph posted online on May 21, 2024, by Willy Ngoma, then-military spokesperson of the M23, to a field down from the hill. The photograph shows M23 military commander Makenga shaking hands with AFC leader Corneille Nangaa and M23 President Bertrand Bisimwa. At the bottom of a hill, a cluster of buildings make up a basic medical facility referred to as "Sikibi hospital" by former detainees.[133]



Satellite imagery from July 29, 2025, of the area west of Tshanzu camp. The different buildings and areas are labelled based on accounts from former detainees. Image © 2026 Airbus. Apollo Mapping. Analysis and graphics © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

[133] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

"Introduction": Transition from Civilian to Military Life

Tshanzu former detainees described systematic beatings where violence was used to punish minor mistakes, enforce discipline, and deter escape.[134] The former detainees described arriving in Tshanzu to undergo an "introduction," also described as a "baptism" or the "transition from civilian to military life."[135] New recruits were referred to as *"kurutu*," meaning recruit.

"It's a test to see if you can endure suffering," said a former detainee. "They spend a whole day whipping you while you're lying on the ground. We were 200 and 10 people died. Two were shot dead and the others whipped to death. We buried them in a big grave with around 50 others."[136]

"To become a recruit, you had to go through the 'introduction.' They beat you and make you roll and crawl through the mud. It's really tough," said a former recruit. "We were 250 at the beginning at around 6 a.m., and by the end at 2 p.m., 20 had died. People died from the whipping and hemorrhaging. We were covered in blood, but we had to continue."[137]

The recruits described an exercise called "*songamana*" (meaning "to be squeezed" in Kiswahili), which involved drawing a circle in the sand and making an entire group jump into it. "They would throw a shoe in the middle and say everyone has to touch it," said a former detainee. "Some underneath would suffocate, and others died because they couldn't fit into the circle and were beaten."[138]

Nine men said they saw between 2 and 20 recruits die from beatings during their "introduction."[139] "My friends died during the 'introduction,'" said a former recruit. "One's rib broke and he was hemorrhaging, the next morning he was dead. They beat us with the

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[134] Human Rights Watch interviews with ten former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), , Mbarara, Uganda, May 23-27 and June 19, 2025; and by phone, June 7 and 8 and December 23, 2025.

[135] Human Rights Watch interviews with 22 former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), by phone, June 8, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

[136] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 31, 2026.

[137] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

[138] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 26, 2026.

[139] Human Rights Watch interview with nine former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 26, and 27, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 31 and February 1, 2026.

whips used for cows. If you're not quick enough you'll get beaten. Another tried to get some water. They thought he was trying to escape and they just shot him dead."[140]

Executions, Punishments, and Beatings

Former detainees said deaths in the camps occurred frequently due to the ill-treatment, malnutrition, dehydration, and executions. Many said they were involved in burying bodies all around the camp, in the surrounding forest, or near Makenga's headquarters, and behind the "Sikibi hospital" about one kilometer west of the camp.[141] They said they buried up to 15 bodies on a single day, either of people who succumbed due to the conditions or were executed. Because the graves were reportedly dug under the tree cover of the forest, Human Rights Watch could not detect any sign of them on satellite imagery.

Punishment for mistakes as small as falling behind during exercises, failing to finish cooking food in time, or asking for water included beatings and executions. "I remember [my friend] from Bukavu tried to steal some maize without authorization. He was whipped to death," said a former detainee. "I saw four executions of people who had tried to flee."[142]

One former Tshanzu detainee reported that "being caught escaping is a death sentence."[143] Former detainees said executions took place publicly, in the main grounds where the graduation ceremonies took place. "They brought them over, called all the recruits to come watch, and executed them," said a former detainee who was deployed in October. "If they shot them dead while they fled, they still called us and told us to line up and each walk past the bodies."[144] Nine former detainees said they had seen up to 15 people executed during their time at Tshanzu.[145]

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[140] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 26, 2026.

[141] Human Rights Watch interviews with 21 former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

[142] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), January 15, 2026.

[143] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), June 6, 2025.

[144] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

[145] Human Rights Watch interviews with nine former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

One former Tshanzu detainee said, "For one small mistake, we were whipped 30 times. For trying to escape, someone would be shot or whipped to death."[146] He said he saw two men whipped to death by six M23 fighters because they had fought over scarce food.

Another detainee who was released from Tshanzu in late 2024 said: "I saw someone whipped 100 times because he was slow going to fetch water. His buttocks were swelling so he put his hands to protect himself, and they fractured them."[147] When a fellow detainee accused him of stealing 1,000 Congolese Francs (US$0.40), he tried running away. "The soldiers caught me and hit me three times with the butt of their guns on the chest," he said. "I felt the bone crack, and a week later I was vomiting blood.[148]

A former M23 trainer, who was first trained in Tshanzu in 2024, witnessed the execution of a group of people accused of overstepping an authorized limit inside the camp in August 2024. "Those who were outside the line, they split them between the Tutsi and others. They said they would save the Tutsi because they did not usually flee," the trainer said. "They shot the 13 others at the gathering grounds. The [six remaining] Tutsi were taken to Masozera [the camp commander], and he killed them with his pistol. Even the Rwandan military said they were going too far."[149] (See below for more information on the presence and role of the Rwandan military in both centers.)

Detention

Three former detainees in Tshanzu reported being held in a hole in the ground referred to as *andaki* (meaning "tunnel" in Kisawahili). Four others said they had seen detention holes in various parts of the camp and close to the "Sikibi hospital."[150]

"There is a place called *andaki* over there, where people are locked up in a hole underground. During the training, some died from the treatment they suffered there,"[151]

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[146] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 20, 2025.

[147] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25, 2025.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee and M23 trainer (name withheld), Kampala, Uganda, November 21, 2025.

[150] Human Rights Watch interviews with seven former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), by phone, June 7, 2025; and in Mbarara, Uganda, May 24 and 27, 2025; Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 31 and February 1, 2026.

[151] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), June 7, 2025.

said the son of a Congolese soldier who was taken to Tshanzu in February 2025. One former detainee said he was held in the hole together with two boys, ages 15 and 16, who were accused of providing information to the FDLR and Nyatura armed groups.[152]

Two former detainees described being kept in pits or sleeping outside overnight as part of their "training."[153] "They made us remove our shoes and clothes and stay there sitting in stagnant water," said a former detainee who spent 47 days in Tshanzu in February and March 2025.[154]

Child Recruitment and Abuse

Many former detainees described the forced recruitment of children, including boys as young as 12, into M23 training at Tshanzu. Although some were held in the detention cells at Rumangabo (see p. 37 for more information), most children forcibly recruited were sent to Tshanzu for training.

Two dozen former Tshanzu detainees counted between 10 and 20 children under 18 in their group.[155] "There were around 17 children in our regiment of 1,010 people," said a former detainee. "They were between 14 and 17 and there was one 12-year-old."[156]

Human Rights Watch interviewed two children, ages 16 and 17, who were taken to Tshanzu.[157] "When you say you are a child, they whip you. They said I was lying, that it wasn't true and that I had to work," said the 16-year-old.[158]

A former detainee who was taken to Tshanzu in January 2025 said: "There were around 10 children among the group of 50 I was with.… When the children struggled with the tasks

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[152] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 27, 2025.

[153] Human Rights Watch interviews with two former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24, 2025.

[154] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24, 2025.

[155] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25 and June 22, 2025; Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24 to 27, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 29, 2026.

[156] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

[157] Human Rights Watch interviews with two children formerly detained at Tshanzu (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24 and 27, 2026.

[158] Human Rights Watch interview with a 16-year-old child formerly detained at Tshanzu (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

they were given, like chopping wood with a heavy axe, they were whipped."[159] Recruits said children were made to carry out the same tasks as adults: "Some children as young as 13 years old had to do everything with us. They had to carry rocks, build the road, remove the sand. We built houses as well … some died, some fled."[160] Conditions were harsh and often deadly for all recruits, but particularly inhumane for children.

A former Tshanzu detainee said he witnessed a 14-year-old boy beaten to death for being unable to chop wood with a heavy axe.[161] The 16-year-old told Human Rights Watch he was forced to bury bodies. "They made us go pick up dead bodies from the hospital and take them to a big grave next to where we exercised," he said. "I didn't want to be a soldier, but the M23 made me one."[162]

"Regimental Police"

A dozen Tshanzu recruits said children were taken aside by senior M23 authorities such as Makenga and Byamungu after the first training cycle in 2025 ended.[163] "There were 12- or 13-year-old children among our group. Makenga took them as bodyguards," said a former detainee. "They used the children to beat us up."[164]

They said children were used as guards, given extra responsibilities, and were referred to as "RP," which stands for Regimental Police (for more information on the type of military training taught, see below). "When you were 'RP,' you oversaw discipline. When they said 'single file' we had to line up, and they would put children on either side to hit anyone who fell out of line. They were as young as 15 years old," said a former Tshanzu detainee.[165] "They worked as bodyguards for the general, but if you lagged behind, they whipped you," said another.[166] "If the 'friends' [Rwandan military] didn't want to beat you, they called the children, who did it for them," said a third.[167]

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[159] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25, 2025.

[160] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 26, 2026.

[161] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 26, 2025.

[162] Human Rights Watch interview with a 16-year-old child formerly detained at Tshanzu (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

[163] Human Rights Watch interviews with 13 former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

[164] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

[165] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 26, 2026.

[166] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

[167] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 31, 2026.

Life-Threatening Conditions

Extreme Hunger and Dehydration

All former detainees whom Human Rights Watch interviewed said they suffered severe dehydration and hunger, contributing to widespread illness and exhaustion.[168] Former recruits reported receiving only minimal food and water in both camps, consisting mainly of poorly cooked maize or a maize-and-bean mash served once or twice a day, sometimes without plates, directly in their hands or their clothes.

Almost all described being in a near-constant state of thirst. Water was rarely distributed, and they described having to drink from puddles, water collected on leaves or building roofs, or trying to secretly fill up water bottles and hiding them to survive.[169] "We went to collect water [for cooking] very far away … when we were there we tried to smuggle small water bottles under our shirt, to exchange later for food," said a former Tshanzu detainee. "When we did the parade, lots of people would collapse from thirst. They just said to leave them there and keep going."[170]

Two dozen former detainees said they saw people beaten or executed for trying to drink water without permission.[171] "If you tried to drink water, you would die. The water was there to prepare food but not to drink," said a 34-year-old civilian taken to Tshanzu. "We tried to drink the stagnant water on top of tents. When we went to Runyoni to collect water we tried to fill up some small water bottles to take back. But if they find you with a water bottle, you die."[172]

Former detainees from Rumangabo described a pattern of extreme and arbitrary violence, including summary killings and brutal punishment for attempting to obtain food or water.

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[168] Human Rights Watch interviews with 102 former Tshanzu and Rumangabo detainees, DR Congo, Uganda, and over the phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

[169] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Tshanzu and Rumangabo detainees, DR Congo, Uganda, and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

[170] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 26, 2026. Four other Tshanzu detainees said they used the same trick to smuggle water when they were sent to collect it from the river.

[171] Human Rights Watch interviews with 25 former Tshanzu and Rumangabo detainees, Kisangani and Beni, DR Congo, and by phone, June 2025 to February 2026.

[172] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee, Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

Said one former detainee: "I took dirty water from the bottom of a cooking pot to drink. They asked me who had authorized me to drink water. I was given 300 lashes until I lost consciousness.... I regained consciousness two days later.... [T]hey made me walk on my knees while carrying a very heavy stone over my head."[173] He identified the commander responsible as Capt. Gaston and showed scars consistent with his account.

Some former detainees in Rumangabo who were held in the camp's detention cells said they were not given water at all for periods of time.[174] "If we were caught trying to drink from puddles on the ground when they let us out to relieve ourselves, the guards beat us severely," said a civilian who was held in the cell from July to November on suspicion of being a soldier.[175]

Forced Labor

In both camps, civilians, including children, as well as former Congolese soldiers, police officers, and Wazalendo and FDLR fighters were expected to carry out daily hard labor.[176]

Men, women, and boys were required to dig, clear and build roads, cut wood, carry heavy loads, and fetch water over long distances. Those from both camps said they were made to work long hours with no rest and little sustenance, even when they were visibly ill or injured.[177] "There was no road in Tshanzu when we arrived," said a former Tshanzu detainee. "We had to go collect rocks to build it. Some vomited blood."[178] Satellite imagery analyzed by Human Rights Watch shows new roads inside Tshanzu and an improvement of the access road to the camp throughout 2024 and 2025.

"Forced labor happened daily and it killed a lot of people. They made us carry loads of 20 or 30 kilos of wood. They whipped people and made them walk for kilometers," said a

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[173] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

[174] Human Rights Watch telephone interviews with six former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), November 16 and 28 and December 7, 2025. Human Rights Watch interviews with five former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24, 2025; and by phone, June 7 and 8 and December 23, 2025.

[175] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), November 28, 2025.

[176] Human Rights Watch interviews with 31 former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees (names withheldKisangani and Beni, DR Congo; Mbarara, Uganda; and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

[177] Human Rights Watch interview with former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, August 19, 2025; and in Mbarara, Uganda, June 21, 2025.

[178] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 26, 2026.

former Congolese officer who spent 10 months at Rumangabo in 2025. “A lot of people didn’t have the strength and died.”[179]

“If someone couldn’t carry the wood when we went to Kabaya, they would beat up everyone,” said another former Rumangabo detainee.[180]

Cooking

Groups of recruits were appointed the task of cooking large vats of beans and maize for the camp, a process they described as extremely challenging—and sometimes deadly—in both centers.[181]

Former Rumangabo detainees said they were made to cook in the closed kitchen, with freshly chopped wood that smoked up the room, from 4 p.m. to 6 a.m. “Because the wood was so wet, the whole kitchen would smoke up. Despite the smoke, they said we were not allowed outside. By the morning some people could barely open their eyes,” said a former detainee.[182] (See p. 34 for more information on executions and deaths in the kitchen).

“We would take it in turns to cook with freshly chopped wood. If we couldn’t light it or cook the food fast enough, we were punished and whipped,” said a former Tshanzu detainee. “Once someone didn’t build the fire properly and the pot fell over. They started beating him in the main gathering area at 4 p.m. By the time we woke up the next morning he was dead.”[183]

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[179] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), December 7, 2025.

[180] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 25, 2026.

[181] Human Rights Watch interviews with 12 former Tshanzu and Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda; Beni and Kisangani, DR Congo; and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

[182] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

[183] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

Satellite imagery from December 16, 2025, shows smoke rising from the kitchen in Rumangabo camp. Image © 2026 Planet Labs PBC. Analysis and graphics © 2026 Human Rights Watch.

A number of former detainees from both centers reported either experiencing eyesight problems or seeing others experience them. Some believed it was due to the amount of smoke that built up in the kitchen.[184] Some said they were unable to see photographs or maps presented to them during the interview for that reason.[185]

"I have eyesight problems now. Some people were left behind [at the camp] because they were blind," said a former Rumangabo detainee. "About 30 or 40 were left behind. Many couldn't see because of their time in the kitchen."[186]

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[184] Human Rights Watch interviews with 16 former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

[185] Human Rights Watch interviews with four former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), by phone, December 7, 2025; and in Kisangani, DR Congo, January 28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 31, 2026.

[186] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

Hygiene Conditions and Medical Care

Hygiene conditions were extremely poor in both centers. "We bathed once in two months and didn't brush our teeth for three months," said a former detainee who spent 10 months in Rumangabo.[187] Former detainees in Rumangabo described being held in dormitories shared with dozens of other people.[188] In Tshanzu, detainees slept on bare floors or in overcrowded shelters, often without bedding, forced to lie in mud or on damp ground. Five former Tshanzu detainees said they were made to sleep outside in the mud.[189]

Medical care was almost nonexistent, although some who fell seriously ill in Rumangabo reported being released to seek medical treatment in November 2025. In Rumangabo, former detainees reported the existence of a medical facility, although access to it was rare. "You were only allowed to see the medical center when you were about to die," said a former detainee.[190] Human Rights Watch interviewed nine Rumangabo recruits and eight Tshanzu recruits who said they buried bodies near the medical centers in their respective training camps and identified locations of graves on satellite imagery.[191]

Some former detainees reported being beaten when they tried to seek medical treatment. "I had a lot of health problems. When I asked to go to the hospital, they took a group of us to a separate building, and told us to lie on the floor," said a former Rumangabo detainee. "They said: 'We're going to heal you' and whipped us until we said we weren't ill anymore."[192]

Detainees reported being given paracetamol at best, despite suffering from diarrhea and other illnesses. Detainees also reported burying bodies taken from the hospital. "There were many bodies buried next to the hospital, Rumangabo was a graveyard," said a detainee who spent several months in the hospital.[193] Another detainee who spent a

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[187] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), December 7, 2025.

[188] Human Rights Watch telephone interviews with five former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), November 16, 25, and 28 and December 7, 2025.

[189] Human Rights Watch interviews with five former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), by phone, June 7 and 8 and December 23, 2025; and in Mbarara, Uganda, May 24, 2025.

[190] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), November 25, 2025.

[191] Human Rights Watch interviews with nine former Rumangabo detainees and eight former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

[192] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, February 1, 2026.

[193] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

month in the hospital said: "I saw five people die in one night. They died from exhaustion and lack of medication."[194]

Another detainee who was held in the detention cells located just next to the hospital in Rumangabo said: "They came at night and forced us to go collect bodies from the hospital. Every night [I went] there were 5, 10, 15 bodies [to bury]. I did it several times."[195]

In Tshanzu, former detainees reported the presence of a small dispensary inside the camp, as well as a hospital about a kilometer away and next to Makenga's headquarters. "I went to bury bodies … close to 'Sikibi' hospital…. I did it five times…. It was always in the same grave," said a former detainee. "We threw the bodies in, and didn't bury them properly."[196]

Photograph from January 6, 2023, shows East African Regional Force (EACRF) soldiers guarding Rumangabo camp. The medical center can be seen in the background with a red cross on it. © 2023 GUERCHOM NDEBO/AFP via Getty Images

[194] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23, 2026.
[195] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 28, 2026.
[196] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

Rwanda's Role in Abuses

M23 and Rwandan Commanders and Forces at the Centers

Senior AFC/M23 leaders, including AFC leader Corneille Nangaa Yobeluo, M23 military commander Maj. Gen. Sultani Makenga, M23 President Bertrand Bisimwa, and other M23 leaders or commanders such as Gen. Baudoin Ngaruye, Bertrand Byamungu, John Imani Nzenze, and Willy Ngoma, were all reported to have been seen at both training centers in 2025.[197] Human Rights Watch research and the United Nations indicate that the M23's Léon Kanyamibwa and Bertin Masozera directed military training with support from other M23 officers, and that Rwandan military trainers operated in both Rumangabo and Tshanzu.[198]

In Rumangabo and Tshanzu, former detainees identified several Rwandan army positions around the camps, sometimes referred to as "friends" in reference to "friendly forces."[199] Several among them also reported the presence of Rwandan special forces at times near their camps.[200]

In Tshanzu, Rwandan trainers supervised the military training of detainees. They were described as sometimes wearing a Rwandan flag or RDF insignia on their uniforms, speaking regularly of Rwanda as "home," and speaking only Kinyarwanda and English.[201] "They had RDF written on their boots, and they would talk about going home to Gisenyi or Kigali [in Rwanda] during the weekends," said a former Tshanzu detainee.[202]

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[197] Human Rights Watch interviews with two former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25 and June 22, 2025. Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), December 7, 2025.

[198] Human Rights Watch interviews with three former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Beni, DR Congo, November 25, 2025; and Mbarara, Uganda, May 25 and June 21, 2025. Human Rights Watch interviews with five former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24, 25, and 26, 2025; and by phone, December 23, 2025. See also: UN Security Council, "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2024/432, June 4, 2024, https://docs.un.org/en/s/2024/432 (accessed December 9, 2025). para. 39.

[199] Human Rights Watch interviews with 27 former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kampala and Mbarara, Uganda; Beni, Kisangani, and Kinshasa, DR Congo; and by phone, May 2025 to February 2026.

[200] Ibid. Human Rights Watch exchange with two UN sources, by phone, March 2 and 18, 2026.

[201] Human Rights Watch interviews with seven former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Beni, DR Congo, November 25, 2025; and Mbarara, Uganda, May 24 and June 19, 21, and 22, 2025. Human Rights Watch interviews with four former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24-26, 2025.

[202] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

A number of former detainees identified a group of buildings on satellite imagery surrounded by a fence in the western part of Tshanzu camp as the accommodation for Rwandan trainers, or "friends" and described the presence of Rwandan trainers in the camp.[203]

The Rwandan trainers managed groups and taught them weapons handling, physical training, and ideology sessions. They gave military training in English, used Rwandan army terminology, and exercised daily control over detainees and recruits.[204]

An M23 trainer and several former Tshanzu and Rumangabo detainees said that the arrival of Rwanda trainers several months into 2025 led to some marginal improvements in their treatment.[205] "The bosses were Rwandans. We called the instructors 'friends,'" said a former recruit. "When they arrived, they stopped killing so many people. They only spoke English or Kinyarwanda, they told us they came from Rwanda."[206]

Another Tshanzu detainee, however, said that although they were presented as instructors, they were directly involved in abuse. "The 'friends' taught us," he said. "They are the ones who beat us, who hurt us. They whipped our buttocks until they bled. I was beaten at the end of the training by the 'friends.' There are scars. It was for nothing; it was their way of saying goodbye."[207]

Rwandan army positions around Rumangabo appeared to play a similar role. "Special forces from Rwanda surrounded the camp and would shoot at people who tried to escape," said a former Rumangabo detainee.[208] Another one said: "The Rwandan military … secured the camp, their positions were around the camp. There was one on the hill [behind the kitchen]. When people tried to flee, they shot them."[209] Several former detainees identified

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[203] Human Rights Watch interviews with 14 former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), by phone, June 7 and December 23, 2025, and January 17, 2026; and in Mbarara, Uganda, June 19 and May 24 and 25, 2025; Kisangani, DR Congo, January 26, 27 and 28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 31, 2026.

[204] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 20, 2025.

[205] Human Rights Watch interviews with three former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30, 2026.

[206] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 27, 2026.

[207] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 31, 2026.

[208] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23, 2026.

[209] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

the military position on the hill north of the camp and said that Rwandan forces were present there.[210]

Several former detainees said Rwandan cattle herders were also brought in to beat and train them. "Among the instructors were the herders," said one. "They made us walk and exercise, and do the military trainings such as drills and formations. They would tell us: 'I will hit you like my cows.'"[211]

Ideological, Military, and Physical Training

In 2025, Rumangabo was generally used for training military personnel, including former Congolese military, whereas Tshanzu was for the training of civil servants, Wazalendo, and civilians more broadly. As such, detainees in Tshanzu underwent a more thorough military training, which included weapons and more strenuous physical training.

Commanders in both camps conducted regular ideological sessions. Former detainees from both camps reported that trainers told detainees the country "belonged" to them and needed to be "liberated" from "corrupt state officials in Kinshasa."[212] Instruction covered political narratives portraying Congo as wealthy but mismanaged and emphasized obedience to authority.[213] These sessions were led by both Rwandan and M23 officers, according to former Rumangabo and Tshanzu recruits.[214]

Military training in Tshanzu included weapons' assembly, learning to use categories of firearms, digging trenches, preparing firing positions, forced marches, crawling, and daily runs referred to as "muchaka."[215] Physical punishment for failing these exercises was

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[210] Human Rights Watch interviews with five former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23 and 24, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30 and February 1, 2026.

[211] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 30, 2026.

[212] Human Rights Watch interviews with former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24, 2025; and by phone, June 7, 2025.

[213] Human Rights Watch interviews with seven former Tshanzu and Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), by phone, June 7 and 8, 2025; and in Mbarara, Uganda, May 23-25 and June 22, 2025.

[214] Human Rights Watch interviews with five former Tshanzu and Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 23-25 and June 22, 2025; and Beni, DR Congo, November 25, 2025. See also: UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission on the situation in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo," A/HRC/60/80, September 5, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/ffmk-drc/a-hrc-60-80-auv-en.pdf (accessed April 24, 2026).

[215] Human Rights Watch interviews with five former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24-27, 2025.

pervasive.[216] In Tshanzu, former recruits did martial arts training after running for one or more hours. "Even after that, they didn't give us water," said a former detainee.[217]

"After waking up, we ran and then did the military exercises," said a former Tshanzu detainee. "Then, we were given different tasks. But if we were tired from transporting weapons or other things they made us do, they whipped us."[218]

Former Tshanzu detainees said they were taught to use rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns, mortar, and assault rifles.[219] Rumangabo detainees were not given weapons training.

Two former Rumangabo detainees reported being called to provide reinforcement or carry weapons and munitions when fighting occurred nearby.[220]

Training in Kinyarwanda

All those Human Rights Watch interviewed said that the training took place mainly in the Kinyarwanda language, and to a lesser extent, English and Kiswahili. When asked why, one former Rumangabo detainee said: "They were Rwandans. They forced us to speak Kinyarwanda and told us 'Soon Kinyarwanda will be the national language.'"[221]

Former detainees from Rumangabo and Tshanzu said Lingala-speakers were targeted for abuse, especially if they were heard speaking Lingala or failed to understand instructions given to them in Kiswahili or Kinyarwanda, the main spoken languages at both camps.[222]

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[216] Human Rights Watch interviews with 20 former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Beni, DR Congo, November 25, 2025; Mbarara, Uganda, May 23-26 and June 19-22, 2025; and by phone, August 19, November 16, 25, and 28, and December 7, 2025. Human Rights Watch interviews with 10 former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 23-27, and June 19, 2025; and by phone, June 7 and 8 and December 23, 2025.

[217] Human Rights Watch interviews with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

[218] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 26, 2025.

[219] Human Rights Watch interviews with 10 former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), by phone, June 6 and December 23, 2025; and in Mbarara, Uganda, May 24 and 27, 2025; Kisangani, DR Congo, January 26 and 27, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 31 and February 1, 2026.

[220] Human Rights Watch interviews with two former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 21 and 22, 2025.

[221] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, February 1, 2026.

[222] Human Rights Watch interviews with 11 former Rumangabo detainees and 3 former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Kisangani and Beni, DR Congo, January 23 to February 1, 2026; Mbarara, Uganda, May 25 and 26 and June 22, 2025; and by phone, June 7, 2025.

"They beat me because I spoke Lingala. They said it was a language of thugs," said a former Rumangabo detainee. "They hit me with their wooden sticks on the head and my back until I bled."[223]

Another said: "I saw my colleague killed. They spoke to him in Kinyarwanda and he responded in Lingala. The guard said: 'It's people from Kinshasa who are running Congo badly' and they killed him."[224]

Former Tshanzu detainees reported facing abuse if they did not understand the Kinyarwanda teaching. "Some made mistakes because they didn't understand Kinyarwanda," said one. "I was whipped because I didn't understand the Rwandan language. They fractured my fingers after I tried putting my hands to protect [my buttocks]."[225]

Kitamaduni

Former detainees from both centers said that they were made to practice "kitamaduni" (*utamaduni* means culture in Kiswahili), which involved singing songs in Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili on a daily basis.[226] "We trained all day and, in the evenings, we had to sing. They did it to make us suffer … they made people sing from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m.," said a former Rumangabo detainee.[227] "We sang Rwandan songs in Kinyarwanda. They wanted to teach us their ideology and told us to stop supporting [Congolese President Felix] Tshisekedi," said another.[228] In Tshanzu, former recruits reported doing the same: "We sang from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m."[229]

Graduation and Deployment

Thousands of new recruits have gone through the training cycles in 2025 and early 2026. AFC/M23 authorities announced on September 14, 2025, that 7,437 new fighters had

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[223] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23, 2026.

[224] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, February 1, 2026.

[225] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 31, 2026.

[226] Human Rights Watch interviews with 17 former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), by phone, November 28, 2025; and in Mbarara, Uganda, May 27, 2025; Kinsangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

[227] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23, 2026.

[228] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

[229] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.

completed six months of training at the Rumangabo military camp in North Kivu.[230] The induction ceremony was attended by AFC leader Nangaa and M23 military commander Makenga. On October 1, 2025, over 9,000 additional new recruits were presented from Tshanzu.[231] A video report from the Kivu news channel of both ceremonies that Human Rights Watch geolocated to both camps shows thousands of recruits on parade.[232]

According to AFC/M23 spokesperson Lawrence Kanyuka, the recruits include former Congolese army soldiers and fighters previously aligned with the Wazalendo coalition who joined the movement following the M23's capture of Goma and Bukavu earlier in the year.[233]

In a speech at Rumangabo's graduation in October 2025, Makenga said the forces were trained to "liberate their country," while accusing President Tshisekedi's government of ethnically targeted killings, village destruction, and undermining the national army. The new forces have been integrated into the Congolese Revolutionary Army (Armée révolutionnaire congolaise, ARC).[234] Nangaa said four brigades of "commando" units were formed and claimed that an additional 12,000 recruits would undergo the next phase of ARC military and ideological training.[235]

The UN Group of Experts in December 2025 reported that "[t]wo days after the pass-out ceremony, on 16 September, sources reported the deployment of at least 15 fully loaded trucks with AFC/M23 combatants coming from the AFC/M23-ARC training camp in Rumangabo in Kirumba, near Kanyabayonga, in Lubero territory."[236]

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[230] "AFC/M23 unveils over 7,000 new recruits," *IGIHE*, September 15, 2025, https://en.igihe.com/news/article/m23-afc-unveils-over-7-000-new-recruits (accessed December 9, 2025). "RUMANGABO Gen. MAKENGA ATANZE ISOMO RIKOMEYE KU NGABO NSHYA IBIHUMBI 7500 ZINJIJWE MURI M23," *YOSE TV RWANDA*, video clip, YouTube, September 15, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ju9AB4oereI (accessed December 9, 2025).

[231] Lawrence Kanyuka's X account, @LawrenceKanyuka, October 5, 2025, https://x.com/LawrenceKanyuka/status/1974609027645714916 (accessed April 29, 2026). "End of military training: More than 9,350 new recruits join the Congolese Revolutionary Army," *Kivu Top Info*, video clip, YouTube, October 4, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5KFhxu5VfA (accessed December 9, 2025).

[232] Ibid.

[233] Ibid.

[234] Ibid.

[235] UN Security Council, "Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2025/858, December 30, 2025, https://docs.un.org/en/s/2025/858 (accessed January 8, 2026), Annex 9.

[236] Ibid.

On February 8, 2026, the M23 announced that 7,532 new fighters completed the training in Tshanzu in a new video that Human Rights Watch geolocated to the training area at the entrance of the camp.[237]

Nyongera

New recruits were often first transferred to the Nyongera military base in Rutshuru territory, either for further training—in the case of those who were to join the AFC/M23 police force or "local defense"—or for sorting before further deployment. "We went to Nyongera, the training center and logistics base. That's where they deploy soldiers," said a former recruit. "They also train 'local defense' there."[238]

Some former detainees described ill-treatment and abuse at Nyongera. One said he had been taken to Nyongera in February 2025 and beaten over his whole body until he lost all physical sensation. He was found in a field by women who took him to a hospital for treatment.[239] Another former detainee who was taken to Nyongera in early 2025 said he was detained because of his relatives in the Congolese army. He said: "We were many recruits taken forcibly, 780 people coming from different zones. Once in Rutshuru … those that were to do local defense were trained in Nyongera; 140 were taken to Nyongera and we spent two months there. Gen. Baudouin [Ngaruye] was there with us."[240] A former police officer said he did a further month and a half of training at Nyongera after spending seven months in Rumangabo. "Rwandan police were the instructors, they told us they had come to train us," he said.[241]

Deployment

Human Rights Watch interviewed 17 recruits who were deployed to the front line for periods ranging from days to months before escaping.[242] Recruits taken from Rumangabo generally reported not being given weapons, whereas those from Tshanzu, who were mainly civilians

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[237] "AFC/M23: 7,532 new commandos vow to liberate the DRC within the ARC," *Kivu Top Info*, video clip, YouTube, February 10, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?si=vVGroIb49fsXkyPu&v=NnxIlfQJT8E&feature=youtu.be (accessed May 5, 2026).

[238] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, January 30, 2026.

[239] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Nyongera detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24, 2025. Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a UN source, November 14, 2025.

[240] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Nyongera detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 21, 2025.

[241] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 28, 2026.

[242] Human Rights Watch interviews with 17 former Rumangabo and Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, June 17, 2025; Kisangani, DR Congo, January 23-28, 2026; and Beni, DR Congo, January 30-February 1, 2026.

and Wazalendo, were armed. A 17-year-old boy who was trained in Tshanzu described being deployed close to the Lubero front line: "I was deployed to General Baudoin [Ngaruye]'s First Brigade. They gave me an AK47 [assault rifle] and we started patrols. We walked long hours and carried rice, beans, and munitions. I also fought."[243]

"After Rumangabo, they sent us to Bukavu on the Walungu front line.... The M23 didn't even give us weapons, they used us to carry munitions or heavy weapons," said a former Congolese army sergeant who was taken for training to Rumangabo in March 2025. "We couldn't defend ourselves. And in some cases, when there is a front line with too much resistance, they would send us to get killed first and then send the real M23 fighters."[244]

A former Tshanzu detainee said: "Most people tried to escape once they were sent to the front lines. Some thought they could flee towards the FARDC. But those who tried were often shot by the M23 commanders, or by the FARDC on the other side."[245]

Some new recruits also said they received uniforms from Rwanda.[246] The report of the UN Group of Experts on Congo said in December that "[d]espite undergoing more than seven months of training and political indoctrination, most recruits were not fully trusted by the AFC/M23 command. They were often deployed in unfamiliar areas, inadequately equipped and, in some cases, unarmed or deployed under duress to the front lines."[247]

In November 2025, the M23 released a group of around 60 people from Rumangabo, either due to poor health or because their claims of not being part of the Congolese military were verified.[248]

On January 2, 2026, Makenga and Willy Ngoma, then-spokesperson for the M23, visited Rumangabo and stated that surrendered combatants could voluntarily join the ARC or

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[243] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Kisangani, DR Congo, January 24, 2026.
[244] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), Beni, DR Congo, November 25, 2025.
[245] Human Rights Watch interview with a former Tshanzu detainee (name withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 25, 2025.
[246] Confidential footage, on file with Human Rights Watch, March 20, 2024.
[247] UN Security Council, "Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2025/858, December 30, 2025, II. B. 24.
[248] Human Rights Watch telephone interview with a former Rumangabo detainee (name withheld), November 30, 2025.

register for repatriation with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).[249] In a video posted online that Human Rights Watch geolocated to Rumangabo, Ngoma referred to the group of captured combatants during the offensive on Uvira and claimed that they were being provided with adequate food and medication.[250] On February 8, 2026, another 7,532 "commando" fighters graduated at a ceremony in Tshanzu, ready for further deployment.[251]

In April 2026, the M23 signed an agreement with the government of Congo for the transfer of detained combatants to Congolese-controlled territory through the ICRC.[252]

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[249] "RUMANGABO: General Makenga reassures prisoners of war and reaffirms the commitment of the AFC/M23," *Kivu Top Info*, video clip, YouTube, January 3, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPY93PXjcCs (accessed January 8, 2026).

[250] Ibid.

[251] "Over 7,500 new commandos join AFC/M23 ranks," *IGIHE*, February 10, 2026, https://en.igihe.com/news/article/over-7-500-new-commandos-join-afc-m23-ranks (accessed February 11, 2026).

[252] "RDC: signature d'un protocole d'accord entre l'AFC/M23 et le CICR pour un transfert de militaires," *RFI*, April 15, 2026, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20260415-rdc-signature-d-un-protocole-d-accord-entre-l-afc-m23-et-le-cicr-pour-un-transfert-de-militaires (accessed April 29, 2026).

Legal Framework

The fighting among Congolese and Rwandan armed forces and other armed forces and non-state armed groups is an armed conflict under international humanitarian law, also known as the laws of war.

Hostilities between Congolese and Rwandan forces are governed by treaty law for an international armed conflict, notably the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the First Additional Protocol of 1977 (Protocol I) to the Geneva Conventions and customary international humanitarian law. The fighting involving non-state armed groups and militias is bound by Common Article 3 to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, the Second Additional Protocol of 1977 (Protocol II) to the Geneva Conventions, and customary international humanitarian law applicable to non-international armed conflicts. The rules concerning the methods and means of combat and fundamental protections for civilians are largely the same for international and non-international armed conflicts.

Rwanda's Occupation of Eastern Congo

The international humanitarian law of occupation is primarily set out in the 1907 Hague Regulations,[253] the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949,[254] Protocol I of 1977 to the Geneva Conventions,[255] and customary international humanitarian law.[256]

Article 42 of the Hague Regulations provides the definition of occupation, stating: "Territory is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army. The occupation extends only to the territory where such authority has been established and can be exercised."[257]

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[253] ICRC, International Humanitarian Law Databases, *Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, 18 October 1907*, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/hague-conv-iv-1907 (accessed December 9, 2025).

[254] ICRC, International Humanitarian Law Databases, *Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Geneva, 12 August 1949*, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949 (accessed December 9, 2025).

[255] ICRC, International Humanitarian Law Databases, *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977.*, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977 (accessed December 9, 2025).

[256] "Customary IHL Database," ICRC, International Humanitarian Law Databases, accessed December 9, 2025, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl.

[257] ICRC, *Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex*, Regulations: Art. 42.

Common Article 2 to the Geneva Conventions explicitly notes that each Convention applies to all cases of "partial or total occupation of the territory" of a party to the Convention. The 2016 Commentary of the International Committee of the Red Cross on Common Article 2 sets out three requirements for a situation of belligerent occupation: the presence of foreign military forces without the consent of the sovereign state; the foreign military's ability to exercise authority over the territory; and the related inability of the sovereign state's authorities to exert its control over the territory.[258] These elements have been described in judicial cases, military manuals, and academic writings as the "effective control test" to determine whether a situation qualifies as an occupation for the purposes of international humanitarian law.[259]

Under the effective control test, the occupying force largely controls the territory and can deploy troops as needed. These forces need not be present throughout the territory but must be able to exert authority as necessary. The sovereign state must be substantially incapable of exerting its authority because of the presence of foreign forces. However, the mere presence of national armed forces or armed groups opposing the foreign forces does not negate the occupation.

In addition, effective control over a territory may be exercised by surrogate armed forces or non-state armed groups so long as the occupying forces maintain overall control. Thus, a state would be an occupying power when it exercises overall control over de facto local authorities or armed groups that effectively control all or part of a territory.

Rwanda's Occupation under International Law

Rwanda's deployment of thousands of troops in eastern Congo at the height of the M23's offensive on Goma and Bukavu in January and February 2025, and again in December 2025

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[258] ICRC, International Humanitarian Law Databases, *Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field. Geneva, 12 August 1949., Commentary of January 1, 2016, Article 2 – Application of the Convention,* https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gci-1949/article-2/commentary/2016 (accessed December 9, 2025).

[259] *Prosecutor v. Dusko Tadić a/k/a "Dule"*, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Case No. IT-94-1-T, Opinion and Judgment (Trial Chamber), May 7, 1997, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/tadic/tjug/en/tad-tj970507e.htm (accessed April 29, 2026). *The Joint Service Manual of the Law of Armed Conflict* (Joint Service Publication 383, 2004 Edition), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27874/JSP3832004Edition.pdf (accessed April 29, 2026). Tristan Ferraro, "Determining the beginning and end of an occupation under international humanitarian law," *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 94, No. 885 (March 2012), https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/determining-beginning-and-end-occupation-under-international-humanitarian-law (accessed April 29, 2026).

for its offensive on Uvira, as well as its apparent overall control of the M23, the de facto authorities, indicates that Rwanda is an occupying power under international humanitarian law.[260] Rwandan military personnel directed and led operations during offensives, including those that captured Goma and Bukavu.[261] Several hundred Rwandan troops, operating modern weaponry such as armored drones and GPS-guided mortars, led the advance on Goma.[262]

In late November and early December 2025, several thousand Rwandan troops, including special forces, crossed the border into Congo to support the M23's offensive on Uvira, South Kivu's second largest city.[263] The United States told the UN Security Council on December 12, 2025, that "Rwanda has [recently] deployed multiple surface-to-air missiles and other heavy and sophisticated weaponry into North and South Kivu to aid M23."[264] In its December 2025 report, the UN Group of Experts estimated that between 6,000 and 7,000 Rwandan troops were on Congolese territory, including two brigades and two special forces battalions. It also concluded that Rwandan armed forces support was critical to capturing new territory, including advanced military technology and equipment.[265]

Rwandan military commanders' and trainers' presence during the training of recruits in at least two training centers in Congo was confirmed by more than two dozen former recruits interviewed for this report and the UN Fact Finding Mission on Congo.[266]

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[260] From seven UN, military, and diplomatic sources. See also: UN Security Council, "Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2025/446, July 3, 2025, https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/446 (accessed April 3, 2026).

[261] Michela Wrong, "Hidden invasion: Rwanda's covert war in the Congo," *NBC News*, June 6, 2025, https://www.nbcnews.com/world/africa/rwanda-congo-war-hidden-invasion-trump-peace-talks-rcna209051 (accessed December 9, 2025).

[262] Human Rights Watch interviews with two military sources and three UN sources, by phone and in Goma, DR Congo, January and February 2025.

[263] Human Rights Watch telephone interviews with five UN, Rwandan, and Congolese military sources, December 2025. Review of photographs and videos on file with Human Rights Watch. For more information, see: "DR Congo: Fall of Eastern City Puts Civilians at Risk," Human Rights Watch news release, December 15, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/15/dr-congo-fall-of-eastern-city-puts-civilians-at-risk.

[264] Ambassador Mike Waltz, United States Mission to the United Nations, "Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," December 12, 2025, https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-situation-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-2/ (accessed January 8, 2025).

[265] UN Security Council, "Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2025/858, December 30, 2025, https://docs.un.org/en/s/2025/858 (accessed January 8, 2026).

[266] Human Rights Watch interviews with seven former Rumangabo detainees (names withheld), Beni, DR Congo, November 25, 2025, and Mbarara, Uganda, May 24 and June 19, 21, and 22, 2025. Human Rights Watch interviews with four former Tshanzu detainees (names withheld), Mbarara, Uganda, May 24-26, 2025. UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission on the situation in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo," A/HRC/60/80, September 5,

Rwanda has also been involved in negotiating ceasefires and other actions on behalf of the M23.[267] These actions by Rwandan forces and the absence of Congolese authority in the area would appear to meet the international law standards for a belligerent occupation of parts of eastern Congo.

Violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law

This report details numerous incidents of apparent violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by M23 fighters and Rwandan military personnel in the context of their forced recruitment campaigns and their treatment of detainees. Serious violations of the laws of war that are committed with criminal intent—that is, deliberately or recklessly—are war crimes.

Wrongful Detention, Unlawful Forced Recruitment

The Geneva Conventions set out a comprehensive legal framework aimed at protecting captured combatants and civilians during armed conflict.

The Third Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War defines prisoners of war (POWs) and details the protections of POW status. POWs must be humanely treated at all times. They must be protected against acts of violence or intimidation and against insults or public curiosity. POWs must be kept in facilities "under conditions as favorable as those for the forces of the Detaining Power [...] in the same area."[268]

Civilians and fighters from armed groups not entitled to POW status are entitled to the protections provided under the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of

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2025, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/ffmk-drc/a-hrc-60-80-auv-en.pdf (accessed April 24, 2026).

[267] "Angola announces ceasefire deal between DR Congo and Rwanda," *africanews*, August 13, 2024, https://www.africanews.com/2024/07/31/angola-announces-ceasefire-deal-between-dr-congo-and-rwanda/ (accessed December 9, 2025). In addition, the M23's capture of the town of Walikale in March forced Alphamin Resources at Bisie mine, a major tin mine that produces 6 percent of the global tin supply, to suspend its activities. Reuters reported that the United States directly engaged with the Rwandan and Congolese governments to secure guarantees of the M23's withdrawal and that the Congolese forces would not attack to allow operations to resume. See: Sonia Rolley, "US pushed for deal to re-open Alphamin tin mine in war-hit Congo, sources say," *Reuters*, April 9, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-attempting-deal-re-open-alphamin-tin-mine-war-hit-congo-sources-say-2025-04-09/ (accessed December 9, 2025).

[268] Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (Third Geneva Convention), adopted August 12, 1949, 75 U.N.T.S. 135, entered into force October 21, 1950, art. 25.

Civilian Persons in Time of War. Military forces may detain civilians only for "imperative reasons of security" or for prosecution for criminal offenses.[269] Detainees held on security grounds are entitled to appeal the decision to intern them and have their case reviewed every six months. While captured fighters cannot claim the same protections under interrogation as POWs, they are, like all detainees, protected from torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment as set out under international human rights law and customary international law.

Compelling a prisoner of war or a civilian or other protected person into the forces of a hostile power is a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions.[270] The Geneva Conventions also strictly limited labor that prisoners of war or civilians may be compelled to perform.[271]

Forced recruitment is a war crime under the Rome Statute.[272]

Extrajudicial Killing, Torture and Ill-Treatment, Corporal Punishment

International humanitarian law requires that everyone in custody be treated humanely in all circumstances and be protected against intimidation and violence. Murder, torture or inhumane treatment, corporal punishment, and willfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health are all serious violations of the Geneva Conventions[273] and customary laws of war,[274] and violations or abuses of international human rights law.[275] These abuses are also war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.[276]

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[269] Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention), adopted August 12, 1949, 75 U.N.T.S. 287, entered into force October 21, 1950, art. 78.

[270] Third Geneva Convention, art. 130. Fourth Geneva Convention, art. 147.

[271] Third Geneva Convention, arts. 49-55. Fourth Geneva Convention, arts. 40, 51, and 95.

[272] Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Rome Statute), A/CONF.183/9, July 17, 1998, entered into force July 1, 2002, arts. 8(2)(a)(v), (b)(xv).

[273] Third Geneva Convention, Common Article 3 - Conflicts not of an international character, arts. 17 and 87; Fourth Geneva Convention, art. 32.

[274] International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, vol. I: Rules (Cambridge University Press, 2005), Rules 90 and 91.

[275] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, art. 7.

[276] Rome Statute, arts. 8(2)(a)(i)-(iv) and (vi)-(viii).

Those held under the authority of the Rwandan armed forces are protected by the Third Geneva Convention on prisoners of war if Congolese soldiers,[277] and the Fourth Geneva Convention if civilians.[278] The Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions guarantee prisoners of war and detained civilians the right to maintain contact with their families through regular correspondence, as well as specific conditions of detention, including accommodation, food, clothing, hygiene, and access to medical care.[279]

The UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment states that "[n]o exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture."[280]

Under international law, states are obligated to ensure that, even without an official complaint, allegations of torture are promptly, impartially, independently, and thoroughly investigated, that victims have access to an effective remedy and receive reparation, and that those responsible are brought to justice.[281]

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (the Banjul Charter) requires respect for the right to life and integrity of the person and states that no one may be arbitrarily deprived of their life.[282] Furthermore, "every individual shall have the right to the respect of the dignity inherent in a human being and to the recognition of his legal status. All forms of exploitation and degradation of man, particularly [...] torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment and treatment shall be prohibited."[283]

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[277] Third Geneva Convention.

[278] Fourth Geneva Convention.

[279] Third Geneva Convention, arts. 25-27, 29-31, 70, and 72. Fourth Geneva Convention, arts. 25, 85, 89, 90-92, 106, and 107.

[280] Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, adopted December 10, 1984, G.A. res. 39/46, annex, 39 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 51) at 197, U.N. Doc. A/39/51 (1984), entered into force June 26, 1987, art. 2(2).

[281] UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 31, The Nature of the General Legal Obligation Imposed on States Parties to the Covenant, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add. 13 (2004), https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.13 (accessed April 29, 2026), paras. 15 and 16. UN Committee against Torture, General Comment No. 3, Implementation of article 14 by States parties, U.N. Doc. CAT/C/GC/3 (2012), https://docs.un.org/en/CAT/C/GC/3 (accessed April 29, 2026), para. 27.

[282] African [Banjul] Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted June 27, 1981, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982), entered into force October 21, 1986, https://www.african-court.org/wpafc/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/AFRICAN-BANJUL-CHARTER-ON-HUMAN-AND-PEOPLES-RIGHTS.pdf (accessed April 29, 2026), art. 4.

[283] Ibid., art. 5.

Recruitment of Children

Conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 into national armed forces or non-state armed groups or using them to actively participate in hostilities is a violation of the Geneva Conventions and customary laws of war.[284] It is a war crime under the Rome Statute.[285]

The use of child soldiers is also prohibited in several human rights treaties to which Rwanda is a party: Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Under the Optional Protocol to the CRC, governments must ensure that children under 18 are not subject to compulsory recruitment and must take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces under 18 do not take a direct part in hostilities.[286] Armed groups distinct from a state's armed forces may not, under any circumstances, recruit or use individuals under 18 in hostilities.[287] The protocol also obligates states to take all feasible steps to prevent such recruitment and use, including adopting necessary legal measures to prohibit and criminalize these practices.[288] Armed forces additionally have a duty to provide children with special protection and care.[289] The CRC further requires states to take all feasible measures to ensure the protection and care of children affected by armed conflict.[290]

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child sets 18 as the minimum age for recruitment and participation in hostilities.[291]

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[284] Fourth Geneva Convention, art. 50. Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), 1125 U.N.T.S. 609, entered into force December 7, 1978, art. 4(3)(c). ICRC, *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, Rules 135-137.

[285] Rome Statute, arts. 8(2)(b)(xxvi) and (e)(vii).

[286] Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (Optional Protocol to the CRC), adopted May 25, 2000, G.A. Res. 54/263, Annex I, entered into force February 12, 2002, arts. 1 and 2.

[287] Ibid., art. 4(1).

[288] Ibid., art. 4(2).

[289] Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted November 20, 1989, G.A. Res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), entered into force September 2, 1990, art. 38(4).

[290] Ibid.

[291] African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990), adopted July 11, 1990, entered into force November 29, 1999, art. 22(2).

Crimes Against Humanity

The mass detention, killings, and torture by the M23 over the course of 2025 until the present should be investigated as possible crimes against humanity.

Under the Rome Statute, crimes against humanity are various serious offenses knowingly committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against any civilian population.[292] These include murder, enslavement, imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of international law, torture, enforced disappearance, and other inhumane acts, intentionally causing great suffering or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health.[293]

"Widespread" refers to the scale of the acts or number of victims.[294] "Systematic" indicates a pattern or methodical plan.[295] Crimes against humanity can be committed during peacetime as well as during armed conflict, so long as they are directed against a civilian population.

The Rome Statute defines an "attack directed against any civilian population" as a course of conduct involving the multiple commission of acts defined as crimes against humanity against any civilian population, pursuant or in furtherance of a state or organizational policy to commit such an attack.[296] The acts need not constitute a military attack. The policy element requires that the state or organization actively promote or encourage such

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[292] Rome Statute, art. 7(1).

[293] Ibid., arts. 7(1)(a)(c)(d)(e)(f)(i)(k).

[294] *Prosecutor v. Jean-Paul Akayesu*, International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), Case No. ICTR-96-4-T, Judgment (Chamber I), September 2, 1998, https://www.worldcourts.com/ictr/eng/decisions/1998.09.02_Prosecutor_v_Akayesu.pdf (accessed April 29, 2026), para. 579. Akayesu defined widespread as "massive, frequent, large scale action, carried out collectively with considerable seriousness and directed against a multiplicity of victims." *Prosecutor v. Dario Kordic and Mario Cerkez*, ICTY, Case No. IT-95-14/2-T, Judgement (Trial Chamber), February 26, 2001, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/kordic_cerkez/tjug/en/kor-tj010226e.pdf (accessed April 29, 2026), para. 179. *Prosecutor v. Clément Kayishema and Obed Ruzindana*, ICTR, Case No. ICTR-95-1-T, Judgement (Trial Chamber II), May 21, 1999, https://www.worldcourts.com/ictr/eng/decisions/1999.05.21_Prosecutor_v_Kayishema_1.pdf (accessed April 29, 2026), para. 123.

[295] *Prosecutor v. Dusko Tadić a/k/a "Dule"*, ICTY, Case No. IT-94-1-T, Opinion and Judgment (Trial Chamber), May 7, 1997, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/tadic/tjug/en/tad-tj970507e.htm (accessed April 29, 2026), para. 648; In *Prosecutor v. Dragoljub Kunarac, Radomir Kovac and Zoran Vukovic*, ICTY, Case Nos. IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-T, Judgement (Trial Chamber), February 22, 2001, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/kunarac/tjug/en/kun-tj010222e.pdf (accessed April 29, 2026), para. 94. The Appeals Chamber stated that "patterns of crimes—that is the non-accidental repetition of similar criminal conduct on a regular basis—are a common expression of [a] systematic occurrence."

[296] Rome Statute, art. 7(2)(a).

an attack against a civilian population or, in exceptional circumstances, deliberately fail to take action with the aim of encouraging the attack.[297]

In determining whether criminal acts were committed "as part" of the "attack" directed against a civilian population, the ICC has indicated that relevant considerations include the characteristics, aims, nature, and consequences of the acts, and their temporal and geographical proximity. Isolated or random acts that are not part of the attack will not amount to crimes against humanity.

The rounding-up and detention of civilians—men, women, and boys—for recruitment purposes, which became increasingly methodical during 2025 in areas under M23 control in North and South Kivu, could be an attack on a civilian population. The ICC has stated in its jurisprudence that the presence of military personnel does not automatically negate the civilian character of the population. An attack directed against a civilian population may occur even if some soldiers or fighters are present among the victims, so long as civilians are "the primary, as opposed to incidental, target of the attack."[298]

The large number of civilians either swept up or targeted for recruitment—estimated to be in the thousands by Human Rights Watch and the UN—suggests that the operation in M23-controlled areas was widespread. The well-established pattern of arrest, transfer, and detention, and the presence of Rwandan and senior M23 commanders in the training centers documented in this report indicate an official policy by the M23 in which the Rwandan military participated.

The grave abuses committed against those rounded up and then detained might constitute crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute.[299]

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[297] ICC Elements of Crimes, art. 7(3).

[298] See ICC, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgment of March 21, 2016 (ICC-01/05-01/08) para. 154; ICC, Prosecutor v. Germain Katanga, Judgement of March 7, 2014, para. 1104 citing ICTY, Kunarac et al. Appeal Judgement, (ICC-01/04-01/07 296/660) para. 91.

[299] Both the UN Fact-Finding Mission on the situation in North and South Kivu and the UN Group of Experts on Congo have concluded that the M23 carried out "systematic" forced recruitment campaigns, including of civilians. See: UN Security Council, "Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," December 30, 2025; UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission on the situation in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo," A/HRC/60/80, September 5, 2025.

Individual Criminal Responsibility

Criminal responsibility may fall on persons responsible for war crimes or crimes against humanity, including those planning or instigating or assisting the commission of the crimes. In addition, commanders and civilian leaders may be prosecuted for war crimes or crimes against humanity as a matter of command responsibility when they knew or should have known about the commission of war crimes or crimes against humanity by persons within their chain of command and took insufficient measures to prevent them or punish those responsible. Non-state armed groups are legally obligated to respect the laws of war, and their leaders bear responsibility for ensuring that commanders and fighters comply with these requirements.

States have an obligation to investigate alleged serious international crimes committed by their nationals, including members of their armed forces, or on their territory, and to fairly prosecute those responsible.

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The report was reviewed by Lewis Mudge, Central Africa director; James Ross, legal and policy director; Sam Dubberley, director of the Technology, Rights, and Investigations division; and Sarah Jackson, deputy program director. Specialist review was provided by Allan Ngari, Africa advocacy director; Nicole Widdersheim, deputy Washington director; Philippe Dam, European Union director; Ida Sawyer, director of the Crisis, Conflict, and Arms division; Maria Elena Vignoli, senior counsel in the International Justice Program; Jo Becker, advocacy director of the Children's Rights division; and Julia Bleckner, senior health researcher in the Global Health Initiative.

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“Death Was Everywhere”

Arbitrary Detention, Killings, and Forced Recruitment by the M23 and the Rwanda Defence Force

In early 2025, the Rwanda-backed M23 armed group captured Goma and Bukavu, the provincial capitals of North and South Kivu in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Since then, the armed group has carried out large-scale forced recruitment and other operations in areas under its control. This report documents the M23’s detention of thousands of captured combatants and civilians, some as young as 12, at Rumangabo and Tshanzu military camps, where recruits were subjected to brutal ideological, physical and military training lasting several months. Conditions in these camps are life-threatening: beatings were widespread, and detainees frequently died from injuries, exhaustion, dehydration, or hunger.

The grave abuses by M23 fighters and Rwandan military personnel – including murder, torture and other ill-treatment, corporal punishment, forced unlawful recruitment and abusive labor, and use of child soldiers – are war crimes. Many of these abuses, if demonstrated to have been carried out as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population, would also amount to crimes against humanity. Rwandan and Congolese authorities and regional and international courts should investigate these abuses and hold those responsible, including as a matter of command responsibility, to account.

(above) Photograph recorded on January 30, 2025, shared with Human Rights Watch by a journalist and geolocated to the Unity Stadium in Goma, shows a truck full of men in civilian clothes. The man in the foreground is wearing military gear including a helmet consistent with those worn by RDF soldiers.
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(front cover) An M23 fighter stands guard as people board a truck during an enrollment of civilians, police officers, and former Congolese army soldiers in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, February 23, 2025.
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