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DR Congo: M23 Mass Killings Near Virunga National Park

Rwanda-Backed Armed Group Executes Over 140 Civilians in 14 Villages, Farming Areas



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An aerial photograph of the Rutshuru River, which flows through the Virunga National Park, in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, April 1, 2022. © 2022 ALEXIS HUGUET/AFP via Getty Images

- The Rwandan-controlled M23 armed group summarily executed over 140 civilians in July 2025, largely ethnic Hutu, in at least 14 villages and small farming communities in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.
- The mass killings appear to be part of a military campaign against the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a mostly Rwandan Hutu armed group formed by participants in Rwanda's 1994 genocide, and other opposing armed groups.
- The UN Security Council and governments should impose further sanctions on those responsible for grave abuses, seek prosecution of commanders implicated in war crimes, and ensure continued UN investigations into atrocities.

(Nairobi) – The [Rwandan](#)-controlled M23 armed group summarily executed over 140 civilians, largely ethnic Hutu, in at least 14 villages and farming areas in July 2025 near Virunga National Park, eastern [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), Human Rights Watch said

today. Credible reports indicate the number of people killed in Rutshuru territory since July may exceed 300, among the worst atrocities by the M23 since its resurgence in late 2021.

Between July 10 and 30, M23 fighters summarily executed local residents and farmers, including women and children, in their villages, fields, and near the Rutshuru River across the Binza administrative subdivision (*groupement*) in Rutshuru territory, North Kivu province. Witness accounts, the UN, and military sources indicate that the Rwandan military, the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF), were also involved in the M23 operations.

“The M23 armed group, which has Rwandan government backing, attacked over a dozen villages and farming areas in July and committed dozens of summary executions of primarily Hutu civilians,” said [Clémentine de Montjoye](#), senior Great Lakes researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Unless those responsible for these war crimes, including at the highest levels, are appropriately investigated and punished, these atrocities will only intensify.”

From mid-July to mid-August, Human Rights Watch interviewed 36 people by telephone, including 25 witnesses, as well as local activists, medical workers, military and United Nations personnel, and other informed sources. Human Rights Watch analyzed relevant videos and photographs, consulted with forensic pathologists, and corroborated accounts using maps and satellite imagery.

Human Rights Watch compiled a list of 141 people who were either killed or are missing and feared dead. On August 6, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [reported](#) that “at least 319 civilians were killed by the M23, backed by members of the Rwanda Defence Force, between 9 and 21 July in four villages in [...] Rutshuru.” This figure corroborates information Human Rights Watch received from other sources. Human Rights Watch also received information that the M23 executed another 41 civilians between July 30 and August 8 in the Binza *groupement*, but this could not be independently confirmed.

Human Rights Watch wrote to Rwandan authorities on August 7 and Bertrand Bisimwa, the M23’s leader, on August 8 to request information about the killings, but received no responses. The Alliance Fleuve Congo (Congo River Alliance, or AFC), the politico-military coalition that includes the M23, on [August 7 rejected](#) the UN’s allegations. On August 11, the Rwandan government [rejected](#) the UN’s allegations that the Rwandan military was involved in the operations, and [claimed](#) that an armed group opposed to the M23 carried out the killings.

Human Rights Watch documented or obtained credible information about killings in July in the localities of Busesa, Kakoro, Kafuru, Kasave, Katanga, Katemba, Katwiguru, Kihito, Kiseguru, Kongo, Lubumbashi, Nyamilima, Nyabanira, and Rubare. These areas were then under M23 control, and several M23 commanders were identified at some locations.



[Click to expand Image](#)

Locator map of the area in Rutshuru territory, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where the mass killings occurred. Graphic © 2025 Human Rights Watch

Witnesses to attacks said that M23 fighters told them to immediately bury the bodies in the fields or leave them unburied, preventing families from organizing funerals. M23 fighters also threw bodies, including of women and children, into the Rutshuru River.

The mass killings appear to be part of a military campaign against opposing armed groups, especially the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, or FDLR), a largely Rwandan Hutu armed group created by participants in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

In the killings reported to Human Rights Watch, most victims were ethnic Hutu and, to a lesser degree, ethnic Nande. The M23's targeting of Hutu civilians living near FDLR strongholds raises grave concerns of ethnic cleansing in Rutshuru territory, Human Rights Watch said.

Human Rights Watch's research indicates the M23's military operations were carried out by the 1st Battalion of the 1st Brigade, commanded by Col. Samuel Mushagara and Brig. Gen. Baudoin Ngaruye, respectively. General Ngaruye is under [UN sanctions](#) for his role in [M23 war crimes](#). Residents also described the participation of Rwandan military forces in the M23 operation, identifying Rwandan soldiers by their uniforms and their accents. The [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) and military sources confirmed the Rwandan military's involvement in the operations.

The Rwandan government, which [effectively controls the territory the M23 occupies](#), should allow UN and independent international forensic experts to preserve and analyze evidence of war crimes, including the UN Human Rights Office and the independent UN Commission of Inquiry on Congo, once it is operationalized.

The UN Security Council, the European Union, and governments should condemn these grave abuses, impose [further sanctions on those responsible for abuses](#), and press for the arrest and appropriate prosecution of commanders implicated in war crimes. Donor governments providing military assistance to Rwanda should urgently review their programs to ensure they are not fueling violations.

The killings in Rutshuru territory come weeks after a preliminary agreement in a United States-brokered [peace deal](#) signed on June 27 between Congo and Rwanda, which [requires](#) Congo to implement a plan to "neutralize" the FDLR as Rwanda withdraws from Congolese territory. It also requires the parties to protect civilians, including by facilitating the freedom of movement of the UN peacekeeping mission, known as MONUSCO. The agreement's [Joint Security Coordination Mechanism](#) should ensure that crimes committed in the context of any anti-FDLR operations are credibly investigated, Human Rights Watch said.

"The Rwanda-backed M23's mass killings throw into sharp focus the gaps that exist between rhetoric on the international stage and the reality for civilians in eastern Congo," de Montjoye said. "Governments seeking peace agreements remain bound by the laws of war, and those individuals responsible for war crimes still need to be fully investigated and brought to justice."

For additional details, international law, and accounts by witnesses, please see below.

Allegations of Mass Killings by the M23

The M23 killings that began around July 10 reportedly started in fields north and south of the road that passes through Kiseguru and Katwiguru in Rutshuru territory. Witnesses and residents said M23 fighters surrounded and blocked off all roads into the area to prevent people from leaving. After July 14, witnesses said the M23 summarily executed people in Nyamilima, 25 kilometers from Kiseguru. Human Rights Watch documented executions by the M23 up until July 30 in Nyabanira, including targeting people who had come to search for or bury their loved ones or find food in their fields.

Human Rights Watch analyzed 21 photographs and videos sent directly to researchers that showed the bodies of victims. Due to the lack of metadata in the files, Human Rights Watch was unable to confirm the location, time, or dates the images were taken. The identities of some victims were confirmed through witness accounts.

The images strongly corroborate executions by machete and gunfire, according to the Independent Forensic Expert Group of the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims.

In its August 7 [statement](#), the AFC/M23 claimed that some of the localities where the UN reported killings—some of which Human Rights Watch research corroborates—are mainly inside Virunga National Park where farmlands “do not exist.” This attempt to discredit the UN allegations of M23 killings of farmers in those areas do not reflect the facts: satellite imagery and witness accounts indicate that these areas have been used as farmland for years.

Agricultural Villages West of Kiseguru, Democratic Republic of Congo, in Virunga National Park

July 2, 2025



[Click to expand Image](#)

In their August 7 statement, AFC/M23 claimed that "Kanyakiri, Kigaligali, Dubai, Katanga, Lubumbashi, Kasave, Kakoro and Busesa are located mainly within the Virunga National Park, a protected area where all agricultural activity is strictly prohibited. How could farmers

have been massacred in fields that don't exist?". While most of the villages are inside the park perimeter, satellite imagery from July 2, 2025, shows that these areas were farmed at the time, the protected and forested area only effectively starting west of the Rutshuru river. Earlier images show the presence of fields since at least 2015. Image © 2025 Planet Labs PBC.

Witness Accounts

Three farmers said the attacks on their fields and nearby forest began on July 10 or 11. "I left to hide some tools but when I returned to get my family, I saw the M23 had reached them," said a farmer who was living in a field near Kiseguru. "I could see them [his family members] from a distance ... they were all shot dead." His wife and their three children—ages 9 months to 10 years old—were killed in front of him.

Another man said that five members of his family were killed in Katanga, about 12 kilometers northwest of Kiseguru. "We woke up on July 11 and [the M23] were there in large numbers.... [T]hey were already on our doorstep.... [T]hey killed people with guns and machetes."

Villagers described finding the bodies of a 47-year-old man and his four children, ages 11 to 17, in a field about 18 kilometers from Kiseguru, on July 11. "We found him in his field with his head cut off," said a man who found and buried them. "They were all killed with machetes. Their throats were cut."

A man whose wife and two children, ages 14 and 21, were killed said that he saw the M23 take his family away from their field in Katanga on July 10, together with two other women and a child. A witness later told him they had seen the M23 execute them at the confluence of the Rutshuru (also called Kitchuru) and Ivi (also called Rive) Rivers, about 10 kilometers north.

A woman who saw M23 fighters kill her husband with a machete on July 11 said that M23 fighters that day rounded up the women and children. "Around 10 a.m., we were forced to walk toward the place where our lives were going to end," she said. "We walked in silence. If a child started crying, they threatened to kill them. They killed with knives." She said they were a group of about 70 people, including women and girls: "We walked all day until we reached the confluence of the Kitchuru [Rutshuru] and Rive [Ivi] Rivers in the evening.... They told us to sit on the edge of the riverbank, and then they started shooting at us." She said the executions took place near Kafuru, and identified 47 people, including children, who were killed. She was able to escape because she fell in the river without being shot. Human Rights Watch received information that the M23 carried out mass killings by the Rutshuru River for several days.

Residents and witnesses said that the M23 continued to execute people until at least July 30.

A woman said that her relative was among the dead in a photograph, analyzed by Human Rights Watch, that showed six bodies:

"He was from Nyabanira and fled here to Kiwanja, but because life is hard here we have to go back to our fields in Nyabanira to find food. If we're lucky, we come back, if we're unlucky, we run into the M23 and that's the end, it's death. My [relative] went on July 30 to look for food and never came back.... Someone who saw his body came to tell us and gave us his hat. We recognized him in the photo with five other men."

Human Rights Watch independently confirmed the identities of four men in the photograph. The Independent Forensic Expert Group analyzed the photograph and concluded that visible hand ties were used on three of the men, while a fourth most likely had his hands tied behind him. The group said that all had injuries consistent with gunshot wounds.

An unknown number of civilians were also injured in the attacks. Three medical sources said that the injured, including a 22-month-old child, were taken to nearby medical facilities for treatment. They had gunshot or machete wounds.

Anti-FDLR Operations

The area where the M23 military operations took place borders Virunga National Park and areas [where the FDLR have been operating](#) for decades. For years, civilians [have been caught](#) in the crossfire of fighting between Congolese government forces and [armed groups such as the FDLR](#).

Many farmers killed in the July operations were either local residents or migrant workers who had travelled from villages and towns further away, such as Tongo and Kanyabayonga, to work in the fertile valley on the edge of the park. Some lived in the fields, where they worked with their entire families.

Residents and an independent source told Human Rights Watch that the M23 had intermittently suspended access to farmland because they were conducting anti-FDLR operations, including on July 10, and told people to move to urban centers. Three residents said that in June, an M23 commander, Col. Claude Imani, gave the farmers authorization to work in the fields again.

Satellite imagery confirms the area was being cultivated again after the beginning of June as many new clearings appear in previously overgrown fields. Farmers interviewed said they each had to pay a one-time US\$10 tax to the M23 to be allowed to work in the fields again.

"They are still in our fields, they are saying they are going after the FDLR," said a man whose wife and two children were killed on July 11. "That's why they left men's bodies in the fields, but they took the women and children to kill them by the river."

Human Rights Watch received credible information that the M23, the FDLR, and other armed groups were fighting in the area both before and at the time of the summary executions. A splinter faction of the FDLR, the Rwandan RUD-Urunana (Rally for Unity and Democracy), controls some areas bordering [Virunga National Park](#), including in Bwisha chiefdom (*chefferie*) containing the Binza groupement, and has a base near the Ivi and Rutshuru Rivers' confluence.

On August 11, Rwanda's foreign affairs minister, in a [post on X](#), blamed the killings on fighters from the Collective Movement for Change (CMC)-Nyatura, a Hutu armed group that is opposed to the M23. However, witnesses and residents told Human Rights Watch that fighters from the FDLR and CMC-Nyatura were rarely seen in villages since the M23 captured the area in August 2024, and all interviewed attributed the killings to the M23.

On July 30, M23 officials in Ishasha announced through loudspeakers that those who had recently arrived needed to present themselves to the administration. These included people who had fled killings in neighboring areas, according to two local sources. Men under age 45 were detained and transferred to a building near the border with Uganda, where they were reportedly beaten, and the next day loaded onto trucks. A source who was among the group said the M23 told them they didn't want them fleeing their villages to come to Ishasha and accused them of supporting the FDLR, the Congolese army, or the government-backed Wazalendo coalition of armed groups.

A video posted on social media on August 1 that Human Rights Watch geolocated and verified shows scores of men being marched along the main road in Ishasha toward the north part of the town where the border post is located. At least some of these men were subsequently released.

The M23 routinely accuses suspected opponents, often without evidence, of collaborating with the FDLR, other armed groups, or the Congolese army. Human Rights Watch documented the M23's execution on July 7 of a pastor in Katwiguru who was accused of collaborating with the Wazalendo.

In May, the M23 [rounded up](#) people in Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu, and surrounding areas whom the M23 accused of supporting the opposing forces. They took some away by vehicle to unknown locations. Some of those rounded up were originally from Karenga, in Masisi territory, which is also [considered](#) an FDLR stronghold.

International Law

All parties to the armed conflict in eastern Congo, including non-state armed groups, are bound by international humanitarian law, which prohibits attacks on civilians, summary executions, torture, forced displacement, looting, and other abuses.

While "ethnic cleansing" is not formally defined under international law, a UN Commission of Experts has [defined](#) the term as a "purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas."

Individuals who commit serious violations of the laws of war with criminal intent are responsible for war crimes. Commanders who knew or should have known about serious abuses by their forces and did not take appropriate action may be prosecuted as a matter of command responsibility.

War crimes and other atrocity crimes are crimes of universal jurisdiction, which allows other countries to prosecute them regardless of where the crimes were committed or the nationality of victims and perpetrators.

In October 2024, the International Criminal Court prosecutor [announced](#) that his office would renew investigative efforts in Congo with a focus on crimes in North Kivu since January 2022. The court's investigation should include the M23's summary executions of civilians and other grave abuses in eastern Congo, Human Rights Watch said.



