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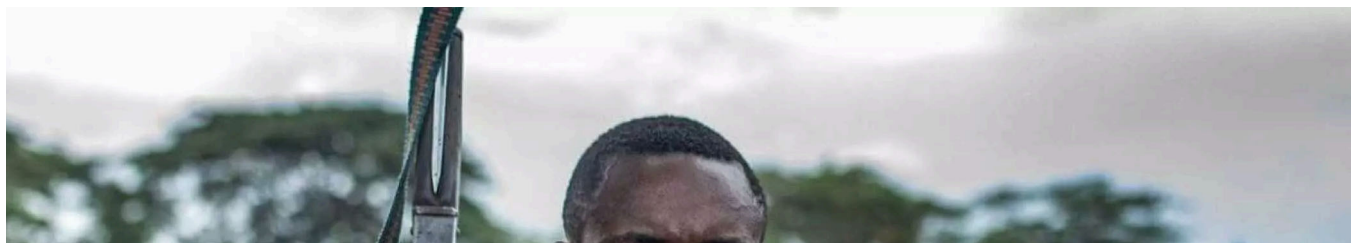
The enemy of my enemy is my friend: How armed group alliances are shaping the battle for South Kivu

The violence in eastern DRC is increasingly shaped not only by military forces or the M23, but by the non-state armed group alliances that support them.

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Key takeaways

- DRC-focused peace deals and ceasefires consistently neglect allies under the Wazalendo and AFC, but fighting among these groups has frequently led to [the resumption of hostilities](#).
- The AFC's two major advances in South Kivu were enabled by its internal coherence and the expansion of operations by AFC allies beyond the M23.
- As the Congolese military seeks to counter the AFC's advances, it has increasingly relied on militias operating under the Wazalendo banner.
- However, their battlefield successes have been hampered by the Wazalendo's internal fragmentation and clashes with

the Congolese military.

When the [March 23 Movement \(M23\)](#) launched an offensive to expand its control across the South Kivu highlands in November 2025, the resurgence of fighting in eastern [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) entered a new phase. The rebels continued southward toward Fizi town, and, by February 2026, violence in the highlands had escalated to the highest levels since the M23 conflict reemerged in late 2021. However, while international mediation has focused on high-level negotiations and regional political tensions, violence in South Kivu has been shaped less by domestic and international military forces and more by a complex web of non-state armed group alliances.

To project force across a widening territorial front, the M23 and Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) have relied heavily on armed groups under the Congo River Alliance, or Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC). The AFC is a broad coalition of political and armed actors that includes the M23, but extends membership to several armed groups in South Kivu. In order to counter threats from the M23, AFC, and RDF, the Congolese military (FARDC) has mobilized a diverse network of auxiliary armed groups, collectively known as the Wazalendo. In South Kivu, the Wazalendo have expanded in the past year to include additional armed groups, especially those opposed to Rwandaphone influence. They have also played an increasingly visible role in front-line operations, often replacing the Congolese military itself.

These coalitions are central to understanding how front lines have shifted since November 2025 (see chart below). This report examines how the M23 and RDF expanded their control into South Kivu and argues that this advance was enabled by the internal coherence and expansion of the AFC as it confronted the more fragmented allied armed groups loyal to Kinshasa. The Wazalendo have lacked a clear command structure under the Congolese military and coordination with other allied groups, leading to clashes with the FARDC, other groups under the Wazalendo alliance, and intragroup fighting.



1 of 2

The ecosystem of AFC and Wazalendo non-state armed groups in South Kivu

Armed confrontations between November 2021 and March 2026*



Hover over individual points to see actor names.
See next slide for more information on individual actors.

Group AFC Wazalendo coalition Infighting



**Data up to 20 March.*

Point size indicates total number of confrontations.

Link thickness indicates number of confrontations between actors.

Only the 10 non-state armed groups with the most total armed confrontations with the opposing group are displayed.

Violence in South Kivu has escalated despite numerous diplomatic efforts for a ceasefire and offers of investment.¹ More than one year since the fall of Goma, the prospects for negotiated settlement hinge not only on talks between the Congolese and Rwandan governments, but increasingly on the internal dynamics of both the AFC and Wazalendo.

The AFC widens its tent to extend its control of South Kivu

Formed on 15 December 2023, the AFC is a broad political-military coalition. The M23 provides the largest number of fighters and occupies its most senior leadership positions.² The M23 created the wider AFC umbrella to incorporate other political and military actors beyond the group's narrower leadership structure, consolidating decision-making under the AFC command structure and integrating allied armed group leadership into broader AFC positions. The AFC's political wing governs vast areas of North and South Kivu under a parallel administration competing with the Kinshasa-aligned government. In both North and South Kivu, the AFC has established a system of governance in which its administrators regulate the behavior of civilians, collect taxes, and provide public goods and services.

While the M23 remains the coalition's central pillar, the broader AFC alliance in South Kivu brought several Banyamulenge groups and Burundian rebels under one umbrella in 2025. The alliance now unites numerous powerful political figures, including the former president of the Congolese Independent National Electoral Commission, Corneille Nangaa Yubeluo, who now leads the AFC.³ A leadership shuffle in 2025 also brought a more coherent structure and integration of the various Banyamulenge groups under the AFC, including the self-defense ethnic militia commonly known as the Twirwaneho. The group's president, Freddy Kaniki Rukema, serves as the AFC's deputy coordinator of economic, financial, and development affairs.⁴ Recent dismissals, such as that of Cabinet Director for Political Coordination Yannick Tshisola Kwasa Mukwenu, also demonstrate the group's capacity to remove those they perceive as disloyal or ineffective.⁵



The leader of the AFC, Corneille Nangaa Yubeluo, speaks during a press conference in Goma on 30 January 2025. Photo by Tony Karumba/AFP/AFRUMBA/AFP via Getty Images.

Tactically, the AFC has enabled the M23 to project an armed presence across geographically disparate areas — often behind positions held by the Congolese military and its allies and into areas where the M23 or RDF could not deploy without aircraft. Much of the violence in South Kivu since 2025 has involved M23-allied groups operating under the AFC umbrella. Despite historically contentious relationships between its members, the AFC's leadership changes over the past year and sustained territorial gains across North and South Kivu have created strong incentives for armed groups to continue collaborating under this alliance. Unlike the Wazalendo, infighting among AFC allies has been limited since the coalition was formalized. In addition, ongoing peace negotiations with external mediators provide armed groups in South Kivu with an incentive to join the AFC: As part of the coalition, they stand to gain from post-conflict political settlements that could offer a pathway to power.⁶

Aside from the M23, the Twirwaneho — meaning “we defend ourselves” in the Kinyamulenge language — has been the most active armed group in the AFC alliance. The Twirwaneho frames its mobilization as a defensive effort to protect the Banyamulenge community from attacks by rival armed groups and local militias, many of whom portray the Banyamulenge as “Rwandaphones” or

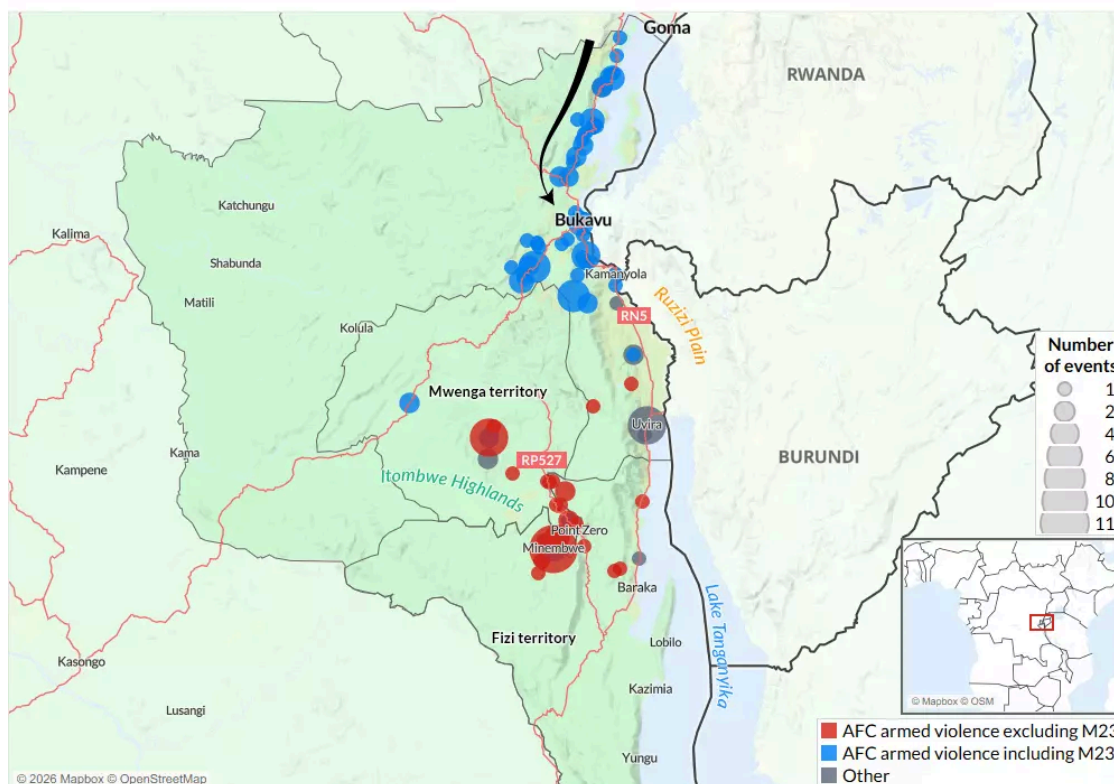
“outsiders.”⁷ The M23 has long-standing ties with the Twirwaneho: The group attempted to build alliances with them during its initial rebellion in 2012.⁸ Other armed groups that primarily recruit among the Banyamulenge, including the Gumino and Mayi Mayi Android, have also agreed to fight under the AFC coalition despite past tensions and clashes against one another.

The AFC also incorporates Burundian rebel movements opposed to the Burundian government, most notably the Resistance for the Rule of Law (RED-Tabara) and the National Liberation Forces (FNL). Historically, relations between some of these actors — particularly between RED-Tabara and Banyamulenge factions — have erupted into violent confrontations. However, since operating within the broader AFC structure, relations between these factions have remained relatively stable, with limited infighting.

The M23 takeover of vast areas of South Kivu province occurred in two phases, both of which involved the AFC extensively. The first phase coincided with the M23’s southward push after its takeover of Goma and culminated in the capture of Bukavu in February 2025 (see map below). During February and March that year, violence surged in the Fizi and Mwenga territories as AFC-aligned Twirwaneho forces intensified operations against the approximately 10,000 Burundian military (FDNB) troops deployed in eastern DRC to support the Congolese military,⁹ the FARDC, and Wazalendo groups. These battles were central to contesting control over the South Kivu highlands but were geographically distant from the M23 positions around Bukavu and in the northern part of the Ruzizi Plain. These AFC-aligned forces in the highlands enabled concurrent operations in two distinct areas before the M23 or RDF could establish a strong, direct, on-the-ground presence.

Armed violence during the first AFC offensive

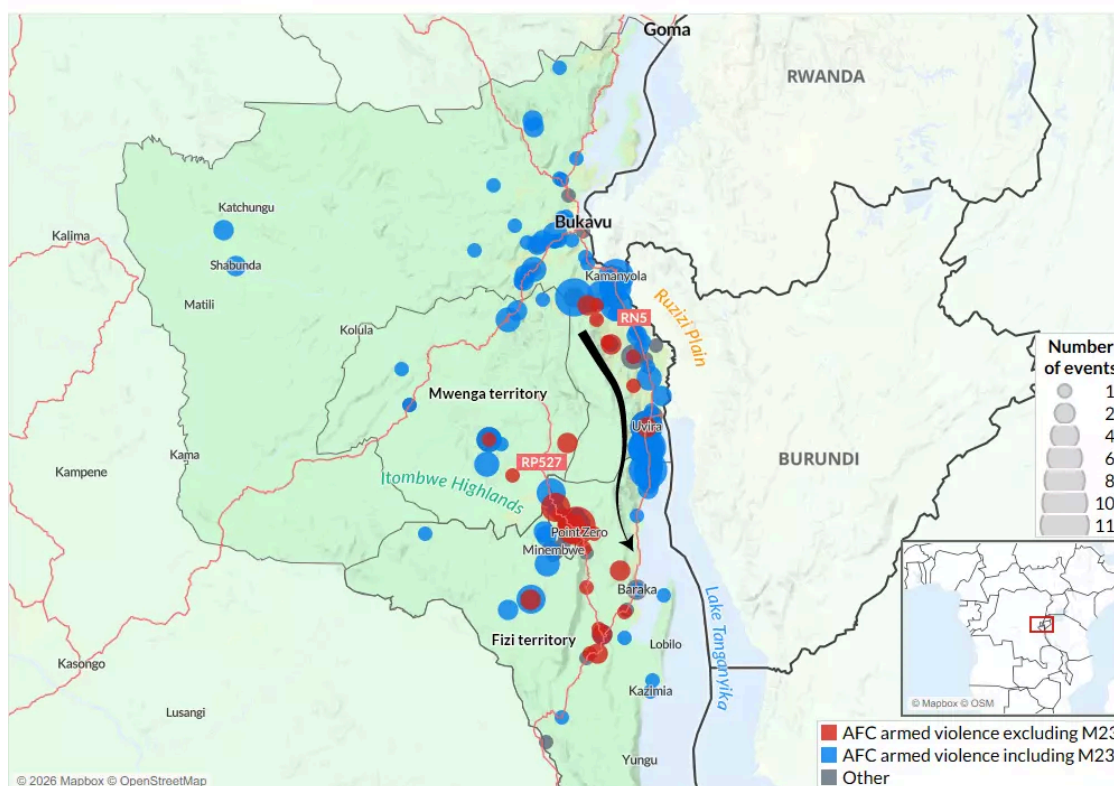
February - March 2025



The second phase began in November 2025 (see map below). It started with clashes along the RP527 – a strategic road linking the lowlands near Lake Tanganyika with the Itombwe Highlands – then escalated. During this second phase, the AFC allies increased operations against the Wazalendo, FARDC, and the Burundian military, with more direct M23 involvement in the highlands than in the first phase. While fighting persisted on the high plateau, the Twirwaneho and other AFC-aligned groups launched a coordinated advance toward the Ruzizi Plain north of Uvira. By early December, the AFC had captured Uvira before pushing southward along the RN5, further consolidating control over key transport corridors. These AFC offensives into the lowlands cut off the road transit corridor from Bujumbura to Uvira, impeding the FDNB's ability to deploy into and resupply troops in South Kivu. Burundian forces instead had to use boats to ferry soldiers and supplies over the lake.¹⁰

Armed violence during the second AFC offensive

November 2025 - January 2026



In both the highlands and around Uvira, infighting among Wazalendo groups preceded this offensive, weakening their ability to mount a cohesive defense against the AFC. ACLED records over a dozen cases of infighting among Wazalendo allies in South Kivu during the two months prior to the AFC's November offensive. In one example, members of a Wazalendo ally called Mayi Mayi Biloze Bishambuke had been fighting one another in Fizi, and one of the group's commanders was killed.¹¹ In Uvira, two separate Wazalendo groups led by Makanaki and Nyerere fought against another Wazalendo ally, led by Kashumba, diminishing their ability to provide a cohesive defense against the incoming AFC forces.¹²

So far in 2026, areas around Baraka on the RN5 and Point Zero on the RP527 have become hotspots of fighting between the AFC and the Wazalendo, who are operating alongside the FARDC, Burundian military, and private mercenaries, as the latter coalition aims to prevent further advances and regain positions in South Kivu. Despite these two stages of advances in South Kivu, the AFC retreated to a perimeter around Uvira city under diplomatic pressure from the United States, permitting the Wazalendo and FARDC to regain the city on 18

January. Throughout the fighting, civilians have paid a heavy toll for the exchanges of control in Uvira as numerous armed groups have carried out violence targeting suspected sympathizers on opposing sides.

Rising Wazalendo infighting limits its capacity to hold South Kivu

The FARDC has long relied on alliances with non-state armed groups, reflecting the military's own fragmented composition and history of integrating former rebel factions.¹³ Many of these armed groups come from diverse locations and ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, claiming to represent the interests of particular populations from around the region. Further, Kinshasa's alliances with numerous, distinct armed groups rather than a cohesive force reflect a strategy to prevent a military overthrow, especially one carried out by a unified actor with power over the resource-rich eastern region.

Numerous armed groups now under the Wazalendo receive support from the FARDC but have resisted integration into the military or defected. Other armed groups view collaboration with the Wazalendo as a way to gain power.¹⁴ During an interview in Baraka, Delphin Kalembe, commonly called Ngoma Nzito, a leader of Mayi Mayi Biloze Bishambuke — a group that has frequently clashed with the Twirwaneho — was asked whether he would join the military if the FARDC permitted. Nzito said, "Yes, I would be part of the military, and I would take the role of a general, considering the number of fighters I have under my command."¹⁵



M23 rebels are pictured on 22 February 2025 in Bukavu as they guard a unit of surrendering Congolese military troops who will be recruited into the rebel group after the rebels took control of the city. Photo by Hugh Kinsella Cunningham/Getty Images.

In 2025, as the M23 and RDF expanded their offensives across North and South Kivu, the FARDC increasingly depended on militias operating under the Wazalendo banner to counter the AFC's advances. However, under sustained battlefield pressure, the Wazalendo alliance has been weakened by long-standing rivalries, persistent infighting, and recurring clashes with the very military it is meant to support. Unlike the AFC, the Wazalendo lacks a broader command structure, with each group answering only to its own leader rather than coordinating with other Wazalendo groups or having a clear command-and-control structure under the military.¹⁶ Internal leadership disputes have also plagued various Wazalendo allies, including past divisions and infighting within Mayi Mayi Raia Mutomboki, which birthed numerous factions that subsequently clashed with each other. Like many Wazalendo groups, the Mayi Mayi Raia Mutomboki have a long history of fighting against the Congolese military and Rwandan Hutu rebels, but now find themselves operating alongside both of these former enemies to counter the AFC.

Efforts to formalize the Wazalendo coalition against the M23 rebel advances began in May 2022. Meetings held in Pinga, between Walikale and Masisi territories, brought together several armed groups willing to coordinate with the FARDC against the M23.¹⁷ Despite these meetings, the Wazalendo alliance failed to develop a cohesive hierarchy or command structure, complicating coordination between armed groups. However, it seems these meetings laid the groundwork, as some Wazalendo allies established formal agreements with one another and the Congolese military under the *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie* (VDP) and *Réserve Armée de la Défense* (RAD).

In contrast, other Wazalendo groups have taken up arms without such a clear contract and function outside these formal agreements established under the VDP or RAD. As one Wazalendo fighter told an interviewer in 2024, “Anyone who takes up arms to fight the enemy is a Muzalendo [the singular form of Wazalendo]. That's where the problem lies now. The enemy is creating its own Wazalendo, and confusion is spreading on the ground. But remember, these are fake Wazalendo. The real Wazalendo are fighting Rwanda and the M23.”¹⁸ This quote highlights the challenges of identifying Wazalendo groups, as even local reports often describe any armed group fighting against the M23 or the RDF as Wazalendo.

In South Kivu, Wazalendo groups tend to come from numerous ethnic backgrounds but often frame themselves as indigenous or local, contrasting themselves to the ethnic Banyamulenge, who many Wazalendo groups consider to be outsiders and not truly Congolese.¹⁹ One of the most active armed groups under the Wazalendo coalition is Mayi Mayi Yakutumba, led by William Amuri Yakutumba, who has built a broader network of allied militias that refuse to join the ranks of the Congolese military and are explicitly opposed to perceived Rwandaphone influence.²⁰ The group's long-standing hostility toward both Rwandan-backed forces and the FARDC has made its cooperation with the Wazalendo more a strategic arrangement than a match in ideology.

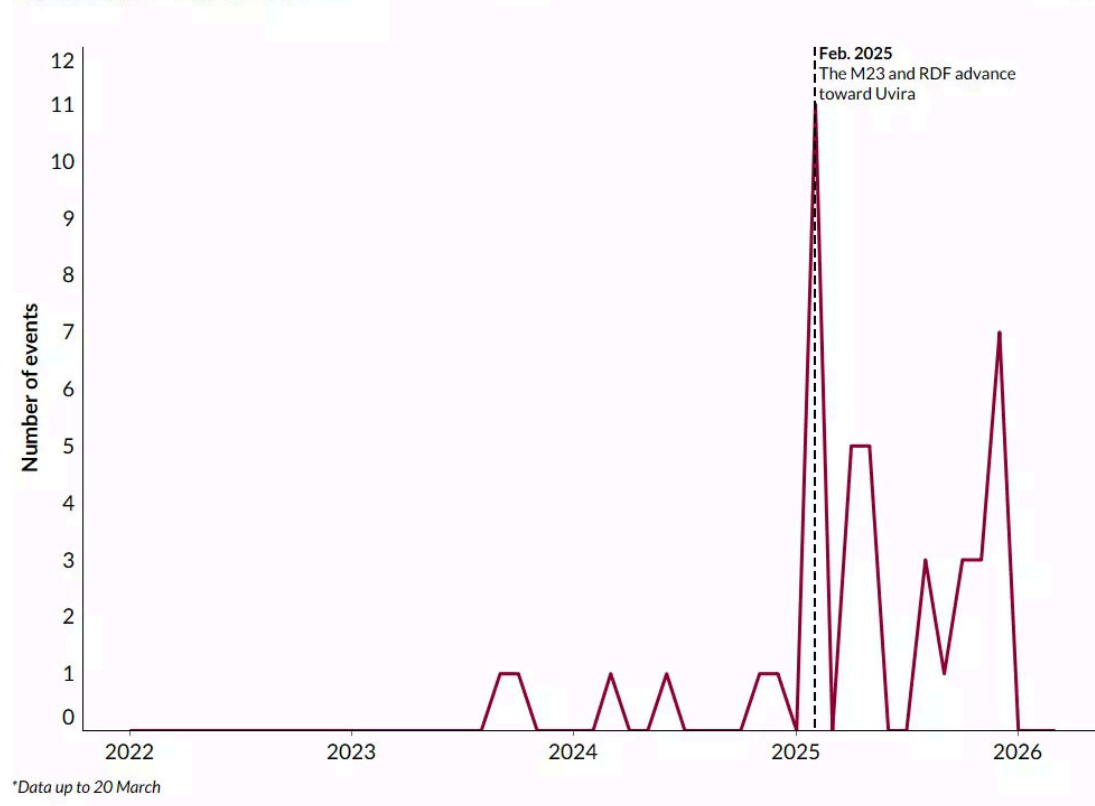
Other groups, such as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), occupy a more ambiguous position among the FARDC's allies. The group was formed as a Rwandan rebel group by members of the Hutu paramilitary Interahamwe organization that led the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and frequently

aligns with FARDC operations to fight alongside Wazalendo-affiliated groups. However, the FDLR is not generally considered part of the Wazalendo coalition, as many perceive it to be a Rwandan group more than a local self-defense group.²¹ Its presence complicates the security landscape, as Kigali demands an end to FARDC cooperation with the FDLR.

Despite this broad coalition operating against the AFC, cohesion remains fragile. Clashes between Wazalendo fighters and FARDC soldiers have taken place throughout the M23 rebellion and increased in 2025 as government forces withdrew from key positions (see graph below). Illustratively, Wazalendo clashes against the FARDC around Uvira territory spiked in February 2025 during the M23-RDF advance toward the city, as Wazalendo fighters often fought retreating soldiers who had abandoned their positions, demanding they return to the battlefield or surrender their weapons.

Infighting between FARDC and Wazalendo forces in South Kivu

March 2022 - March 2026*



Tensions have also flared when the FARDC has attempted to dismantle roadside checkpoints established by Wazalendo groups, who use them to collect rents to sustain their operations. Unlike the FARDC, whose mandate is national and

territorial, Wazalendo-aligned groups tend to pursue highly localized objectives -- defending specific communities, controlling particular trade routes, or maintaining influence within a narrowly defined area. A strategic retreat for the FARDC may be a small military loss to win a broader war, but for the Mayi Mayi militants under the Wazalendo coalition, it may entail giving up the very people, resources, and influence the group aims to influence and purportedly protect. These differing ambitions complicate efforts to build a unified command structure and limit the Wazalendo's ability to operate cohesively with the FARDC.

These disputes reflect deeper structural tensions: While some Banyamulenge officers hold positions within the FARDC command structure, many Wazalendo factions mobilize explicitly against perceived Rwandophone influence. For example, demonstrations turned violent in Uvira when locals and Wazalendo militants mobilized on 8 September 2025 against the FARDC's appointment of General Olivier Gasita Mukunda, who is ethnically Munyamulenge, as the head of operations and military intelligence within the 33rd military region. [22] Historical rivalries among Wazalendo groups further constrain coordinated action against the AFC.

Despite these rivalries and failure to collaborate cohesively, the FARDC has countered the AFC's ground forces by expanding its use of combat drones on the battlefield and enabling the deployment of various mercenary groups, including Vectus Global -- private military contractors led by Blackwater founder Eric Prince. [23] In South Kivu province, the Congolese military conducted more air- and drone strikes in the first quarter of 2026 than all of last year. The Wazalendo has also increasingly received aerial support from the Congolese military during joint ground operations.

Contentious alliances complicate a peace deal between the DRC and Rwanda

The balance of power in eastern DRC is increasingly shaped not only by regional military forces or the M23, but by the allied armed groups bolstering the main conflict actors. Clashes with the Congolese military and infighting have limited the Wazalendo's capacity to defend areas of South Kivu against the more cohesive AFC.

In January this year, infighting among Wazalendo groups broke out again around Fizi between the Mayi Mayi Biloze Bishambuke and the National Coalition of the People for the Sovereignty of Congo, just southwest of where the Wazalendo, FARDC, and FDNB are fighting to hold back further AFC advances. With the AFC threatening to progress toward Fizi, this infighting could weaken the Wazalendo's ability to defend the area.

Wazalendo groups tend to lack a broader objective like the aspirations common under the AFC to defend all Congolese Tutsi. [24] These constraints, paired with a growing M23 force that is expanding through the addition of deserters from the Congolese military and former Wazalendo, have enabled the AFC to extend its influence across South Kivu over the past year.

Looking ahead, the durability of both the AFC and the Wazalendo will likely depend on their ability to deliver continued advantages to member groups. As the fragmentation within the Wazalendo has shown, if expansion or defensive momentum stalls, historical rivalries can quickly re-emerge. Further, Rwandan and Congolese military support for numerous armed groups means that future fragmentation could potentially result in opponents who are better trained, equipped, and experienced than in past years.

Since the M23 rebellion escalated in late 2021, peace agreements and ceasefires have consistently failed due to the inability to curb ongoing Wazalendo and AFC hostilities.

The various peace deals and negotiations also have yet to completely halt the M23-RDF-AFC operations in South Kivu, though US diplomatic pressure eventually prompted the AFC's withdrawal from Uvira town. [25] Washington also imposed sanctions on key Rwandan leaders on 2 March 2026 after the AFC and RDF continued advancing in South Kivu despite the US-led December peace agreement. [26] Yet this pressure largely focuses on Rwandan leaders while overlooking the broader coalitions of armed groups carrying out violence in South Kivu.

Over the next year, any viable peace process will need to account for the interests of these broader coalitions by including representatives from the myriad armed groups in discussions and ensuring their interests are considered to avoid slipping back into armed conflict.

Visuals produced by Christian Jaffe.

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