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PROTECTION BRIEF

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

FEBRUARY 2025



Lushagala IDP site before the fighting in eastern DRC. Following the conflict, destruction and dismantling of IDP sites, have forced many to leave IDP sites. © UNHCR/Guerchom Ndebo

Operational Context in North and South Kivu

From January 2025, clashes between the March 23 Movement (M23), the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) and other armed groups have intensified in North and South Kivu. This escalation has rapidly deteriorated the security and humanitarian situation, leading M23 to take over several strategic towns including Minova, Sake, and Goma, the capital of North Kivu. This triggered further mass displacement, with many families and communities experiencing multiple displacements.

For nearly a week of fighting, which started on 26 January 2025, Goma experienced a total blackout, with no access to running water, electricity, nor the internet, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. As the conflict intensified, various actors, including community members and internally displaced persons (IDPs), dismantled portions of existing IDP sites. Significant damage to public infrastructure was also reported in and around Goma, hospitals and health centres. Several warehouses of humanitarian organizations were looted by armed actors, as well as by some civilians taking advantage of the chaos.

The situation in early February remains tense. The cease-fire declared at the extraordinary summit of the East and Southern African communities has calmed the level of fighting in South Kivu. In Goma some shops and businesses have started to reopen, although it remains fragile and volatile. Now established in Goma, the political wing of M23, the Congo River Alliance (AFC), are consolidating their control over the city. AFC/M23 has called on displaced people to return to their home areas.

A core driver of this conflict is the control over the rich mining resources of eastern DRC, such as gold, tin, and coltan, which are vital to the global supply chain. Minova, for instance, plays a crucial role in supplying Goma through its port on Lake Kivu. The fighting also connects to a decades-long ethnic conflict. Before this conflict, more than 21 million people already needed humanitarian aid, with 6.7 million people internally displaced in the DRC, including 4.6 million in South and North Kivu.

Protection risks

Bombardment of Civilian Infrastructure

Intense hostilities around Goma resulted in at least 2,900 deaths which included significant civilian casualties. Belligerents used heavy weapons, bombs, and long-range projectiles in densely populated areas, which included at least eight IDP sites. Thirteen IDPs in Rusayo site were killed immediately when a shell fell on their shelters. Fighting across many neighborhoods left residents trapped without access to water, electricity, nor the internet.

The Provincial Health Division of North Kivu and the WHO reported 3,000 injured persons between 25-30 January 2025 in Goma and the Nyiragongo territory and records injuries inflicted on civilians by bombardment. Compounding the ongoing risks to civilians, explosive remnants of war are reportedly abandoned across several neighborhoods in Goma posing a significant threat to civilian population. These unexploded devices, scattered in inhabited areas, increase the risk of fatal accidents, especially for children who might handle them

accidentally. Without a prompt demining and securing operation, these explosives will continue to endanger the population and hinder the resumption of daily activities.¹

Attacks on Civilians Including Sexual Violence

Summary executions, arbitrary arrest and kidnapping have been recorded in recent weeks in both provinces. Civilians in the zones on the margins of armed clashes in South Kivu have reported sexual violence, flogging, widespread looting of homes and shops and extortion at the hands of a variety of armed actors. In North Kivu, civilians in both Rutshuru and Lubero territories report targeted executions and reprisal against civilian populations who are perceived to be affiliated with one armed group or another.² Reports also indicate attempts at arbitrary arrests and intimidation directed at members of civil society organizations and human rights defenders in Goma.³

Local women's organizations who partner with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Protection Cluster have reported widespread sexual violence, forced displacement.⁴ At least 165 women experienced sexual violence on 27 January, as prisoners escaped from the Muzenze prison in Goma.⁵ An additional 45 cases of child sexual violence were referred to UNICEF.⁶ In South Kivu, 55 per cent of the civil society organizations that provide medical and psychosocial assistance to sexual assault survivors have reported that the insecurity due to skirmishes has inhibited them from delivering critical services to survivors in recent weeks. Survivors of other forms of human rights abuses are also facing difficulties accessing assistance. The increased displacement and resource scarcity, added to pre-existing inequalities, exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls, exposing them to sexual violence and abuse.

Destruction and Looting of IDP Sites

In early February, the IDP communities in Minova were given a deadline to leave humanitarian sites, including tented settlements, schools, and churches. By 4 February, 22 collective centers had been emptied and 7 IDP sites destroyed. Reports suggest that the IDPs were encouraged or sensitized to leave their sites and return to their areas of origin, despite the lack of guaranteed security and essential services.

Around Goma, IDP sites emptied during bombardment, with IDPs seeking shelter in homes, schools, and churches. Opportunistic looting occurred at some sites during this time. As of February 3, at least five IDP sites—*Buhimba*, *Bulengo*, *Rego*, *8eme CEPAC*, and *Lac Vert*—were re-occupied at over 70 per cent. Meanwhile, five other IDP sites—*Lushagala*, *Lwashi*, *Rusayo 1*, *Rusayo 2 Extension*, and *Kashaka*—had an occupation rate of around 50 per cent.

In a January 30 press conference, AFC urged all displaced persons around Goma to return

¹ UNHCR's Weekly Protection Monitoring Report for North Kivu

² UNHCR's Weekly Protection Monitoring Report for North Kivu

³ <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20250129-dr-congo-and-rwanda-leaders-in-crisis-talks-as-m23-rebels-on-brink-of-seizing-goma>

⁴ Press briefing by UN Women on the situation of women and girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo

⁵ UN Special Representative condemns the renewed offensive by the M23 with the support of the Rwandan Defence Force and expresses grave concern about the heightened risk and emerging reports of conflict-related sexual violence in Eastern DR Congo

⁶ UNICEF DR Congo Humanitarian Flash Report No. 3 (Upsurge violence in North and South Kivu), 01 February 2025

to their home areas. During the week of 10 February 2025, they followed up with specific instructions to close certain IDP sites by 12 February 2025.

Discussions with displaced people in both provinces suggest that some IDPs have returned to their villages of origin, paying for vehicle or motorcycle transport themselves, while others remain with host families, collective centers, and IDP sites.⁷ Those who are hesitant to return list a variety of factors, from the need for assistance with transportation to their home villages to knowledge that their homes and fields contain unexploded ordinance or were destroyed during previous rounds of armed clashes. Limited access to basic services, such as schools, healthcare centers, and water points, further complicate the possibility of returning.⁸

Key Elements of the Protection Response

Although safe access to some vulnerable communities has improved recently, humanitarian workers still face security restrictions limiting their access to IDP sites and collective centers. Despite these challenges, UNHCR, as both the co-lead and operational partner of the Protection Cluster, continues to provide services on the ground. Activities currently being resumed include:

- Supporting civilian and community-based protection mechanisms, including structures such as refugee and IDP committees, Local Peace and Development Committees (CLPD), and Civil Defense.
- Monitoring the evolving protection situation for civilians.
- Conducting inter-agency assessments of IDP sites in Goma and surrounding areas to assess the current situation and inform the response strategy.
- Documenting population movements and mapping localities where IDPs have spontaneously returned.
- Providing emergency assistance to survivors of sexual violence (psychosocial first-aid, PEP kits) and prevention programming.
- Emergency shelter and life-saving basic subsistence assistance

⁷ UNHCR's Weekly Protection Monitoring Report for North Kivu

⁸ UNHCR/Intersos Protection Analysis, 2 February 2025

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