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Ensuring Women's Protection Amid Rising Conflict in Eastern DRC

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About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.

Featured Image: A woman displaced by the conflict in eastern DRC holds her daughter in the Kanyaruchinya IDP camp. Her daughter was born in the camp. Photo by Moses Sawasawa for Refugees International.

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Executive Summary

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and especially the eastern part of the country, has endured decades of conflict, pitting government forces against rebel groups. The latest cycle of conflict between the government forces and M23 rebels has pushed about **1 million** people to Goma—the capital and the largest city of the North Kivu Province. They are hosted in overcrowded camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) without adequate food, clean water, sanitation, healthcare, or education. Women have borne the brunt of the conflict, with belligerents accused of using sexual violence as a weapon of war. Due to many factors, including significant cuts in food assistance, gender-based violence (GBV) cases have increased five-fold over the last year, and M23 has encircled Goma—a humanitarian hub. The risk of Goma falling to Rwanda-backed M23, and the planned withdrawal of a 25-year-long UN peacekeeping mission at the end of April, could have devastating consequences for the safety of people throughout the region. The situation is deteriorating quickly due to decreased humanitarian funding and inadequate coordination across various humanitarian clusters. Women and girls face the greatest protection risks.

The departure of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) will embolden rebels like M23 because the Congolese authorities have proven they are ill-suited to maintain security once MONUSCO departs adequately. The Congolese security forces have a long history of egregious human rights violations. Against such a background and fluid security situation, closing the UN peacekeeping mission without sustainably addressing the underlying drivers of fragility and conflict could lead to more intercommunal conflict and a more profound humanitarian crisis.

Influential entities, including the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), together with the UN Security Council, France, and the United States, should embark on a robust diplomatic and political process to halt M23's Goma takeover and find a sustainable political solution to the protracted humanitarian crisis. The Nairobi and Luanda Processes need to be revitalized with support from the UN Security Council, which should use all its powers, including sanctions on individuals and countries destabilizing the DRC, and extend MONUSCO's term in consultation with the DRC government.

In the meantime, donors should increase funding for the DRC's Humanitarian Response Plan, especially for programs addressing GBV. Humanitarian actors should prioritize cluster coordination to address displacement holistically, given the linkages between the lack of humanitarian aid and the resurgence of GBV cases.

The DRC's protracted crisis induces an understandable fatigue among aid actors and donors. However, ignoring the DRC crisis at this critical stage will create a far more dire protection crisis.

Recommendations

To DRC Authorities:

- Agree to postpone the planned phased departure of the UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO) considering the deteriorating security situation in the country's east, particularly Goma.
- Fully implement Congolese laws, including the amended Congolese Penal Code, Law on Parity 2015, and revised Family Code 2016. These laws empower women and prevent gender discrimination, especially regarding land ownership and access.
- Increase the police presence in and around the camps in coordination with humanitarian actors, especially in areas where women commonly collect firewood.
- Allocate more of the national budget to the Ministry of Gender, Family and Children for GBV mitigation and response activities. Include dedicated HLP funding for coordination and sex-disaggregated data collection.

To UN Agencies:

- The Humanitarian Country Team should systematically include Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) issues in key documents like the yearly Humanitarian Needs Overview and the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for the DRC.
- UN agencies, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), should continue to work with the DRC government to negotiate access to more land for IDPs to settle near Goma.
- The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Secretariat should conduct an Operational Peer Review as outlined in the IASC guidelines post Scale-Up to evaluate and improve the cluster system and the coordination of the humanitarian response. When the review is complete, it should share the results and findings.

To UN Member States:

- The UN Security Council and MONUSCO Troop-Contributing Countries should work with the DRC government to extend the mandate of MONUSCO and postpone its planned withdrawal.

- The UN Security Council—especially the United States and the DRC penholder, France—should pressure the Congolese government, M23, and supporting governments to adhere to the Nairobi and Luanda processes. They should cooperate with the regional blocs, the East African Community (EAC), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). In the immediate term, they should embark on a robust diplomatic and political process to halt M23’s Goma takeover.
- The UN Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Informal Experts Group (IEG) should visit the region to highlight the deteriorating situation for women and girls.
- The Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict should continue to denounce the situation of women and girls in the DRC.

To Humanitarian Actors:

- Prioritize the establishment of Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) in all the IDP camps and ensure that they have psychosocial and livelihood support and referrals for medical assistance.
- Provide consistent and adequate cash and food assistance to IDPs, integrating GBV prevention and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) referral mechanisms into distributing food and non-food items (NFIs).
- Members of humanitarian coordination mechanisms like the UN cluster system should support an IASC-led Operational Peer Review to enhance coordination, communication, and data sharing across sectors. Request funding earmarked for these coordination activities.

To Donors:

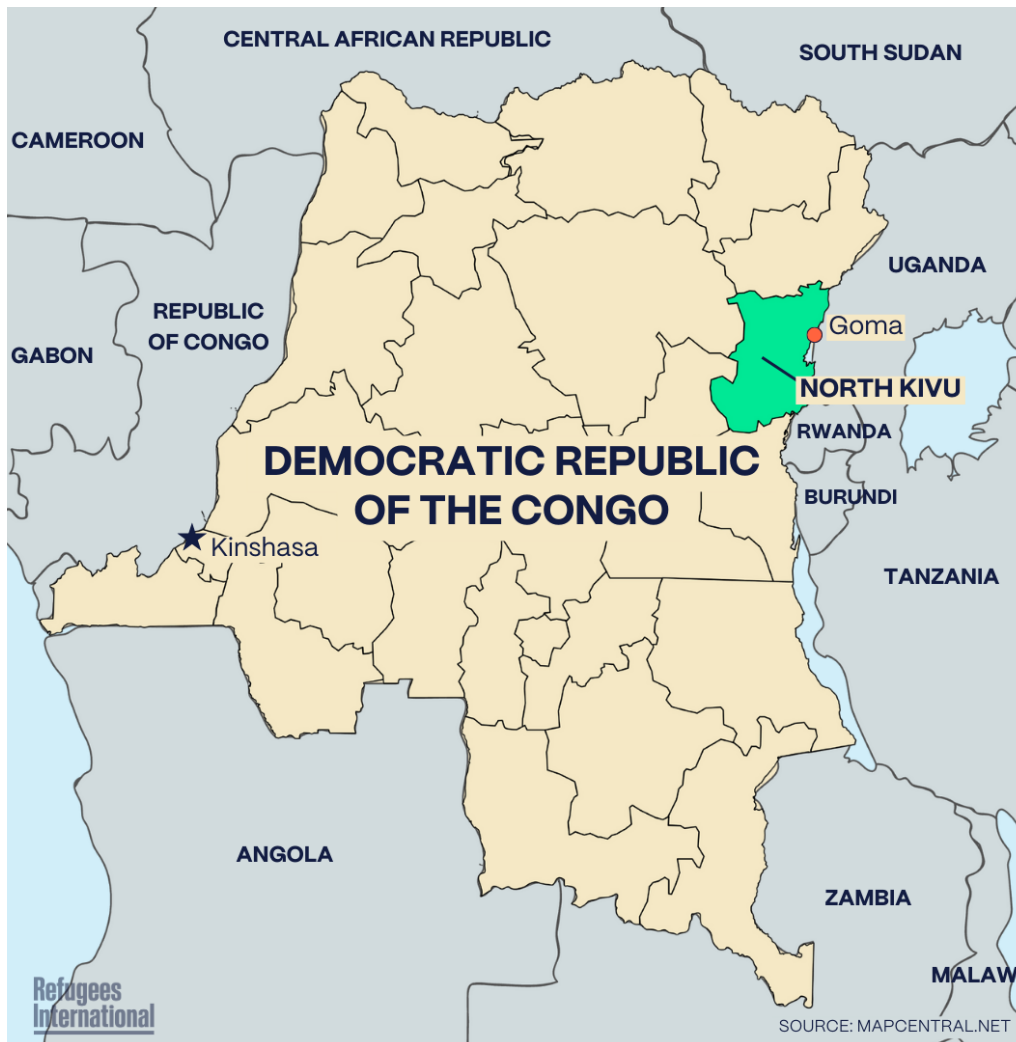
- Increase funding for DRC’s Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) given the rapidly deteriorating situation, and prioritize GBV-related food assistance and protection activities.
- Fund the coordination, data collection, and strengthening of Housing Land and Property rights to enhance women’s access to land tenure and thereby reduce their exposure to GBV.
- Ensure that funding to local partners in IDP camps in the DRC is subjected to HLP due diligence and links to the Water, Sanitation, and Health (WASH) and Shelter clusters.

- Provide funding to UN agencies and NGOs specifically for transporting GBV survivors from rural areas to medical facilities and, when possible, legal services.
- Fund local organizations to set up livelihood trainings, create more livelihood opportunities, and provide cash to set up small businesses or find other ways to use their livelihood skills.
- Prepare for the possibility of M23 advancing toward Goma by ensuring that funding is flexible and recipients can modify the purpose of and timeframe in which they use the financial support.

Research Methodology

A team from Refugees International traveled to Goma, eastern DRC, in January 2024. The team interviewed IDPs in Bulengo and Kanyaruchinya camps, focusing on women and adolescent girls, particularly GBV survivors and people with disabilities.

The team also interviewed journalists, leaders of community-based organizations, and senior staff of local NGOs, international NGOs, UN agencies, and donor governments. They supplemented these in-person interviews with remote interviews.



Conflict in the DRC

History of the Conflict

The ongoing deterioration of security in Eastern Congo has its roots in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwanda genocide. Extreme Hutu militants seized the country and killed about 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in the genocide before being defeated by Tutsi-aligned RPF militia led by current Rwandan president Paul Kagame. The RPF victory led to at least 2 million Hutus seeking refuge in the east of the DRC,¹ including those who were génocidaires. Some of these Hutus who fled later formed the Federation for Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) movement. They were present in eastern DRC and included senior members of the Rwandan government who oversaw and directed the 1994 genocide.

Rwanda regarded the FDLR's presence and Congolese President Mobutu's tolerance of them as existential security threats. In 1996, Rwanda and Uganda invaded the DRC. The Alliances of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL) captured Kinshasa, overthrew President Mobutu in May 1997, and installed Laurent Kabila as the DRC's president.

Kabila fell out quickly with his key backer, Rwanda, over measures Kabila took to reduce Rwanda's [undue influence](#) over the affairs of Congo. This included Rwanda's military presence in eastern DRC. That prompted Congo's Second War from 1998 to 2003, involving seven² regional militaries and various rebel groups. The conflict is estimated to have led to the deaths of [5.4 million people](#). Even following the signing of peace agreements and holding elections in 2006, the DRC has continued to be mired in vicious cycles of violence and mass displacement. This is especially true of North and South Kivu. The combination of lucrative natural resources, a weak central government, and the presence of more than 120 militias with mixed allegiance to predatory neighbors like Rwanda continues to breed instability in eastern DRC.

The most potent militant non-state actor is M23. M23 is a product of a failed negotiation between the National Congress of the Defense of the People (CNDP), another armed group, and the Congolese government on [March 23](#), 2009. M23 came to prominence in 2012 when it last seized Goma. M23 professes to defend the interests of Congolese Tutsis and alleges that the Congolese government does not protect Tutsis from Hutu militias within the country. While the government of Rwanda continues to [deny](#) its involvement, it is [widely acknowledged](#) that Rwanda is [backing the M23](#),

¹ Communities in the eastern DRC-Rwanda border share the same linguistic and cultural heritages. Rwanda principally justifies its intervention in eastern DRC on two grounds: one, the remnant of the former Rwandan government poses an existential threat to Rwanda, and 2) to protect the Congolese Tutsi communities living in eastern DRC marginalized by the DRC government.

² Countries involved in the war include Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Chad supporting Kabila's government against Uganda and Rwanda.

supporting the group financially, providing weapons, and, in some cases, even supplying troops.

After about five years of being relatively dormant, M23 rebels resurfaced in 2022, more potent than ever. Mathias Gillman, the head of the UN stabilization mission in the DRC at the time, noted, “The M23 behaves more and more like a conventional army and benefits from equipment that is much more sophisticated than in the past.” By mid-2023, M23 gained control over large parts of North Kivu. Government forces have tried to repulse them with limited success. One humanitarian responder who has worked in the DRC for decades told the Refugees International team, “The cycle of violence keeps happening, and each one is worse than the last.”

The latest round of conflict has displaced at least 5.6 million people in an area already experiencing extreme poverty. There are at least 1.7 million IDPs in North Kivu alone. As in the first two Congo wars and the subsequent cycles of violence, sexual violence is a salient characteristic of this renewed fighting.

During the first week of February 2024, M23 rebels launched a major offensive, clashing with government forces in Sake town in the Masisi region. When this report was published, M23 controlled the entire area around Sake, while government forces retained control of the town. This fighting displaced at least 135,000 people in just a few days, and by mid-February 2024, 70 percent of the residents of Sake had fled, adding to the 500,000 IDPs already in the Goma area. As of March 2024, at least 230,000 people had fled in the previous month, resulting in almost 1 million IDPs in and around Goma.



For two years, fighting between the DRC government forces and the M23 has caused a massive displacement of the population to Goma, where they live in IDP camps. Photo by Moses Sawasawa for Refugees International.

GBV in the DRC

One of the most pronounced components of the conflict in eastern DRC is gender-based violence (GBV). While GBV has always been a feature of conflict in the DRC, the level of reported sexual violence has skyrocketed in the last two years in the eastern part of the country.³ The planned withdrawal of MONUSCO and the potential fall of Goma to M23 threaten to escalate GBV risks dramatically further.

GBV Rising Dramatically

From 2021 to 2022, there was a [91 percent](#) rise in GBV reports in North Kivu. In 2023, the numbers continued to rise. According to the UN's Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), from May to August 2023, at least [46,000](#) GBV cases were reported in North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri. Doctors Without Borders reported upwards of [90,000](#) cases over the entire year. In just two months in 2023, more than 10,000 women and girls in North Kivu sought aid following incidents of GBV. One NGO told the Refugees International team that these numbers represent a *five-fold* increase from the previous year. More than [two-thirds](#) of these reports were rape, and armed strangers perpetrated a majority of the rapes. The International Rescue Committee DRC Country Director [explained](#), "Eastern DRC has become one of the most dangerous places in the world for women and children. They are now facing a protection crisis, at a level not seen before, where GBV is happening all the time."

The Refugees International team spoke to dozens of GBV survivors in the IDP camps near Goma, including adolescent girls and women in their seventies. They all told Refugees International stories of brutal sexual violence. Many women told the team that they were raped when militias—notably M23—came to their villages. They were also raped when fleeing their homes, while living in IDP camps, and, most commonly, while outside the IDP sites collecting firewood.

Many women reported to the Refugees International team that they had been raped more than once. Virtually all the women Refugees International talked to said the perpetrators were rebel soldiers, members of a militia, or military personnel. As one INGO country director remarked to the Refugees International team, "GBV is not new here. Rape is not new here. What is new is the extent of the rape and the fact that it has somehow become commonplace."

Interviews with survivors and aid actors suggest that these assaults are not ethnically motivated. Instead, as one doctor who treats survivors of rape told Refugees International, "They are territorially motivated. They are to humiliate and dominate,

³ An increase in reported cases does not always mean an increase in actual cases. However, the context (increased conflict and limited humanitarian assistance) and interviews with IDPs and service providers indicate that the increase in reported cases means a significant increase in actual cases.

Victoria's Story

Victoria* has been living in Bulengo camp for more than a year. She fled the M23 who attacked her village and took control of the land she used to farm together with her husband. The rebels killed her husband in front of her, and she fled with her daughter, son-in-law, and their two children—her grandchildren. It was a long, arduous journey for her on foot from their farmland in the Masisi region to Bulengo IDP camp. Victoria is 55-years-old and suffers from some medical problems including arthritis.

When they arrived in the camp, Victoria was shocked to see how crowded it was and that there was no room for them to even set up a tarp to sleep under. Her son-in-law finally found them a small patch of land to put up a makeshift shelter that did not even have enough space where they could all lie down at night. Victoria's daughter started leaving the camp to collect firewood to sell for food while Victoria watched her young grandchildren. When her daughter came home one day and explained she had been raped, her daughter's husband left the family entirely. No one knows where he went.

Victoria then started going to collect the firewood herself, but in October 2023, she too was raped by armed men in the forest. She told Refugees International, "I am an old woman. Why would anyone want to attack me? Why would they rape me? This war is senseless.

* Name has been changed to protect the identity of the survivor.

to show the women who are in charge in the area.” A woman leading a local NGO told Refugees International, “If you want to destroy a society, you target the moms, target the women.”

Another form of GBV prevalent in displaced communities in North Kivu is survival sex. Humanitarian assistance is limited, and livelihood opportunities are virtually nonexistent in the IDP camps. The lack of assistance has led women and girls to resort to negative coping mechanisms, including survival sex. The latest mapping conducted at the beginning of 2023 identified [145 brothels](#), at least half of which are in IDP sites. Many of these brothels employ children, which is not only an example of GBV but also sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). One aid organization reported to the Refugees International team that women and girls are selling their bodies for as little as \$0.20.

Causes of GBV

Three main factors are driving the significant uptick in GBV. First, the conflict has [intensified](#) in the last year and a half. As the conflict grows, so too does the number of displaced people and the number of men with weapons. Much of the rising GBV in eastern DRC is conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), in which armed men attack women and exert dominance over them. This is often part of a deliberate goal to control the region and instill fear in the local populations.

Second, there needs to be more humanitarian assistance, especially food and livelihood support. UN agencies, INGOs, local NGOs, and IDPs all identified the lack of food and livelihood opportunities as central to the spike in GBV. According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), [23.4 million](#) people are experiencing crisis and emergency levels of food insecurity, including [5.4 million](#) people in the three eastern provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. DRC is on par with Sudan as having the [largest number](#) of food insecure people in the world, with one in four Congolese not having enough to eat. For IDPs, a lack of food is even more pronounced.

Every IDP woman Refugees International spoke to commented that not having enough food was her biggest problem. They all said that if they had food and in some cases fuel, they would not need to leave the camp. This would significantly reduce their risk of being raped. Food distributions from the World Food Program (WFP) and other partners in the Food Security Cluster are limited; in some camps, they are even nonexistent. In 2023, resource gaps forced WFP to limit their services to provide assistance to only [2.8 of the 5.4 million people in need](#) in eastern DRC, likely contributing to the pronounced increase in GBV. WFP is the largest agency providing food assistance in the DRC. In February 2024, WFP’s deputy country director for the DRC [explained](#) that, due to a lack of funding, the UN food agency had recently instituted a policy of “extreme prioritization.” Under the policy, WFP provides rations for the worst affected people for six months but cannot provide food assistance to



A woman cooks in the Kanyaruchinya IDP camp with some firewood she gathered for fuel outside of the camp. She has been there for more than a year. Photo by Moses Sawasawa for Refugees International.

anyone else. WFP determines who receives these rations through their Vulnerability Assessment Team, which employs a variety of tools to assess people's vulnerability and target those most in need.

With limited food distribution, women need money to buy food. Most of the women Refugees International talked to walked four to five hours each way to collect firewood. They use some of the firewood for fuel. They sell the rest for money to buy food and other necessities. One woman told Refugees International, "If we don't have food or money, what else can we do? We have to collect firewood—[right now] it is our only way of getting fuel and money for food. So, we have to decide, do we feed our children and get raped in the bush, or stay in the camp and starve?" Based on Refugees International's interviews, collecting firewood several hours away from the camps is where most of the women were raped and continue to be assaulted. Women told the Refugees International team that they generally trust the Congolese police and they would be safer if there were more police manning the areas outside of the camps. The Congolese authorities should bolster their police presence in areas where armed men frequently attack IDPs.



A woman and her daughter who fled toward Goma at the end of 2023. They live on the side of the road to Sake in an informal IDP camp. Photo by Devon Cone for Refugees International.

Short of the conflict ending, allowing women to remain in the camps is the best way to improve their safety. When Refugees International asked one survivor what could be done for her to feel safer, she responded, “The only thing that will make me feel safer is if we get food, so we don’t have to leave the camp. We are starving here, and we have no choice. We have to get the firewood to get the food.

Cash assistance can serve as part of the solution. All the IDPs Refugees International interviewed preferred cash to in-kind food assistance if they had the choice.

Moreover, [research](#) has shown that usually, cash assistance is a more cost-effective modality for IDPs in the DRC than vouchers for food. The country director of an INGO observed that if donors allocated something like \$50 million only for cash transfers, that “a lot of things would improve.” However, in-kind food assistance versus cash based transfers (CBT) is complicated in the current context of the DRC given the functionality of markets and the availability of food commodities. Early on in the resurgence of this conflict, it was difficult to get in-kind food assistance to the country. Therefore, humanitarian organizations primarily provided cash. Now, M23’s encroachment on Goma has disrupted markets so that food prices have rapidly increased. This is why many organizations, including WFP, prefer in-kind food distributions over CBT. Whether it be in-kind food commodities or CBT or a mixture of both, donors need to increase funding to the Food Security Cluster in eastern DRC so that IDPs have enough food. If IDPs have more food, their risk of rape will decrease.

Third, a lack of adequate shelter and land for IDPs has also contributed to a rise in GBV. The Refugees International team spent several days in multiple IDP camp sites—both official and informal—and in all of them, displaced people were living in squalid conditions. They stayed under small tarps with many children and had no room to maneuver or cook, let alone sleep. As more IDPs arrive closer to Goma, there is even less land and materials available for IDPs to set up these makeshift shelters. These conditions mean that women and girls are living without privacy or security. Furthermore, the number of female-headed households is [increasing](#), and they are at particular risk. In one camp, aid workers told the Refugees International team that 60 percent of the women were without husbands. A huge number of IDPs also arrived just before the rainy season. They did not have shelter, compelling many women to shelter on the tents of strangers. This led to an increase in rapes within the camps. UN agencies, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), should continue to work with the DRC government to negotiate access to more land for IDPs. This is especially critical as new waves of people arrive in Goma as the conflict escalates in the region.

GBV Programming

Service Provision

GBV survivors need a mix of medical, psychosocial, livelihood, and legal support. Some forms of medicine are available. IDP women told Refugees International that they almost always get “the pill”—or the Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) kit—after they have been raped to prevent contracting HIV. The accessibility to this critical medical care post-assault is encouraging. But, as they told Refugees International, the problem is assistance. When they are raped, they only get this pill, and then they have to go back to where the rape occurred because they still need to collect firewood to sell for food. They continue to feel unsafe outside the camps.

Inside many of the IDP camps, humanitarian organizations have established Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS). WGSS are used as an entry point for women and girls to report protection issues including GBV incidents, receive services or referrals, express their needs, and engage in economic empowerment activities through vocational training. The WGSS also enable them to recreate protection mechanisms they have lost during displacement, such as sisterhood or sense of belonging. The Refugees International team visited a WGSS and was impressed with the camaraderie between the women and the community ownership of the space. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) aims to have a WGSS in each of the more than 20 IDP camp sites around Goma. This should be an urgent priority.

INGOs and donors should also partner with local organizations to set up livelihood training and programs to increase livelihood opportunities and seed money for micro-enterprises. Local organizations know the communities best and what livelihood opportunities will succeed. For example, in one camp, the Refugees International team observed a local NGO facilitating training led by one survivor, teaching other survivors how to make bags and baskets. One woman told Refugees International in Bulengo, “There is a Safe Space in this camp, there are trainings. The sensitization work and the trainings are helpful for us, they are working. The problem is, there is no money to use these skills to prevent rape.” The skills women are learning are helpful but must be paired with funds to help the women—in the case of the women learning to make bags and baskets—buy materials so that they can make the goods and sell them.

Funding and Coordination

Three points were evident from Refugees International’s conversations with service providers in the DRC. One was that the service providers know how to address GBV;

Grace's Story

30-year-old Grace* fled M23 attacks in Kichanga with her husband and five children in May 2023. She got separated from her husband early in their journey, and she arrived in Bulengo alone with her children after having all her possessions stolen by militias en route. She received no assistance for four months until the World Food Program (WFP) began distributing some food in October 2023. But the food is not enough. She also needs fuel to cook it, so she walks five hours each way to collect firewood and sells it to buy more food for her family. Because the area to collect firewood is so far away, she returns to the camp at 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. when it is dark.

One of the times she went to collect firewood outside the camp, a group of about ten men with machetes attacked her and the six other women she was with. They all ran in different directions, but so did the men. She explained to Refugees International that “even when we try to protect ourselves by being with other women when we leave the camp, there’s nothing we can do when the men have weapons. There are too many weapons here and too many people with bad intentions. This war has really made us suffer.” Three men caught up with Grace, and all raped her in turn. Five women, including Grace, returned to the camp, but two remained missing. Grace found the missing women the next day, unconscious from the sexual violence they experienced and the injuries they sustained. Soon after that, rebels with guns sexually assaulted Grace again when she left the camp with two other women to buy vegetables. Grace has been violently raped twice by six men since May 2023. When she returned to the camps and reported the rapes, aid organizations gave her a pill (the PEP kit) both times to prevent infection.

* Name has been changed to protect the identity of the survivor.



A woman in her mid-thirties with eight children prepares food for her family in the Kanyaruchinya IDP Camp. She fled fighting between government forces and M23 rebel soldiers at the beginning of 2022. Photo by Moses Sawasawa for Refugees International.

they know what to do. They just do not have the money to do it. Two, they need to coordinate better, recognizing the intersectionality of IDPs' needs and how they contribute to the risk of GBV. And three, the only way for GBV-related interventions to sustainably succeed is to cease the conflict and provide long-term support to government institutions.

Given the global surge of humanitarian crises, funding will likely remain in short supply in eastern DRC. Strengthening coordination can help ensure limited resources are used most effectively and economically. However, donors must also fund the Humanitarian Response Plan this year at a much higher level than the [40 percent](#) received in 2023. Given the unprecedented rates of GBV, preventing, mitigating, and responding to GBV must be a top priority for donor funding.

Effective coordination between all humanitarian sectors is crucial in addressing GBV. With scarce resources, services and aid delivery across sectors need to be integrated and duplication avoided. Refugees International heard of five organizations doing the same training for the same partners because of a lack of coordination and communication. This is unacceptable. It is just one example of many. Several NGOs told Refugees International that during the scale up of humanitarian aid in 2023, "coordination was a disaster." International staff arrived in eastern DRC on emergency, temporary assignments resulting in frequent turnover. This lack of continuity made coordination difficult. With the intensification of the conflict in early 2024, humanitarian actors should revisit the current humanitarian architecture and determine if it is fit for purpose. As part of this process, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Secretariat should conduct an Operational Peer Review as outlined in the [IASC guidelines](#) post Scale-Up and share those findings.

Indeed, as the conflict escalates and Goma is at risk of falling to M23, coordination becomes even more important. Yet, there is a lack of funding for humanitarian coordination. For example, the GBV Area of Responsibility (AoR),⁴ led by UNFPA, coordinates the collection of GBV incident data at points where survivors have accessed GBV services in collaboration with the Ministry of Gender, Family and Children. The GBV AoR needed \$54 million in 2023 to scale up their work in three provinces. The AoR received \$18 million. If donors recognize that GBV is a key characteristic of the DRC conflict and want to address the greatest needs, they need to prioritize coordination in their funding decisions.

Furthermore, addressing GBV requires long-term financing. The Congolese Ministry of Gender, Family and Children is a critical partner in preventing GBV and implementing sustainable responses. Yet, it has virtually no money. In 2022, the budget for social protection throughout the entire country of almost 100 million people, was less than [\\$5 billion](#).

⁴ The GBV AoR leads and coordinates the GBV-related activities and initiatives of the inter-agency cluster system in both natural disaster and conflict-related humanitarian contexts.

Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) Rights

Failing to include an analysis of HLP rights in the initial humanitarian assessment and delivery of humanitarian aid in the DRC disproportionately impacts women. HLP is linked to all aspects of humanitarian assistance. Secure and safe access to land and housing links to other rights, including, as [UNHCR lays out](#), “rights to food, shelter, water, sanitation, health, work, security, freedom of movement.” For women and girls, the lack of food and fuel in the camp management system forces them to seek these items outside the camp, making them susceptible to GBV and harmful coping mechanisms.

In the DRC, land remains the chief driver of conflict after the armed groups, especially in the east. [According to the Norwegian Refugee Council \(NRC\)](#), “In 2022, land disputes were the second major reason for population displacement in DRC, accounting for over half of all protection incidents in North Kivu province alone.”

As more and more IDPs arrive closer to Goma, UNHCR and the Protection Cluster are negotiating with the government and landowners to expand the sites housing and sheltering displaced people. However, the land is limited, leaving people in informal, unregulated areas without assistance. This increases protection risks for IDPs, especially the risk for women and girls of experiencing GBV. As a senior UN staff member of the protection cluster observed, “Land is the most important aspect of protection.”

Furthermore, a longtime aid worker in Goma told Refugees International, “It is different now than during other cycles of conflict because we are also in an economic crisis. During other cycles of violence, people still had access to their livelihoods or farms. This time, they have been displaced to places like Bulengo, closer to urban and peri-urban areas—there is no place for them, no room for them—it is private property.”

Considering the centrality of HLP in addressing displacement and its relevance to other services, donors include HLP in the assessment at the onset of a crisis and after displacement is over.

Peacekeeping

Role of UN Peacekeepers

The intractable nature of this conflict and its high toll on civilians warranted outside help in the form of a peacekeeping mission. The UN established its original peacekeeping mission in the DRC in November 1999. In 2010, the UN renamed the mission and re-established its mandate through [Resolution 1925](#). The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), as it has since been known, was authorized to use all necessary means to undertake its [mandate](#), related to “protection of civilians, humanitarian personnel and human rights defenders under imminent threat of physical violence and to support the Government of the DRC in its stabilization and peace consolidation efforts.”

However, MONUSCO has had limited success in protecting civilians. Until 2012, MONUSCO’s mandate was still principally civilian protection, but with limited ability to be proactive. A substantial change occurred after M23 took over [Goma in November 2012](#). As a response, UN Security Council Resolution [2098](#), authorized the deployment of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in March 2013. At the time, Rwandan-backed M23 rebels were threatening to assume control over all of eastern DRC. This brigade was successful in temporarily [defeating](#) the M23 rebels, thwarting their efforts to take over the entire region. The brigade was [made up](#) of SADC troops from South Africa, Tanzania, and Malawi. Furthermore, the involvement of MONUSCO peacekeepers in [sexual exploitation](#) hurt the mission’s standing and credibility.

MONUSCO’s Departure

In 2019, the UN Security Council, through [Resolution 2502](#), called for the Secretary-General and government of the DRC to develop a strategy to [transfer](#) the “tasks of MONUSCO to the Congolese authorities, the United Nations country team and other stakeholders.” The outbreak of COVID-19 slowed down the process. Still, in September 2021, MONUSCO and the DRC submitted a [Joint Plan](#) to the UN Security Council outlining withdrawal from the country, initiating a phased drawdown.

In December 2021, the UN Security Council extended MONUSCO’s mandate for 12 months but [called](#) for it to “work closely with the United Nations country team to identify ways to address gaps in capabilities to prepare for the Mission’s exit.” The Council also underscored the need to “[progressively transfer](#)” MONUSCO’s tasks. While transition process discussions between the United Nations and the Congolese authorities were progressing, in July 2022, anti-MONUSCO protests rocked various parts of the

country. The protestors called for MONUSCO's immediate departure.

Against the background of the protests, in September 2023, the Congolese foreign minister Christophe Lutundula demanded an expedited [MONUSCO](#) departure. During his address at the UN General Assembly on September 20, 2023, DRC President Felix Tshisekedi [called](#) for the “UN authorities to accelerate and move up the MONUSCO withdrawal deadline from December 2024 to December 2023.” He [argued](#), “It is time for his country to take full control of its destiny.” The government and popular anti-MONUSCO sentiments were palpable when Refugees International visited Goma in January 2024.

Congolese antipathy towards MONUSCO has been festering, primarily fueled by the deteriorating security situation in the country's east. However, politicians, especially at the national level, have made MONUSCO a scapegoat for the DRC's security problems. Some of MONUSCO's failures are structural—its mandate, the complex and complicated domestic conflict terrain, and a hostile regional dynamic. MONUSCO is not the only outfit that has failed in stemming the DRC's protracted insecurity. The regional blocs—the EAC and SADC—have sent militaries to address the security problems in the eastern DRC, but they have also faced challenges. Despite the MONUSCO drawdown predicated on protecting civilians, its departure, notwithstanding its weaknesses, will leave a significant protection gap in eastern DRC.

Regional Military Deployment

Alongside the political track of the Nairobi and Luanda processes,⁵ regional countries have also responded to the deteriorating security situation in the east of DRC by sending their militaries.

On July 22, 2022, the East African Community heads of state [authorized](#) the Regional Force (EACRF) deployment in Eastern DRC. In November of the same year, EACRF⁶ [deployed](#) to help “restore peace and stability in the eastern part of the country.” Among EACRF’s [mandates](#) was to conduct joint operations alongside the DRC’s military to defeat “armed groups elements in Eastern DRC.” The precise interpretation of the EACRF’s mandate has been a point of contention between the DRC’s government and the EAC. One of EACRF’s main [responsibilities](#) “was to oversee the withdrawal of armed groups – including M23 – from areas in eastern DRC.” However, the Congolese President, Felix Tshisekedi, wanted EACRF to take a more forward-leaning posture in engaging the rebel groups, specifically M23. The [president](#) “accused EACRF of ‘cohabiting’ with rebels after the regional troops declined to enter combat.” After over a year, the DRC government refused to extend EACRF’s mandate beyond its December 8, 2023, mandate, and by January 8, 2024, EACRF had eventually left the DRC territories.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC) replaced EACRF. The Extraordinary SADC Summit of Heads of State and Government held in Windhoek, Republic of Namibia, on May 8, 2023, [approved](#) the deployment of SAMIDRC⁷ “as a regional response to address the unstable and deteriorating security situation prevailing in the Eastern DRC.”

If Goma falls to Rwanda-backed M23 as it did in 2012, it will compound the current humanitarian crisis, which is already one of the [worst](#) protracted crises. Civilians, especially women and girls, will pay the price. To avoid that, in addition to sending their militaries, the regional countries should revitalize the Nairobi and Luanda processes to ensure the belligerents and countries supporting them will not continue to destabilize the eastern DRC. The DRC government should, in consultation with the UN Security Council, postpone MONUSCO’s departure, given the evolving security

⁵ The Nairobi process focuses on armed groups, and the Luanda process addresses the DRC-Rwanda political dimensions.

⁶ Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda were the Troops Contributing Countries to the EACRF.

⁷ The SADC countries that have contributed troops to the SAMIDRC are Malawi, South Africa, and Tanzania.

situation in the eastern part of the country.

Conclusion

As the conflict in eastern DRC escalates, the risk of displaced women and girls experiencing GBV will increase. Sexual violence rates, especially rape, are already alarmingly high. Funding for the humanitarian response is limited; therefore, to prevent and respond to GBV. Donors and humanitarian actors must prioritize coordination and ensure IDPs are receiving their basic needs, especially food. HLP rights should feature prominently in humanitarian response plans and activities, especially if IDPs are ever expected to return home.

In the meantime, MONUSCO has a vital role in working with the government to protect Goma from M23's advance toward the city. Despite its shortcomings, MONUSCO does provide some level of protection and stability. Given its longtime presence in the DRC, it is difficult to determine how much worse the situation might be if peacekeeping troops were not there.

However, the humanitarian community needs to be prepared for anything and recognize that Congolese women and girls continue to bear the brunt of this conflict. As a representative of a local NGO in Goma said, "Women definitely suffer the most. But GBV is just a symptom of the illness—the root cause, the illness itself is the conflict and violence."

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