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"I'D NEVER SEEN SO MANY BODIES"

WAR CRIMES BY THE ALLIED DEMOCRATIC FORCES IN THE EASTERN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Cover photo: *A woman who was struck with machetes by ADF fighters when they attacked her community poses for a portrait in 2021. © Brent Stirton / Getty Images*

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ACRONYMS

ADF	Allied Democratic Forces
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FARDC	*Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo
ICC	International Criminal Court
ISCAP	Islamic State's Central Africa Province
M23	March 23 Movement
MONUSCO	*Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation du Congo* United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo
NALU	National Army for the Liberation of Uganda
P-DDRCS	*Programme de Désarmement, Démobilisation, Relèvement Communautaire et Stabilisation* National Programme for Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Reintegration, and Stabilization
UNJHRO	UN Joint Human Rights Office
UPDF	Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces

MAP

The map above shows the four territories – highlighted in yellow – within North Kivu and Ituri provinces where Amnesty International documented abuses by the ADF.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

> **"What we have here is a *wilayah* [province] within the broader Islamic State."**
>
> ADF's leader, Musa Baluku, in a video posted online in late 2020.

On 8 September 2025, fighters belonging to the armed group known as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) discreetly mingled among mourners attending a wake in the village of Ntoyo, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Dressed in civilian clothes, they blended in until they suddenly started attacking people after being joined by camouflage-clad fighters. The late-night killing spree – during which the ADF fighters used hammers, axes, machetes and guns to kill their victims – lasted for hours amid an absence of security forces.

One witness, who ran away with two of his children, said he watched from hiding as the fighters killed his sister with an axe. Another witness described how fighters broke into her house and abducted her four daughters.

A third witness said the sound of gunshots awoke her and other family members, prompting them to flee their house to the bush. In the morning, she found the bodies of her parents. Her father had been shot while running, her mother struck by a hammer at the wake. Of the scene at the village the morning after the attack she said: "I'd never seen so many bodies."

More than 60 people were killed, making it one of the ADF's most horrific attacks in 2025, and a reminder of the brutality the group has inflicted on communities in North Kivu and Ituri provinces for years.

Amnesty International has documented the impact of the group's violence in the eastern DRC, specifically in North Kivu's Beni and Lubero territories, and Ituri's Irumu and Mambasa territories. ADF's horrific actions included attacks on civilians and objects protected under international humanitarian law; abductions and forced labour; recruitment and use of children; and specific abuses and crimes against women and girls, including forced marriage, forced pregnancy and various forms of sexual violence.

These abuses in the context of the ongoing non-international armed conflict amount to war crimes. Given that they were committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack against a civilian population, they amount to crimes against humanity.

Amnesty International undertook this research between October 2025 and February 2026, including a visit to North Kivu in November. In total, 71 people were interviewed, including 61 in-person interviews in the cities of Beni and Butembo and the towns of Oicha and Lume.

Of those interviewed, 45 were direct witnesses who survived attacks on communities and/or were abducted by the group for varying periods of time. Interviewees also included civil society members, military and police officials in governing positions in North Kivu, humanitarian actors including from the UN, and analysts who have tracked ADF's violence for years.

ORIGINS AND ISLAMIC STATE CONNECTION

The ADF originated in the 1990s in Uganda, as a merger of opposition groups, before taking refuge in Zaire (now the DRC). After regional dynamics changed, the group started targeting civilians in the eastern DRC. By

2014, large-scale attacks by the ADF in North Kivu's Beni territory prompted the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) to launch a military operation against the group, with support from the UN Mission for the Stabilization of Congo (MONUSCO).

In 2019, the Islamic State armed group officially recognized a pledge of allegiance by the ADF, and the latter ultimately became the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP). Since 2021, the Congolese military has been engaged in a large joint military response against the ADF, called Operation Shujaa, conducted alongside the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF).

Up until the renewed offensive and territorial expansion by the Rwanda-backed March 23 Movement (M23) in early 2025, the ADF had been consistently responsible for the largest number of killings, mainly of civilians, in the eastern DRC in recent years. ADF's violence is also responsible for a spiralling humanitarian crisis, including increased displacement and hunger in a region grappling with overlapping conflicts and emergencies.

ATTACKS ON VILLAGES AND TOWNS

While the ADF does attack security forces, their primary target in recent years has been civilians. Fighters deliberately attack civilians not only to restock food, medicines and other supplies, but also in retaliation for military operations. Experts maintain that the diversion of FARDC's troops – and international attention and resources – to focus on the conflict with M23 and Rwanda has allowed the ADF to capitalize on security gaps and expand its attacks.

Amnesty International documented eight ADF attacks in Ituri and North Kivu, including the above-mentioned massacre in Ntoyo. Witness testimonies indicated that security actors, including FARDC troops in nearby bases, did not always respond or took too long to arrive at the scene of attacks.

A woman in her 30s said that when the ADF raided Otmaber in Irumu on 12 July 2025, fighters shot her, her husband, and their 7-year-old son. "After shooting us, they went and proceeded to burning houses… [My son and] I crawled slowly into a house that wasn't burned and spent the night there," said the woman. She remained hospitalized for two months to recover from her wounds.

Her husband and son survived, but at least eight people were killed in that attack. "Even in the morning, [the military] didn't come. Everyone had to take care of themselves," the woman said. Two weeks later, the military was at the centre of civilians' anger once again after a major ADF attack on a church in the same territory in Komanda village left more than 40 worshippers killed.

ADF fighters consistently engage in pillaging. The group has also repeatedly attacked health facilities and raided them for supplies. One such attack documented by Amnesty International targeted a referral health centre in the village of Byambwe in November 2025. At least 17 civilians were killed, and four wards were set on fire in the sole healthcare facility in the area. An older person who escaped by crawling out of the facility said: "You couldn't stand; they shot at anything that moved."

ADF's violence has upended livelihoods and disrupted entire villages' economies. People have lost homes and belongings; fearful farmers have stayed away from their fields. The incessant attacks have also caused significant distress and trauma. Several witnesses said they experienced flashbacks and nightmares. "I have been consumed by fear… I don't even know fear of what," said a woman who survived being hit in the head with a machete, in an ADF attack that burned down her house with her 3-year-old daughter inside.

ABDUCTIONS AND FORCED LABOUR

The ADF has consistently carried out abductions over many years. Amnesty International documented 46 cases of abduction, including seven cases of abductions for ransom (also known as hostage-taking). Abductions triggered several other abuses and crimes, including forced labour; torture and other ill-treatment; sexual slavery; and at times, unlawful killings. Witnesses also said that abductees were killed in attacks by the FARDC and the UPDF when those militaries targeted ADF fighters.

The ADF has increasingly turned to abductions for ransom. Seven former hostages who were abducted in 2025 said their families paid amounts ranging between US$100 to US$10,000 to secure their release. A former hostage said it took her family one month to send the fighters US$1,000 through a mobile phone-based transfer, staggered over multiple payments. Another former hostage said his family had to both take a loan from a local financial institution and borrow from merchants in their area to pay US$10,000 in ransom money. "It will take me time to pay off [the debt]… Every month there is interest," he said months after his release.

Abductees were often forced to work, porter, and act as guides for the ADF. Fighters gave abductees very little food, made them walk for hours and days and carry heavy loads, all while subjecting them to insults

and beatings and killing those who showed signs of exhaustion. A former hostage, who was forced by fighters to porter for days in the bush, said he has been experiencing debilitating pain for months since his release, such that he can no longer farm. “The things they made us carry were too heavy, I have been struggling [since],” said the man who has eight children.

The ADF has long set up camps deep in the forest, with locations and sizes of the camps changing over the years. Former abductees who were held in captivity for months and years described being moved from smaller camps, predominantly made up of fighters who carry out attacks, to larger camps where the group’s leadership, their dependents, and many more abductees were present. Abductees in those camps – adults and children – were compelled to carry out various tasks or face death. This included fetching food and water, cooking, providing care for others, going into communities to collect information, picking up deliveries, mining and performing different tasks during attacks.

“They taught us how to kill with weapons and with blades… In the bush, you had to do what you were told. You cannot be weak. When they say, ‘cook’, you cook. When they say, ‘go fetch water’, you do that,” said a woman who escaped in late 2024 after more than two years in captivity.

Former abductees said they feared the wrath of suspicious community members and security forces. Ten former abductees said that when they encountered soldiers or civilians after emerging from the bush, they were taken into the custody of the Congolese military intelligence and detained for periods ranging between seven days to five months. Some former abductees who were caught by UPDF soldiers during operations in the eastern DRC also said they were transferred to military and other detention facilities in Uganda.

RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN

The ADF is listed by the UN among the armed actors in the DRC most responsible for recruitment and use of children. The group exploits children in various roles, including as fighters, porters, cooks and lookouts. Many former abductees and witnesses of attacks said they saw children believed to be as young as 10 participating in the group’s activities. Numerous witnesses also spoke of children they knew who were abducted and used by the ADF.

Amnesty International interviewed two formerly abducted children, plus three young people abducted when they were children, who were all used by the ADF for various purposes. A sixth case was documented of a boy who said he was abducted by fighters for the purpose of being used but managed to escape after a few days in captivity. The interviewees were aged 13-17 when they were abducted.

A young man, who was abducted when he was under 15 years old and remained in ADF captivity around two years, said: “They put me in a group in charge of looking for food… There were other boys and girls in the group… They preached Islam to us… When it was time to pray, I prayed with them. If you refused, they could kill you… We were not allowed to play.”

A girl who was abducted when she was under 15 said she was taken from her house alongside an adult family member, but only she ended up being confined in the group’s camps. “They started teaching us Arabic because they were Muslims. After the Arabic lessons they gave us fighting training. When we finished that training, we started taking part in some attacks,” she said. She added that her role was to carry looted items, and that while she didn’t kill people in the attacks she participated in over a year and a half, the group’s fighters “killed people before my eyes”.

The DRC has a long history of working on the issue of children associated with armed forces and armed groups. However, unlike other armed groups in the country, the ADF has not been open to official engagement.

Child protection actors have been left with a sizeable population of children associated with the ADF to place in transit centres and family-based care before unification with loved ones or placement with foster families. Furthermore, several challenges faced children formerly abducted by, or otherwise associated with, the group, including questionable detention practices, the dearth of specialized psycho-social support and gaps in reintegration programming. These children are victims of trafficking and must be treated accordingly.

SPECIFIC ABUSES AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Amnesty International interviewed five women and two girls who were abducted by the ADF and forced into “marriages”. The duration of their confinement ranged between 18 months to four years. These interviewees and others spoke of many more women and girls who were abducted and taken as “wives” in ADF camps.

Witnesses said “extra-marital” relations were not allowed and were cause for punishment. However, several interviewees mentioned incidents of sexual violence by ADF fighters towards women and girls outside of “marriage”.

Interviews indicate that the ADF gave "wives" – at times multiple ones – to fighters as a recruitment incentive, and that the practice is systematic in the group's camps. The women and girls were prohibited from exercising any agency whatsoever over decision-making pertaining to their bodies, including reproductive choices. They were subjected to extended periods of sexual and physical violence.

Women and girls described a shared experience of being forced to convert to Islam and subjected to indoctrination into the group's version of the religion. They were compelled to take on Arabic names and to cover their hair and bodies. The women and girls said they were explicitly told by women trainers and camp chiefs they had to accept being given "husbands" or face death; some were made to watch the public, grisly killings of others who refused orders.

A young woman who was abducted when she was a teenager recounted the exchange she had when she was taken to the camp's chief. "I said I'm still young. He asked how old I was and I said 16. He said, 'That is [old] enough; here we give girls as young as 12 husbands. Either you accept a husband or we kill you.'" She described repeated ill-treatment by her "husband", who at one point threatened that she would be "slaughtered" if she attempted to flee like two girls who tried to escape from the camp and were executed.

At least two of the women said they were separated from their children when they were abducted. One of them spent more than three years in the group's captivity; she said: "They saw milk coming from my breasts. They asked if I had a child, and I said yes. They asked where the child was and I said I had left him in [my town]… They told me, 'Forget that one, we will give you another one here.'"

Six of the seven women and girls who were taken as "wives" said they ended up pregnant as a result of the forced marriages. All but one gave birth, including one woman who had two children in the bush. Interviews indicated that these pregnancies were foreseen and planned for by the group, such that other abductees – and in some cases medical professionals – were assigned to deliver the babies, including by caesarean section, in the forests' harsh settings.

When the women and girls who were trafficked by the ADF finally came out of this life of sexual slavery and domestic servitude, primarily after military operations that targeted their camps, they remained shackled by suspicions and stigma. Those who came home with children described how their own families rejected their children. One woman said pressure by her in-laws to kill her two children who were born in the bush almost drove her to taking her own life.

Testimonies of the women and girls highlighted the prolonged impact of the group's violence and the hidden struggle of thousands of victims who need significant and multifaceted support and do not have it. Several interviewees said they faced severe economic challenges upon release from the group and could barely afford feeding themselves and their children, let alone securing access to medical services and specialized care. Meanwhile, humanitarian workers expressed deep concern over massive reductions in international assistance, which have had a particular impact on access to post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) kits, preventative HIV medication and treatment for sexually transmitted infections.

Even before the sweeping aid cutbacks, a national reparations framework, meant to support survivors of sexual violence, struggled to cater to the needs of the ever-expanding population of sexual violence survivors in the country. The reparations scheme has also been marred by allegations of corruption, further compounding barriers women and girls faced in the absence of comprehensive reintegration support.

CRIMES UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW

The acts committed by the ADF and documented by Amnesty International constitute numerous violations of international humanitarian law, many of which amount to war crimes.

Based on the documentation, the ADF is responsible for a myriad of war crimes, including the following: murder; intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population; attacking protected objects; pillaging; hostage-taking; torture or cruel treatment; and outrages upon personal dignity. The group is also responsible for the war crimes of child recruitment; rape; sexual slavery; and sexual violence.

ADF's attacks against the civilian population in North Kivu and Ituri are widespread in nature, as they have been committed across a large area and for years. They also demonstrate a methodical approach; that is, they are systematic. An organizational policy can be determined from public statements by ADF's leaders and inferred from the widespread and systematic nature of the acts. The above-mentioned prohibited acts therefore also amount to crimes against humanity, including of murder; imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty; enslavement; torture; rape; sexual slavery; forced pregnancy; and forced marriage as other inhumane acts.

THE WAY FORWARD

Congolese authorities have acknowledged gaps in responding to ADF's threat. The group indeed employs asymmetrical tactics, takes cover in a triple-canopy rainforest, relies on an expansive network of informants and has amassed advanced technological capabilities. Still, the state has a human rights obligation to protect civilians from ADF's pervasive attacks.

Authorities should strengthen mechanisms for protection of civilians, including by working with the UN and other partners, as well as with local communities, to improve and bring to scale early warning mechanisms and allow for rapid response ahead of attacks. A comprehensive approach to security, justice and accountability, and meaningful reintegration programming, are required to address the needs of communities and survivors and ensure successful reinsertion and long-lasting community healing.

The international community must support the Congolese state in fulfilling its obligations, including guaranteeing the safety of civilians and their properties and providing sustainable support to victims and survivors. The disregard in international policy and donor circles to ADF's expansive threat and crimes has been nothing short of shocking. Lessons should be drawn from previous failures to address crimes committed by the Islamic State and similar groups in other countries.

2. METHODOLOGY

This report focuses on violence against civilians by the armed group the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. It does not cover the group's cross-border actions in Uganda.

The report is based on research carried out between October 2025 and February 2026, including a visit to North Kivu province from 10 to 25 November 2025. On-the-ground interviews were conducted in the cities of Beni and Butembo and the towns of Oicha and Lume. Abuses and crimes against civilians were documented in the provinces of North Kivu (Beni and Lubero territories) and Ituri (Irumu and Mambasa territories).

Amnesty International set out to document abuses by the ADF with a focus on attacks that occurred in 2025 given the escalation of the group's violence during that year. Emblematic attacks and cases from before 2025 that show a historical pattern of abuses were also documented. For example, many abduction cases lasted for several years.

In total, Amnesty International interviewed 71 people, including 61 in-person interviews in North Kivu. The research included interviews with 45 direct witnesses of the group's violence: 16 men, 25 women and four children. In this report, "child" and "children" are used to refer to anyone under the age of 18, consistent with international law. The 45 witnesses included survivors of attacks on communities as well as former abductees taken for varying periods of time.

All interviews with survivors and witnesses were conducted individually in safe and private locations. Interviews were conducted in Swahili and French via interpretation into English.

Survivors and witnesses were identified through community networks and trusted civil society actors. Amnesty International informed interviewees about the nature and purpose of the research, as well as about how the information would be used. Oral consent was obtained in all cases. Interviewees were told they could end the interview at any time or take a break and could choose not to answer specific questions.

Amnesty International took precautions to try to avoid re-traumatization. As much as possible, Amnesty International's researcher let survivors and witnesses guide the discussion, and periodically asked them whether they wanted to continue, pausing when they exhibited visible signs of distress. The researcher also ensured interviews ended on more positive topics, and asked survivors what justice meant to them and their recommendations about what was needed to enable them to start to recover and heal.

In documenting sexual violence, Amnesty International's methodology was informed by international best practice guidance, including the Global Code of Conduct for Gathering and Using Information about Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (The Murad Code).

No incentive was offered for speaking. Amnesty International covered the expenses of transport and refreshments for the interviewees, many of whom had travelled long distances from violence-afflicted areas to meet the researcher.

Amnesty International also spoke with civil society members, military and police officials in governing positions in North Kivu, military judiciary and penitentiary officials, humanitarian actors including from the UN, and researchers and analysts who have tracked the group's activities for years. These interviews were conducted in English and French.

Amnesty International withheld the names and identifying details of the witnesses who were interviewed, as well as of the victims who died, to ensure confidentiality and safety from reprisals. Names of the victims, including lists the organization obtained of those who perished in largescale massacres, are on file with

Amnesty International. At times, the report also did not specify the gender of the interviewee to further minimize the chances of them being identified. The names of officials, aid workers and others who were interviewed were withheld for a variety of reasons, including their direct request, for security purposes, because they were not authorized to make public statements, or to ensure the ability to do their work without constraints.

Amnesty International's researcher reviewed reports by UN agencies, the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo established by the UN Security Council, international and local human rights and research groups, and reporting on the ADF's violence by local and international media. The organization also analysed satellite imagery to corroborate information obtained about attacks on communities.

In addition, Amnesty International reviewed online posts and videos by the ADF and the Islamic State armed group published on platforms tightly controlled by the Islamic State – including Amaq news agency and Al-Naba weekly newsletter – and known to denote strong evidence of affiliation. The posts included statements that were claims of responsibility by the ADF of some of the attacks documented in this report. Analysts who have studied the group and closely followed it for years have also referred to these online platforms in analysing the group's actions and attacks.

The ADF has taken on various names over the years. In this report, Amnesty International is using the name officially used by authorities, the UN and international governments. Witnesses and survivors at times used "rebels" to refer to members of the group, as well as "NALU", one of the group's older names. Amnesty International kept those references when used in quoted testimonies.

On 18 April 2026, Amnesty International wrote to the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) and the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF), presenting a summary of its findings and requesting information. No response had been received at the time of publication.

Amnesty International thanks everyone who took part in the research, including civil society actors and witnesses who shared their harrowing accounts. For some, this was at personal risk and in difficult circumstances.

3. BACKGROUND

The armed group officially known as the ADF has been carrying out attacks in the eastern DRC for years. The group's origin goes back to a mid-1990s union between several Ugandan anti-government movements, including the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU), which earned it the moniker ADF-NALU.[1] Pushed out by the Ugandan military, the group retreated to the DRC, or Zaire at the time, in the eastern region already awash with armed groups and rife with ethno-nationalist sentiments.[2]

Under the leadership of Jamil Mukulu, a hardline Islamist cleric, the nationalist NALU side of the group eroded and ADF's activities ultimately focused on eastern Congo amid a changing geopolitical landscape.[3] In late 2013, ADF began carrying out large-scale attacks against Congolese civilians in Beni territory, prompting the FARDC in 2014 to launch an operation, with support from the UN Mission for the Stabilization of Congo (MONUSCO).[4]

ISLAMIC STATE CONNECTION

After Mukulu fled eastern Congo and was arrested in Tanzania in 2015, the group came under the leadership of another Ugandan national, Musa Baluku.[5] The group took on the Arabic name *Madinat Al-Tawheed Wal Mujahedeen* (City of Monotheism and Holy Fighters) and began outwardly signalling broader ambitions and appealing to the Islamic State armed group, including through propaganda videos.[6]

In 2019, the ADF officially became part of the Islamic State.[7] It is now the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP).[8] The group is still referred to as the ADF by the government, the UN and the international and local communities.[9] The UN Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo has reported on the various forms of support the ADF receives from the Islamic State, including financial and technical assistance as well as overall guidance.[10]

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[1] Congressional Research Service, "The Allied Democratic Forces, an Islamic State Affiliate in the Democratic Republic of Congo", 1 September 2022, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12206; Sunguta West, "The Rise of ADF-NALU in Central Africa and Its Connections with al-Shabaab", 1 September 2015, Jamestown, Volume 13, Issue 1, https://tinyurl.com/4a97x9ku

[2] Congressional Research Service, "The Allied Democratic Forces, an Islamic State Affiliate in the Democratic Republic of Congo" (previously cited); Tara Candland and others, "The Rising Threat to Central Africa: The 2021 Transformation of the Islamic State's Congolese Branch", June 2022, CTC Sentinel, Volume 15, Issue 6, https://tinyurl.com/3xcw2dxr, p. 38; Halkano A. Wario, "Countering Daesh/ADF in Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda", March-April 2023, The Horn Bulletin, Volume 5, Issue 2, https://tinyurl.com/49mu2xzv, p.3.

[3] Sunguta West, "The Rise of ADF-NALU in Central Africa and Its Connections with al-Shabaab" (previously cited); Congressional Research Service, "The Allied Democratic Forces, an Islamic State Affiliate in the Democratic Republic of Congo" (previously cited); Halkano A. Wario, "Countering Daesh/ADF in Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda" (previously cited), p. 4.

[4] Andrew McGregor, "Congolese Forces Take the Offensive Against Uganda's ADF-NALU Militants", 20 March 2014, Jamestown, Volume 12, Issue 6, https://tinyurl.com/yv7858v9; Tara Candland and others, "The Rising Threat to Central Africa" (previously cited).

[5] Congressional Research Service, "The Allied Democratic Forces, an Islamic State Affiliate in the Democratic Republic of Congo" (previously cited); Tara Candland and others, "The Rising Threat to Central Africa" (previously cited).

[6] Tara Candland and others, "The Rising Threat to Central Africa" (previously cited); Jared Thompson, "Examining Extremism: Allied Democratic Forces", 29 July 2021, Center for Strategic and International Studies, https://tinyurl.com/mvt54pxp

[7] On the gradual connection between the ADF and the Islamic State armed group and the formal acknowledgement by the latter, see, for example, George Washington Program on Extremism, *The Islamic State in Congo*, 1 March 2021, https://tinyurl.com/3vrvk3db; Tara Candland and others, "The Rising Threat to Central Africa" (previously cited); Ryan O'Farrell and others, "Clerics in the Congo: Understanding the Ideology of the Islamic State in Central Africa", 11 April 2024, Hudson Institute, https://tinyurl.com/yx8yyp5f

[8] Initially, the ADF formed one part of the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP) alongside another affiliate in Mozambique. But the latter became its own *wilayah*, or province, under the Caliphate in 2022 and the ADF solely represented what is referred to as ISCAP in claims of responsibility and other communiques by the Islamic State. See, for example, Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Group of Experts), *Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 13 June 2023, UN Doc. S/2023/431, p. 64.

[9] This is also the name that appears on UN, regional and individual states' sanctions lists. See also Ryan O'Farrell and others, "Clerics in the Congo: Understanding the Ideology of the Islamic State in Central Africa" (previously cited).

[10] See, for example, Group of Experts, *Final report*, 13 June 2023 (previously cited), paras 14, 21, 26, 29-38 and p. 53-33, p. 64.

ADF's sustained campaign of violence has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the eastern DRC, including by causing more displacement of civilians. © Alexis Huguet / AFP via Getty Images

INCREASED ATTACKS ON CIVILIANS

In 2021, the group stepped up its campaign of violence to an unprecedented level, with massacres and other attacks claiming the lives of at least 1,275 civilians.[11] In March and April of that year, civil society groups mobilized mass protests across North Kivu against the killing of civilians by armed groups, including the ADF.[12] In May 2021, the Congolese government placed North Kivu and Ituri provinces under military rule, which continues today.[13]

The FARDC and MONUSCO attacked the group's camps in Mwalika, Beni territory, in September of that year.[14] In November 2021, the FARDC and its neighbouring country's military, the UPDF, launched a large joint military response, Operation Shujaa.[15]

Over the years, Operation Shujaa resulted in the deaths of a few key ADF leaders, led to the freedom of hundreds of abductees, and has degraded the ADF's operational capacity.[16] However, one of its effects has been pushing the group deeper west (as far as Tshopo province), effectively expanding the ADF's area of operations and therefore the number of impacted communities.[17] The military operation is ongoing.

Until the renewed offensive and territorial expansion by the Rwanda-backed March 23 Movement (M23) in early 2025,[18] the ADF had been consistently responsible for the largest number of killings, mainly of civilians, in recent years.[19] The group remained one of the deadliest armed actors in conflict-affected

[11] Tara Candland and others, "The Rising Threat to Central Africa" (previously cited), p. 39. By June 2022, the UN was reporting that more than 1,300 civilians were killed in ADF attacks since 2021. See, Group of Experts, *Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 14 June 2022, UN Doc. S/2022/479, para. 29.
[12] See, for example, Amnesty International, *DRC: Justice and Freedoms Under Siege in North-Kivu and Ituri* (Index: AFR 62/5495/2022), 10 May 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr62/5495/2022/en/
[13] Al Jazeera, "DRC declares 'state of siege' in violence-hit eastern provinces", 1 May 2021, https://tinyurl.com/ydknhum3; Reuters, "DR Congo declares state of siege over eastern bloodshed", 1 May 2021, https://tinyurl.com/hsnnr97t. See also Amnesty International, *DRC: Justice and Freedoms Under Siege in North-Kivu and Ituri* (previously cited).
[14] Tara Candland and others, "The Rising Threat to Central Africa" (previously cited), p. 41.
[15] See, for example, Congo Research Group and Ebuteli, *Uganda's Operation Shujaa in the DRC: Fighting the ADF or Securing Economic Interests,* 14 June 2022, https://tinyurl.com/54bpufx7. It took a triple suicide bombing in Kampala earlier in November 2021 to finally get the operation green-lighted after lengthy back and forth between Congo and Uganda. Tara Candland and others, "The Rising Threat to Central Africa" (previously cited), p. 41.
[16] See, for example, Group of Experts, *Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 27 December 2024, UN Doc. S/2024/969, para. 8.
[17] See, for example, Ebuteli and Congo Research Group, *Survive and Kill: The ADF's Incursion into the Territories of Irumu, Mambasa, and Lubero*, 28 January 2026, https://tinyurl.com/yck4zsrs (in French); Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), paras 7-11. Analysts interviewed by Amnesty International have shared the same assessment. Interviews in person and by voice calls, November 2025 – February 2026.
[18] See, for example, Amnesty International, *"They Said We Would Die": M23 and Wazalendo Abuses in Eastern Congo* (Index: AFR 62/0145/2025), 20 August 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr62/0145/2025/en
[19] See, for example, Group of Experts, *Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 4 June 2024, UN Doc. S/2024/432, para. 9.

provinces in 2025 and was responsible for several large-scale attacks.[20] Experts maintain that the diversion of FARDC's troops to focus on the conflict with M23 and Rwanda – as well as shifting international attention – has allowed the group to capitalize on security gaps and expand its attacks.[21]

Given the demographic composition in the area of its operations, the vast majority of the ADF's victims have been Christians, though it bears noting that the group has killed and abducted Muslims as well, per interviews conducted by Amnesty International and widely available reporting.[22] The group's claims of responsibility make specific references to Christians being targeted, and the ADF's leaders have stressed the permissibility of killing them.[23] But it is worth considering that the group also uses in its statements – and per former abductees, in daily life too – references such as "non-believers" as an umbrella term that includes Muslims not espousing their version of the religion and way of life.[24]

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

ADF's violence has not only undermined security, it has also been responsible for a spiralling humanitarian crisis. The group's attacks have contributed to increased displacement in North Kivu and Ituri provinces where multiple conflicts and emergencies overlap.[25] While it is difficult to have a precise disaggregation of displacement figures by actors, a large proportion of the 209,406 persons displaced in Beni territory – including the 34,637 persons displaced in Beni town – likely fled ADF violence.[26] Similarly, the majority of the 71,079 persons displaced in Ituri's Mambasa territory likely also escaped ADF attacks.[27]

The group's violence has also disrupted basic services on a wide scale. For example, according to one estimate, the group has been blamed for attacks on 84 health facilities in North Kivu from 2020 to 2025.[28] ADF's recent stepped up attacks in North Kivu's Lubero territory alone have affected 48 schools, leaving more than 10,000 students – 70% of whom are girls – out of school, according to figures shared by the UN.[29]

ADF's attacks interrupt food and other supply chains and are a direct threat to farmers who come under attack and are compelled to abandon their farms. The group has also been imposing "taxes" on farmers, especially in Ituri province, requiring the "tax" to allow farmers access to their own fields.[30] ADF's area of operations is in territories classified by the UN as experiencing acute, as well as emergency, levels of hunger.[31]

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND OBLIGATIONS

Amnesty International and others consider the situation pertaining to ADF's violence in the eastern DRC to be a non-international armed conflict. Therefore, international humanitarian law applies. Parties to non-international armed conflicts are bound by treaty-based and customary international humanitarian law. Violations of certain rules of international humanitarian law are war crimes.

Furthermore, the Congolese government has legal obligations under international human rights law, which applies during times of peace and conflict. Individuals – both military personnel and civilians – can be held criminally responsible for crimes under international law.

The DRC is party to various relevant human rights treaties and protocols, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural

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[20] Group of Experts, *Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 30 December 2025, UN Doc. S/2025/858, p. 116-118. The subsequent chapter – Chapter 4 – explores in detail the scale and gravity of the group's attacks in 2025.
[21] See, for example, International Crisis Group, "Deadly escalation by Ugandan ADF rebels in eastern DRC", 12 September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/ywpw4xdk; ACLED, *As M23 Rebels Take Hold of Eastern Congo, the Islamic State Is Capitalizing on the Chaos*, 18 June 2025, https://tinyurl.com/ye9sp2v9
[22] Interviews in person with former abductees in Beni, Butembo and Oicha, November 2025; Caleb Weiss and Ryan O'Farrell, "The Islamic State's war on Christians in Congo", 12 December 2025, FDD's Long War Journal, https://tinyurl.com/8xr9pkmn
[23] See, for example, Caleb Weiss and Ryan O'Farrell, "The Islamic State's war on Christians in Congo" (previously cited).
[24] Interviews in person with former abductees in Beni, Butembo and Oicha, November 2025. See also Ryan O'Farrell and others, "Clerics in the Congo: Understanding the Ideology of the Islamic State in Central Africa" (previously cited).
[25] See, for example, UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, "DRC situation overview – Global appeal 2026", 26 January 2026, https://tinyurl.com/54pty8vs
[26] These displacement figures and attribution of likely cause was shared with Amnesty International by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). OCHA, email to Amnesty International, 10 February 2026, on file with Amnesty International.
[27] OCHA, emails to Amnesty International, 11 and 12 February 2026, on file with Amnesty International.
[28] OCHA, emails to Amnesty International, 10 February 2026, on file with Amnesty International.
[29] OCHA, emails to Amnesty International, 10 February 2026, on file with Amnesty International.
[30] Insecurity Insight, *DRC Monitoring Brief – Spotlight on: Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)*, April 2025, https://tinyurl.com/3brvmu3e. The ADF's practice of imposing illegal taxation was also mentioned by Congolese human rights defenders who spoke with Amnesty International. One of them, whose organization documents ADF's abuses against civilians, showed Amnesty International's researcher a photo of an ADF-issued "receipt" used to confirm access is permitted after the "tax" was collected. Interview in person, Beni, 11 November 2025.
[31] Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, Democratic Republic of the Congo: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for September - December 2025 and Projection for January - June 2026, https://tinyurl.com/bddfhftd (accessed on 30 March 2026); World Food Programme, "WFP, FAO call for urgent action as hunger deepens in DRC", 29 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/3xcvk759

Rights (ICESCR); the Convention Against Torture (CAT); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocol on Children and Armed Conflict; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol); the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Banjul Charter); the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol).[32]

The DRC government is required to respect, protect and fulfil the rights outlined in these treaties. With support from international partners, it should take concrete measures as a matter of urgency to protect civilians against ongoing and reasonably foreseeable threats posed by the ADF. The abuses committed by the ADF and outlined in this report violate the Constitution of the DRC and Congolese laws as well.

The country is also party to the Rome Statute and has referred the situation in its territory to the International Criminal Court (ICC) twice, including in May 2023, regarding alleged crimes committed in North Kivu since the beginning of 2022.[33] Between 2012 and 2019, the ICC convicted three Congolese armed group leaders for war crimes and crimes against humanity in the eastern DRC.[34] In 2024, the ICC Prosecutor revived investigative efforts in the country, giving priority to alleged crimes in North and South Kivu since 1 January 2022.[35]

The legal system of the DRC is, per the constitution, for the most part monist, technically allowing for the application of international treaties without the need for additional domestic legislation.[36] Articles of the constitution limit that to some extent for some international treaties.[37]

The military justice system has traditionally had jurisdiction in situations of conflict or the imposition of a "state of siege".[38] In 2002, when the country domesticated the Rome Statute into its laws, military courts were given jurisdiction over Rome Statute crimes.[39] However, legal reforms in 2013 and 2015 have given the Courts of Appeal jurisdiction over cases of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity except when committed by a member of the Congolese armed forces.[40]

A limited number of courts of appeal have exercised this power.[41] A recent study has found that, between 2004 and 2023, "Congolese criminal courts – almost exclusively military courts – have rendered at least 131 judgments" over crimes under international law.[42] Amnesty International considers that, ultimately, civilian courts should have sole jurisdiction over crimes under international law.

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[32] UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies, UN Treaty Body Database: Ratification Status for Democratic Republic of Congo, https://tinyurl.com/bddfwzde (accessed on 30 March 2026); African Union, OAU/AU Treaties, Conventions, Protocols & Charters, https://au.int/en/treaties/1164 (accessed on 30 March 2026).
[33] International Criminal Court (ICC), Situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, https://www.icc-cpi.int/drc (accessed on 30 March 2026).
[34] The war crimes resulting in these convictions included enlisting and conscripting children under the age of 15 years and using them to participate in hostilities, murder, rape, sexual slavery, attacking a civilian population, destruction of property and pillage. The crimes against humanity included murder, rape, sexual slavery, persecution and forcible transfer and deportation. In addition to the convictions in these three cases, there was an acquittal in one case against the leader of an armed group; the pre-trial chamber declined to confirm charges against another armed group leader in a second case; and an arrest warrant remains pending against a third armed group leader who is at large. See ICC, Situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, https://www.icc-cpi.int/drc (accessed on 30 March 2026).
[35] ICC, Situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, https://www.icc-cpi.int/drc (accessed on 30 March 2026).
[36] NYU Law, Overview of the Legal System of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Research, January/February 2025, https://tinyurl.com/mumueaxt (accessed on 30 March 2026); Organization for the Study of Treaty Law, Navigating International Commitments: How the Democratic Republic of the Congo Engages in Treaties Under Its Constitution and Existing Conventions, https://tinyurl.com/mttwykxx; Democratic Republic of Congo, Constitution, 2005 (revised 2011), Article 215 (an unofficial English translation is available at https://tinyurl.com/rfvdedks).
[37] DRC, Constitution, 2005 (revised 2011), Articles 214 and 216.
[38] See DRC, Constitution, 2005 (revised 2011), Article 156.
[39] DRC, Loi 023/2002 portant Code judiciaire militaire [Military Justice Code], 2002, available at https://tinyurl.com/5xfc94xz (in French); DRC, Loi 024/2002 portant Code pénal militaire [Military Criminal Code], 2002, available at https://tinyurl.com/2drdj9vb (in French).
[40] DRC, Loi 13/011-B portant organisation, fonctionnement et compétences des juridictions de l'ordre judiciaire [Law 13/011-B concerning the organization, operation and jurisdiction of the courts of the judicial system], 2013, available at https://tinyurl.com/jstkrcde (in French), Article 91; DRC, Loi 15/022 modifiant et complétant le Décret du 30 janvier 1940 portant Code pénal [Law 15/022 amending and supplementing the Decree of 30 January 1940 on the Criminal Code], 2015, available at https://tinyurl.com/3w9c9epa (in French); DRC, Loi 15/023 modifiant la Loi 024-2002 du 18 novembre 2002 portant Code pénal militaire [Law 15/023 amending Law 024-2002 of 18 November 2002 on the Military Criminal Code], 2015, available at https://tinyurl.com/j9h4xrdb (in French).
These laws removed international crimes from the Military Criminal Code and incorporated them into the Criminal Code.
[41] See, for example, TRIAL International, "DRC: Kasai-Central Court convicts militiaman of crimes against humanity", 6 September 2023, https://tinyurl.com/bdhabns3; Derek Inman and Pacifique Muhindo Magadju, "Prosecuting international crimes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Using victim participation as a tool to enhance the rule of law and to tackle impunity", 2018, African Human Rights Law Journal, Volume 18, Issue 1, https://tinyurl.com/yt9bkbez, fn. 87; MONUSCO and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Accountability for Human Rights Violations and Abuses in the DRC: Achievements, Challenges and Way forward (1 January 2014 - 31 March 2016),* 30 October 2016, https://tinyurl.com/zbju2ttj, para. 36; Global Survivors Fund, "Country briefing: The Democratic Republic of Congo", September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/8et587st, p. 5.
[42] UpRights and TRIAL International, *The Congolese Justice System and Crimes against the Peace and Security of Mankind: Progress, Challenges and Prospects,* 1 April 2025, https://tinyurl.com/yppjyvmu (in French), para. 301.

4. ATTACKS ON VILLAGES AND TOWNS

> **"How much more must we suffer?"**
>
> A 40-year-old woman who survived an attack by the ADF in Beni territory.[43]

ADF fighters regularly attack communities and farms in Ituri and North Kivu provinces, primarily killing civilians. They routinely loot civilian property, burn homes and vehicles, and have frequently targeted medical facilities. Flushed out by Operation Shujaa, the group as of mid-2024 continued to move deeper into Mambasa territory in Ituri and Lubero territory in North Kivu and have carried out incursions into communities it had not previously attacked.[44]

The ADF carries out attacks against various security actors, but while the number of such attacks has dropped since the joint military operations of the FARDC and UPDF, attacks on civilians have been on the rise.[45] Observers maintain that the consistent, and at times simultaneous,[46] deadly attacks targeting communities and farms are conducted not only for the purpose of restocking food, medicines and other supplies, but also in retaliation to military operations.[47] Several former abductees also told Amnesty International that leaders in the camps where they were held explicitly mentioned revenge as a reason behind some of the attacks the group conducted.[48]

Witnesses and others said attacks were attributed to the ADF based on the area of operation, hit-and-run tactics as well as certain tell-tale signs, including slaughtering victims with panga machetes, carrying out abductions, dressing in a mix of mismatched military fatigues, using women and child fighters and speaking in foreign languages or in Swahili with a non-Congolese accent.

Amnesty International documented eight attacks on communities: five in North Kivu and three in Ituri.[49] Seven of the attacks took place in 2025, one was in 2024. Three of these documented incursions into communities also included attacks on medical facilities. This is only a small, emblematic sample of the group's attacks. According to the UN, in 2025, the ADF killed at least 1,022 people in more than 200 incidents.[50] The casualty toll obtained by Amnesty International or that reported by others is likely an

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[43] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[44] RFI, "Uganda's DRC mission under scrutiny amid claims of double dealing", 6 December 2024, https://tinyurl.com/52hz7ut3; Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited) paras 11 and 15-17. Two analysts interviewed by Amnesty International who track the group's violence also pointed out to the temporary spillover of the group's violence into Tshopo province before fighters returned back to their bases. Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025; Interview by voice call, 30 January 2026. See also AFP, "Islamic State attack in east DR Congo kills five", 11 August 2024, https://tinyurl.com/34je8536
[45] Group of Experts, *Final report*, 4 June 2024 (previously cited), para. 9.
[46] Group of Experts, *Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 3 July 2025, UN Doc. S/2025/446, para. 123.
[47] Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), paras 10 and 17.
[48] Interviews in person, Beni, November 2025.
[49] In North Kivu province, three of the attacks took place in Beni territory and two in Lubero territory; in Itruri province, two were in Mambasa territory and one was in Irumu territory.
[50] UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO), email to Amnesty International, 24 March 2026, on file with Amnesty International.

underestimation due to – among other factors – the group's pattern of abducting civilians during attacks and later killing them.

Deliberate killing of civilians, pillaging and destruction of homes and medical facilities are serious violations of international humanitarian law and are war crimes. As part of a widespread or systematic attack on a civilian population, murder is also a crime against humanity.

ATTACKS ON COMMUNITIES

ATTACKS IN NORTH KIVU

On the evening of 14 November 2025, ADF fighters arrived at the village of Byambwe in Lubero territory asking for directions to the local hospital. Amnesty International interviewed six civilians who witnessed the attack in Byambwe, including two who said they saw the arrival of the group that asked for directions. Witnesses said that group, which included women and children who appeared unarmed, did not look suspicious at first; one of the witnesses even offered directions.[51] A merchant in her late 20s said:

> **They came carrying bags that looked like guitar cases. We were sitting among a group of merchants waiting for [transport]… When it was around 8pm, we started hearing gunshots and we could see fire over houses. We ran away and spent the night in the bush as it rained…**
>
> **I saw several bodies that night when we were running… they were on the road. The direction we took when we ran was where the [fighters] had come from… I found other people in the bush. I got scared of them and they got scared of me too. We all ran again in different directions. It was like that.[52]**

The two witnesses said they and others who were sitting in the same area waiting for transport that night realized later when they heard that people were being killed at the hospital that those who had asked for directions to the medical facility were ADF fighters and not lost strangers. Two other witnesses who heard the gunshots in the village that night described fleeing their homes with only the clothes on their backs. One of them, a 29-year-old woman, lived close to the hospital. She said:

> **We could hear [the clanging of] people forcing doors open with iron. When we heard that, we came out of our house. That's when we started hearing gunshots. We ran towards the bush. When we were in the bush, we saw fire raging over houses… all the houses where we store our goods were burned. We waited in the bush all night until the morning. When we came out of hiding, I found out that all the people in my quarter were killed… Three of my [relatives] were killed… .[53]**

Amid an absence of security forces, people who fled took cover in the bush or walked for hours on the main road to safer towns. Two witnesses told Amnesty International that after the assault they managed to get on a truck in the early hours of the morning alongside others trying to escape the area. However, the vehicle overturned, leaving several people injured. "The driver was speeding because we were told the rebels were still advancing," one of them said, describing pain in her chest as a result of the accident.[54]

ADF fighters killed at least 23 people in Byambwe and its suburbs in that attack.[55] The Byambwe assault was part of a series of attacks between 13 and 19 November along a stretch of villages in Lubero territory that left at least 89 people killed, according to the UN.[56]

Amnesty International learned from a credible source that hours before the attack in Byambwe unfolded, community members had alerted the police and military of the presence of ADF fighters in the area after reports of an abduction of a resident started circulating among the community earlier that day.[57] By the time the army arrived, the ADF attack had ended. Byambwe came under another deadly ADF attack on 13

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[51] Interviews in person, Butembo, 16 November 2025.
[52] Interview in person, Butembo, 16 November 2025.
[53] Interview in person, Butembo, 16 November 2025.
[54] Interview in person, Butembo, 16 November 2025.
[55] Initially, civil society actors told Amnesty International that more than 30 people were killed in that attack. The organization later obtained lists put together by community members and authorities that indicated that 23 bodies were retrieved from Byambwe and its suburbs. On file with Amnesty International. See also TV5 Monde, "DR Congo: Tribute to the victims of the ADF", 20 November 2025, https://tinyurl.com/328mfaxf (in French); Anadolu Agency, "Patients among nearly 30 killed in rebel attack in eastern DR Congo", 18 November 2025, https://tinyurl.com/2m3yr9ax
[56] UN, "Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General – on ADF attacks against civilians in Lubero territory", 22 November 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4w2xc7y7
[57] Interview by voice call, 7 February 2026.

January 2026.[58] Amnesty International identified a claim of responsibility by ISCAP for the November 2025 attack on Byambwe and its environs in a statement posted on one of the Islamic State's online platforms.[59]

On 14 September 2025 at approximately 8.30pm, ADF fighters raided Mbau in Beni territory, setting homes on fire, shooting and abducting civilians, and looting medical supplies. Amnesty International interviewed three witnesses, including a 47-year-old woman with limited mobility who was unable to flee. She said:

> **NALU arrived at our place… We heard a gunshot. We stayed quiet. After that, we heard the gunshots continue. My children ran… My husband couldn't leave me alone. He took me inside our house… He told me to lie down on the floor and he did that too. They burned my neighbour's house. They caught two of my children and until now they have not been found…**
>
> **In the plot [of land] next to ours, they burned another house and an older man died inside…**
>
> **I always wonder why in other provinces there is peace but only here [in the east] we are suffering… I don't know what we have done to deserve this.[60]**

The woman's testimony highlighted the elevated risks persons with disabilities and older persons face in situations of conflict, including difficulty fleeing attacks.[61]

Witness testimonies and public reporting indicate that Congolese security forces engaged the fighters at some point after the attack started, but by then fighters had killed at least four civilians, burned several homes, caused damage to a medical facility, and some had taken off with abductees.[62] Witnesses said Mbau had been spared from ADF attacks for several years, describing how the incursion took them by surprise.[63]

A 25-year-old farmer and taxi driver told Amnesty International he was at home texting with someone on the phone around 9 pm when he started hearing gunshots outside. Shortly after, fighters stormed another room in the house where he was staying, took a little girl with them, and set the place on fire. "I started seeing smoke in the house… I opened the door and ran. That's when I saw they had set a bedsheet on fire [in the other room] and that the house next door was ablaze too," he said.[64]

He hid in a neighbour's outhouse, continued to hear gunfire and caught glimpses of fighters chasing after someone. Then, he said, he saw FARDC soldiers arriving, ordering people to remain indoors until they could control the situation. "The house I was in burned down completely… [The ADF] burned four houses completely, but the total number of houses that were affected was 13. That night, I saw two bodies, the soldiers took them… In the morning, I saw another body; a man was burned inside his house."[65]

Amnesty International identified a claim of responsibility by ISCAP for this attack in Mbau in a statement posted on one of the Islamic State's online platforms.[66]

On 8 September 2025, ADF fighters carried out one of the group's most horrific and large-scale attacks of the year in the village of Ntoyo, in Lubero territory. Fighters killed more than 60 people, many of whom were

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[58] Interview by voice call, 7 February 2026. See also Presse Actu, "Lubero: Three civilians killed in a new brutal attack attributed to the ADF in Byambwe", 14 January 2026, https://tinyurl.com/2m8zvrud (in French); International Christian Concern, "9 killed, several abducted in latest ADF attack", 20 January 2026, https://tinyurl.com/3puph3nv

[59] The claim acknowledged the killing of civilians, burning homes and taking belongings. On file with Amnesty International. As mentioned above in the methodology chapter, Amnesty International reviewed posts published on online platforms tightly controlled by the Islamic State – including Amaq news agency and Al-Naba weekly newsletter – and known to denote strong evidence of affiliation. The posts included statements by ISCAP claiming responsibility for attacks documented in this report. Analysts who have closely followed the group for years have also referred to these online platforms in analyzing the group's actions and attacks. Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025; Interviews by voice calls 30 January and 9 February 2026. For more on ADF's/ISCAP's use of digital media and the Islamic State's online platforms, see Jonathan Matusitz and Doris Wesley, "Case Study: The ADF's Digital Media", *Jihad in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Role of Digital Media*, 2024, pp. 209-228; Caleb Weiss and Ryan O'Farrell, "Media Matters: How Operation Shujaa Degraded the Islamic State's Congolese Propaganda Output", March 2024, CTC Sentinel, Volume 17, Issue 3, https://tinyurl.com/489s9z3w, pp.19-21; George Washington Program on Extremism, *The Islamic State in Congo* (previously cited); Caleb Weiss and Ryan O'Farrell, "The Islamic State's war on Christians in Congo" (previously cited).

[60] Interview in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025.

[61] See, for example, Amnesty International, "Persons with disabilities in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies: Submission to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on Article 11" (Index: IOR 40/6454/2023), 13 March 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior40/6454/2023/en; Amnesty International, "Older persons in armed conflict and peacebuilding: Submission to the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons" (Index: IOR 40/9188/2025), 28 March 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior40/9188/2025/en

[62] Interviews in person, Oicha, 13 and 19 November 2025. See also Kivu Morning Post, "Beni: At least 4 dead and extensive damage in an ADF attack in Mbau", 15 September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/e5m7nsu3 (in French); Kivu Morning Post, "DRC: ADF attack near the military governor's residence in Beni, attack and sabotage", 16 September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/3xj29tf6 (in French); International Christian Concern, "Mbau village latest ADF target in eastern DRC", 17 September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/abf3pk65

[63] Interviews in person, Oicha, 13 and 19 November 2025.

[64] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.

[65] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.

[66] The claim acknowledged the killing of civilians and burning homes and a motorcycle. On file with Amnesty International.

attending a funeral wake, where, per tradition, residents of the village gathered overnight at the mourning family's house.[67] Amnesty International interviewed five witnesses.

Witnesses said ADF members had discreetly mingled among mourners for hours, before suddenly starting to strike people's heads with hammers.[68] Throngs of other fighters dressed in military fatigues joined, burning homes and killing more civilians in the village with machetes and guns. A 30-year-old man said:

> **That situation started in the morning. We were at the funeral. Rebels arrived there and without us knowing, they took part in the funeral ceremony. They were with us there, checking out the village and planning how they will attack at nighttime. They came with firewood to light fire at the funeral place. When it was nighttime, they wanted to execute their plan. When it was 11.30pm, they started.**
>
> **When [the second group] arrived… we could see among them teenagers and some young girls carrying big weapons. We were surprised… [At some point] they shot two shots. It was the signal to all other members in the quarter to start killing people. They were killing people with hammers… They started telling us, 'Don't run! Get inside your house!'… They wanted us to enter our houses so they could burn us inside our houses…**
>
> **People started running. If they saw you running, they shot you. They started burning houses… I had a shop [with merchandise worth] US$9,000 inside. They burned it… I lost eight of my family members [and] they kidnapped two [more] relatives.[69]**

The man was at the wake but had gone home to eat with two of his children. When the killing spree started, he managed to run with the little ones and watch from a hiding place including as the fighters killed his sister with an axe.[70] His wife and youngest child who remained at the funeral were not killed as the fighters appeared to have spared pregnant women and women with infants, witnesses said.[71]

The husband and wife reunited in the morning after spending the night hiding in separate places. "That morning, anytime you saw someone come out of hiding, it was a surprise. 'Oh! You're still alive! I thought you died!' And when people saw you, they said the same. That was the case when I saw my wife and child… I thought they were killed," he said.[72]

Amnesty International interviewed a witness who was inside the house where the funeral was taking place. Details about the witness's identity are withheld for safety reasons. The witness hid under a bed after peeping from a room's door and seeing the fighters killing people in the living room. Two months after the attack, the witness was still visibly shaken.[73] The witness heard gunshots around 11pm and heard fighters yell, "Bring the axe! Bring the axe!" The witness added: "When they finished killing people in all the rooms, they came to the room where I was. They couldn't see me. They said, 'We are finished here, let's go to another place.'"[74]

A 30-year-old woman said the gunfire woke her up and that, alongside family members, she ran when it kept going. Her mother was spending the night with the mourners at the wake, she said, adding:

> **We ran and left behind my sister's child in the house; everyone ran in a different direction. I ran into the bush, but my father took the direction of the main road. He ran into the rebels and they killed him. In the morning, when I came out of hiding, I saw many people were killed. At the place where the wake was taking place, there were so many bodies. I'd never seen so many bodies. I'd never seen anything like it. My mother was among those who were killed at the wake.[75]**

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[67] Amnesty International obtained a statement from civil society leaders dated 19 September which indicated that 71 people were killed, providing the names of 59 people whose bodies were recovered and mentioning that 12 more were not identified. The organization obtained a second list put together by officials that states that 64 people were killed (27 men, 32 women and five unidentified burned bodies). On file with Amnesty International. The death toll is believed to be much higher. See also AP, "Death toll from 2 attacks by Islamic State-affiliated rebels in Congo climbs to 89", 10 September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4rx2wnyz; Xinhua, "Over 80 killed in ADF rebel attack in eastern DR Congo: local official", 9 September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/y3d26f86; AFP, "DR Congo survivors of IS-linked massacre say army, govt let them down", 11 September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/yeyk2y7w; TV5 Monde, "DRC: New massacre attributed to the ADF", 10 September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4jwvh2pe
[68] Interviews in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[69] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[70] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[71] Interviews in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[72] Interviews in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[73] As with all other interviews with victims, the Amnesty International researcher who conducted the interview went through the organization's informed consent process with the witness and offered breaks or ending the interview whenever the witness wanted.
[74] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[75] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.

Satellite imagery from 19 September 2025 (left) shows a truck and a structure that were burned in Ntoyo village, Lubero territory. The location and damage align with video footage of the aftermath of the 8 September 2025 attack on the village by the ADF as seen in a report broadcast by TV5Monde (right).

The witness said her father was shot and her mother was struck with a hammer. Two other relatives were killed, she said, adding that she counted 10 houses burned down but that more were destroyed. "No one was happy with the military. It is not normal for people to be killed that way while the military camp is 5km away. We tried to call them, but they didn't come and protect us," she said of the troops she only saw in the village around 8am.[76]

A 41-year-old woman said when the fighters arrived at her house, she managed to run with two of her younger children and remained hiding overnight. Four daughters, two of whom are children, ran inside the house and were then forced out and abducted by the fighters, she said.[77]

"In the morning, I returned to my place to find that my house was burned, and nothing was left," she added.[78] When she went to see what had happened at the wake next door, "I saw so many bodies… I recognized some of those who were killed, my father included… He was spending the night at the funeral place… Some people were shot. Some were killed by hammers… My father was killed by a hammer."[79]

Amnesty International identified a claim of responsibility by ISCAP for this attack in Ntoyo in a statement posted on one of the Islamic State's online platforms.[80]

On 16 August 2025, ADF fighters attacked the neighbourhood of Mbimbi in Oicha, Beni territory. According to media reports, at least nine people were killed and several homes burned.[81] Amnesty International interviewed three witnesses, including a woman who survived being hit in the head with a machete. The woman, who bore visible scars on the back of her head, said she was at her house with her husband and daughter when ADF fighters attacked them.

[76] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025. Another witness said she had heard what she believed was the arrival of FARDC soldiers around 3am. According to her, the soldiers shot in the air and were shouting that government forces had arrived, but that, like many others, she did not emerge from hiding until much later. Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[77] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[78] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[79] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[80] The claim acknowledged the targeting of a large gathering and the killing of dozens of civilians and burning of homes and other properties. On file with Amnesty International.
[81] Radio Okapi, "Security crisis in Beni: at least nine dead and houses burned down in an ADF attack", 17 August 2025, https://tinyurl.com/5fe4h56n (in French); Radio Moto Oicha, "Beni: An ADF attack leaves 9 dead, including three burned alive in houses in Oïcha!", 17 August 2025, https://tinyurl.com/27b58e5r (in French); Agence Congolaise de Presse, "ADF incursion into Beni: the Congolese army determined to annihilate the terrorists", 18 August 2025, https://tinyurl.com/2b2mnzdt (in French); RFI, "Eastern DRC: New massacre of civilians attributed to ADF rebels in North Kivu", 18 August 2025, https://tinyurl.com/yuy2jtnv (in French).

A woman described to Amnesty International surviving being hit in the head by a machete during an August 2025 attack by the ADF that left her three-year-old daughter dead and her house burned. © Amnesty International

Her husband managed to escape; "they hit me on my head with a panga and I woke up [later] in the hospital," she said.[82] Relatives "told me that [fighters] killed many people and burned many houses that day… They burned my house with my child inside… She was three years old", the woman said of how her only child was killed. "When I try to ask my husband questions, he doesn't respond, he starts crying… Since [then], I have been consumed by fear. The only thing on my mind is fear… I don't even know fear of what."[83]

Another woman said she heard gunshots around 7pm but didn't realize it was an ADF attack until later when a relative passed by her house as he was running and told her that "the rebels have arrived in this quarter."[84] She hid behind her house and watched as the fighters shot at people and set houses on fire, she said. The 40-year-old woman tended to an injured relative at the hospital the following day and saw at least one body arrive at the facility. She said:

What have we done to deserve these things that are happening to us? How much more must we suffer before this ends? This didn't start today. One day we go to the farm and find the rebels there. We say, 'OK, no need to go to the farm, let's go to the market.' They come and attack there. There is nowhere to go. In the farm there are rebels, in the market there are rebels. We don't know what to do. We don't know how we are going to raise our children in this situation.[85]

Amnesty International identified a claim of responsibility by ISCAP for this attack in Mbimbi in a statement posted on one of the Islamic State's online platforms.[86]

ATTACKS IN ITURI

Amnesty International interviewed three people who witnessed three separate attacks in Ituri province in 2025.[87]

A farmer in his 30s said that he left his village in Beni territory to work on a cocoa farm in the village of Mayuwanu, Mambasa territory. In mid-October 2025, ADF fighters emerged from the bush in the early hours of the morning and attacked where he and a friend were farming. The two men managed to run, but others in a neighbouring plot of land were not as lucky, he said, adding:

> **They caught some of our neighbours… They killed two and went with others alive… I watched from afar. I saw [the fighters]… They had torches and weapons… They were men and women… They made noise as they moved… They don't fear anything…**
>
> **[Later], I saw the bodies [of the two men who were killed] when a relative came to take them for burial in Butembo… They were friends I had met there [in Mayuwanu]… They used a panga to kill them.[88]**

Local media reported that ADF fighters raided the area during that period, primarily targeting a nearby mining site but ultimately carrying out incursions into at least four villages, including Mayuwanu.[89] "When Mayuwanu was attacked, the news reached [my village]; our families were told we were killed. I came back

[82] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[83] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[84] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[85] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[86] The claim acknowledged the killing of civilians and a policeman and burning homes and motorcycles. On file with Amnesty International.
[87] Their accounts were corroborated by information obtained from civil society leaders and open-source material, including media reporting.
[88] Interview in person, Lume, 22 November 2025.
[89] Radio Okapi, "Ituri: 4 villages emptied of their inhabitants following the ADF attack on the 'Cinquantenaire' mining site", 17 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/ycv2y92s (in French); Mines, "Ituri: ADF attacks mining site in Mambasa, several villages targeted", 18 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/mpcr9fph (in French); Congo Rassure, "Ituri: ADF rebel movements reported around Mayuwano and Téturi; population urged to remain vigilant", 16 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/2dyxxr9v (in French). It is not clear how many people were killed as a result of the attack on the four villages.

to tell my family I was not killed… My wife was very happy… She thanked God I was spared," said the farmer who has two children.[90]

A 31-year-old woman from **Otmaber**, Irumu territory, told Amnesty International that on 12 July 2025, ADF fighters who arrived at her neighbourhood shot her, her husband, and their 7-year-old son. Around 7pm, the woman was in the kitchen with the boy when she heard gunshots. She stepped out and saw the fighters and her husband lying on the ground shot in the stomach, she said, adding:

> **After shooting us, they went and proceeded to burning houses. They burned a taxi driver in his house. [My son and] I crawled slowly and went into a house that wasn't burned and spent the night there. All night, there was no reaction from our military. God helped my husband, he didn't die…**
>
> **I bled all night. When it was 5am, I came out and saw people passing. I called them. They took [us] to the hospital… [When we were hiding] my son stayed silent all night I thought he had died… I was trying to reassure him by saying, 'As they have gone past us, we will be OK'… I didn't know he was shot; I discovered it when we were hiding in that house… I saw that he was bleeding… I tried to comfort him… He just quietly nodded his head. He was very afraid.[91]**

According to the UN, eight people, including a child, were killed in that attack in Otmaber and several homes were set on fire.[92] "Even in the morning, [the military] didn't come. Everyone had to take care of themselves. If I hadn't come out by myself, I would have died in that house," said the woman who ended up spending two months in the hospital recovering from the bullet wound.[93] Two weeks later, the military was at the centre of civilians' anger once again after a major ADF attack on a church in the same territory in Komanda village left more than 40 worshippers killed.[94]

Amnesty International identified a claim of responsibility by ISCAP for the above-mentioned attack in Otmaber in a statement posted on one of the Islamic State's online platforms.[95]

A man in his 50s who lived in **Matolo**, in Mambasa territory, described to Amnesty International surviving three separate attacks on the village by the ADF – in September 2022, April 2024 and February 2025.[96] Two of his children were abducted in one of the older attacks. He relocated his other children and wife away from the village, but he kept returning to it.[97]

In late February 2025, he was on his way to visit his family in a neighbouring village alongside a group of people headed in the same direction. He stopped on the road to read a message he received on his phone, the pause seemingly saving his life. "The group of people I was with kept walking, they were ahead of me, and they were [ambushed] by the ADF. I heard one of them crying… 'Don't come! We have been caught! I ran into the bush. They killed them," he said.[98] He saw the bodies of 19 people, he added, after the military had arrived and families were able to retrieve them.[99]

It was part of an attack on Matolo and Samboko, another village frequently targeted by the ADF in the area, in which an estimated 23 people were killed.[100] The man wondered if his abducted children will ever go free, and said:

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[90] Interview in person, Lume, 22 November 2025.
[91] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[92] OHCHR, "DRC: Türk appalled by attacks against civilians by Rwandan-backed M23 and other armed groups", 6 August 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4yjkzfwy
[93] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[94] See, for example, Human Rights Watch, "DR Congo: Armed group massacres dozens in church", 6 August 2025, https://tinyurl.com/3j5wbb55; See also UN News, "UN condemns deadly attack on worshippers in DR Congo", 28 July 2025, https://tinyurl.com/dpwhdrmz
In what is widely believed to be a rare move likely owing to the scale of the attack, a military court in Ituri dismissed from service two senior commanders – one from the military and another from the police – and handed them prison sentences for, among other charges, negligence in responding to the attack in Komanda. Bunia Actualité, "Komanda massacre: Military court convicts two officers for violating orders", 15 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/369rwnwh (in French); RTVH, "Ituri: ADF attack in Komanda, two police and army officers sentenced to 8 and 20 years in prison" 16 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/2sh8zhvr (in French); Radio Canal Révélation, "Ituri: Military court rules in Komanda massacre case", 15 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4m8e22ak (in French); Hapamedia, "Ituri: A FARDC colonel sentenced for negligence in the Komanda massacre", 16 October, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/ywb5vfdz (in French).
[95] The claim acknowledged the killing of civilians. On file with Amnesty International.
[96] The attack detailed in this section and included in the overall count of attacks documented is the one from 2025.
[97] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[98] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[99] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[100] UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "DR Congo: Humanitarian situation in Ituri province - Situation report no. 02", 15 March 2025, https://tinyurl.com/3cseph9b (in French); AFP, "At least 23 people killed by ADF rebels in northeastern Congo", 1 March 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4sy92w39 (in French); African Security Analysts, "Wazalendo militias in Ituri shift focus to illegal mining, neglecting fight against ADF", 7 March 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4zajxnuw

> **I call on the government to help us so we can have peace in these areas, and so I can return there to resume my [livelihood] activities. Now, I am living with difficulty because I have no access to my farm… My message to the international community is to help us Congolese people so we can stop this suffering… The first thing to do is to help us get peace.[101]**

The deliberate targeting of civilians by ADF fighters documented in this report is a clear violation of the cardinal rule of distinction in international humanitarian law, which requires parties to conflict to distinguish at all times between combatants and legitimate military objects on the one hand, and civilian and civilian objects on the other hand.[102] It also violates the prohibition of violence to life.[103] It constitutes the war crimes of murder and of "intentionally directing attacks against… civilians not taking direct part in hostilities".[104]

ADF's attacks are widespread in nature. As shown in this report, the group has attacked civilians across a large, ever-expanding area and for years. As mentioned above – in Chapter 3 (Background) – the ADF had particularly stepped up its violence against civilians in the eastern DRC in 2021; the Group of Experts said in its June 2022 report that more than 1,300 civilians were killed since 2021.[105] In its June 2024 report, the Group of Experts said that the "ADF remained the armed group committing the highest number of killings in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2023, with over 1,000 persons killed, mainly civilians".[106] The years 2024 and 2025 saw some of the deadliest months on record for the ADF with over 200 civilians killed in June and January of those years respectively.[107] And according to the latest UN data available at the time of publication, and obtained by Amnesty International, in 2025, the ADF killed at least 1,022 people in more than 200 incidents.[108]

It is important to note that these fatality numbers are likely an undercount. ADF fighters routinely abduct civilians during their attacks and many end up being killed; their bodies never recovered. Not all attacks are reported, too, given the terrain and communication difficulties in the eastern DRC. Still, the available data shows the frequency and magnitude of attacks. The attacks also covered a large area, taking place in North Kivu's Beni and Lubero territories; Ituri's Mambasa and Irumu territories; and as mentioned above in this chapter and in chapter 3, recently spilling over to Tshopo province.

ADF's attacks are also systematic – they demonstrate a methodical plan, the objective of which is to spread the Islamic State's way of life as well as to punish those the group views as "infidels" and those not espousing its version of Islam. "What we have here is a *wilayah* [province] within the broader Islamic State," said the group's leader, Musa Baluku, in a video released by the group in October 2020.[109] More recently, in a landmark 18-minute video posted on ISCAP online media platforms in September 2025, the group described its mission and actions as waging a fight to "support Islam" against "crusaders".[110] A large part of the group's messaging and propaganda frames its attacks as targeting Christians, but ADF fighters have also deliberately killed and otherwise attacked Muslims.

Other elements of ADF's actions also display a methodical approach, including its targeting of civilians to punish communities they view as sympathetic to authorities; to launch reprisals for military operations; and to direct the military's response away from its main camps. ADF's pillaging of food and supplies necessary for the group's survival, and its attacks on military posts to rob weapons and ammunition, also reflect the calculated approach.

Amnesty International identified a likely matching claim of responsibility by ISCAP for an attack in Samboko and another neighbouring village corresponding to this timeframe. The claim acknowledged the killing of civilians and burning of homes and motorbikes. On file with Amnesty International.

[101] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025

[102] International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rules 1 and 7.

[103] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 89.

[104] Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Articles 8(2)(c)(i) and 8(2)(e)(i); ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 156.

[105] Group of Experts, *Final report*, 14 June 2022 (previously cited), para. 29.

[106] Group of Experts, *Final report*, 4 June 2024 (previously cited), para. 9.

[107] Group of Experts, *Final report*, 3 July 2025 (previously cited) para. 124.

[108] UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO), email to Amnesty International, 24 March 2026, on file with Amnesty International.

[109] Ryan O'Farrell and others, "Clerics in the Congo: Understanding the Ideology of the Islamic State in Central Africa" (previously cited).

[110] Video on file with Amnesty International.

Red Cross volunteers gather around coffins containing the remains of victims during a burial ceremony in the village of Ntoyo, on 10 September 2025, after one of ADF's most horrific attacks of the year. Fighters killed more than 60 people in that attack. © Seros Muyisa / AFP via Getty Images

While the group carries out attacks against security forces and pro-government armed groups, the vast majority of its attacks target civilians. The group's preaching has instructed "not only the permissibility but also the necessity of targeting civilians."[111] The existence of a modus operandi to attack civilian populations can be determined by patterns of attacks and public statements by ADF's leaders,[112] in furtherance of the organizational policy of establishing an Islamic State. It can also be inferred from the widespread and systematic nature of the attacks. To the extent that the prohibited act of murder was committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack on a civilian population, it amounts to a crime against humanity.[113]

ATTACKS ON HEALTH FACILITIES

International humanitarian law affords special protection to medical personnel and units. Facilities and personnel used solely for the purpose of providing medical care should be protected from attacks in all circumstances.[114] Directly attacking medical facilities is a war crime.[115] Amnesty International documented three such attacks by ADF fighters on health facilities during their incursions into communities.

When ADF fighters attacked Byambwe in November 2025, they left a bloodbath at the referral health centre run by the Sisters of the Presentation of Our Lady. At least 17 civilians were killed, and four wards were set on fire in the sole health centre in the area.[116]

An older person, who managed to escape alongside a grandchild, described crawling out of the facility: "You couldn't stand; they shot at anything that moved… They were shooting in every direction, it's by luck that we

[111] Ryan O'Farrell and others, "Clerics in the Congo: Understanding the Ideology of the Islamic State in Central Africa" (previously cited).
[112] See, for example, Ryan O'Farrell and others, "Clerics in the Congo: Understanding the Ideology of the Islamic State in Central Africa" (previously cited); Tara Candland and others, "The Rising Threat to Central Africa" (previously cited).
[113] Rome Statute, Article 7(1)(a).
[114] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rules 25, 28, 30.
[115] Rome Statute, Article 8(2)(b)(xxiv); ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 156.
[116] UN News, "UN decries 'truly horrific' massacres in DR Congo", 21 November 2025, https://tinyurl.com/yvtbktna; AP "Rebels tied to Islamic State kill 17 in Congo hospital attack", 15 November 2025, https://tinyurl.com/44n43p9e; Vatican News, "DR Congo: Terrorists kill civilians at Church-run hospital in North Kivu", 16 November 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4vzuev54; Catholic Standard, "Terrorists kill civilians at Church-run hospital in Congolese village of North Kivu", 18 November 2025, https://tinyurl.com/yaycn3zh

came out alive."[117] The witness lamented that they couldn't carry out a relative they were looking after at the facility, and who ended up being killed. "It's so hard to explain, so hard."[118]

In September 2025, during their incursion into Mbau, ADF fighters stole medicine from La Grâce Health Centre and destroyed property and parts of the building.[119] A staff member who was inside the facility told Amnesty International that night rounds were underway about 9pm when the health workers heard gunshots outside. Nurses closed the doors and turned off the lights; two policemen outside at the facility's gate fled, the witness said, adding:

> **There was a fire outside the hospital. It was [the facility's] car… After burning our car, [the fighters] entered the maternity ward… they burned all the beds and the maternity room. They entered the pharmacy and took all the medicine inside. They didn't stop there. They entered the delivery room and burned everything inside… We didn't think this could happen to us… We are not located on the outskirts of the area. We are in the centre. We are near the main road…**
>
> **The patients were afraid. Some hid under the beds. They couldn't cry; they know what happens, if they heard you, they would come. They stayed silent… We switched off the lights, and it was dark inside.[120]**

In early May 2024, ADF fighters attacked the Pasala health centre in Mandumbi before carrying on with the rest of their rampage in that community in Beni territory. Amnesty International spoke with a witness who was inside the health centre.[121] The witness said:

> **The health centre is located in the southern part of the village. They came from the south. The first person to be killed [during that attack] was at the health centre, then they went from there to the community and continued killing people…**
>
> **They took medicine [from the health centre]… The doors were open and they entered… They destroyed the lock on the cabinet to have access [to the medicine] and they broke the glass of one window when they fired bullets.[122]**

The witness said that among those killed were the facility's accountant, two patients and a nurse who had initially run out of the centre. Two other nurses were briefly abducted.[123] The witness said they saw six bodies at the health centre of civilians who were killed during that attack.[124] Media reports indicate at least eight civilians were killed.[125] The health centre closed for more than a year before it resumed operating, the witness said.[126] Amnesty International identified a claim of responsibility by ISCAP for this attack in Mandumbi in a statement posted on one of the Islamic State's online platforms.[127]

In addition to the three above-mentioned documented incidents, Amnesty International spoke with a senior medical official in Oicha who said an attempted attack on the town's main hospital was foiled. In January 2025, patients noticed a strange looking object in the corridor of the paediatric unit, the official said. They alerted the hospital staff during morning rounds, who in turn alerted the police. According to the official, police identified it as an improvised explosive device, took it away and diffused it, and attributed the attempted attack to the ADF.[128]

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[117] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.
[118] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.
[119] Interviews in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025. See also Insecurity Insight, "Attacks on health care: Bi-monthly news brief", 16 September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/3j2pxvym, p.2; Open Doors, "Over 20 Christians killed in recent attack", 26 November 2025, https://tinyurl.com/yve358kc
[120] Interview in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025.
[121] See also Health Cluster – Democratic Republic of Congo, "M23 humanitarian crisis in North Kivu: Epidemics, population movements, armed conflicts - Epidemiological Week S22 - May 2024", 2 August 2024, https://tinyurl.com/ee4864tw (in French); Africa News, "At least 80 people killed by suspected ADF rebels in DRC", 13 August 2024, https://tinyurl.com/3umkjthz; Radio Okapi, "Beni: Health centers struggle to function due to insecurity", 14 May 2024, https://tinyurl.com/mupeu35s (in French).
[122] Interview in person, Oicha 19 November 2025.
[123] Interview in person, Oicha 19 November 2025.
[124] Interview in person, Oicha 19 November 2025.
[125] VOA, "8 killed in attack on DRC health center", 10 May 2024, https://tinyurl.com/435ca9f9
[126] Interview in person, Oicha 19 November 2025.
[127] The claim acknowledged the killing of civilians and said that an FARDC patrol tried to intervene during the attack, but that the group's fighters engaged the soldiers. On file with Amnesty International.
[128] Interview in person, Oicha 13 November 2025. The ADF has a record of making improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and using them in attacks on communities. See, for example, Group of Experts, *Final report*, 4 June 2024 (previously cited), p. 53; Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), pp. 41-42; UPDF, "ADF IED expert captured", 18 May 2024, https://tinyurl.com/rpv64tmu; BBC, "DR Congo government blames rebels for Kasindi church bombing", 16 January 2023, https://tinyurl.com/bdf4tew7; Long War Journal, "Islamic State claims Christmas day suicide bombing in Congo", 13 January 2022, https://tinyurl.com/5cssb2rn; Counter-IED report, "Alarming IED proliferation in eastern DR Congo", 2022, https://tinyurl.com/2p9n8937

The December 2024 UN Group of Experts report noted that one of the main ADF camps led by the group's top leader had developed a particular pattern of seizing supplies from medical facilities and abducting health professionals "likely to treat the group's ailing members".[129]

PILLAGING

ADF fighters have engaged in widespread looting in North Kivu and Ituri provinces. Witnesses from at least 18 different villages and towns reported the looting of civilians' properties, including cash, merchandise and livestock. The seizure of civilians' property by ADF fighters documented in this report constitutes pillaging, which is prohibited under international humanitarian law.[130] Pillaging is a war crime.[131]

The ADF pillaged the belongings of some witnesses and forced others to carry what the fighters looted. Other witnesses were held by the group for lengthier periods and forced to engage in looting themselves. Former abductees said collecting loot was a core function for some of the group's members, especially women and children, and that it was one of the main tactics for restocking on supplies.

For example, a 40-year-old farmer who was abducted while tilling in Mayangose in Beni territory in April 2025 said that after abducting him and others, fighters seized chickens and ducks in houses and farms along the way.[132] Another farmer also abducted in Beni territory a month earlier said the fighters who captured her took crops from farms; in her case it was bananas and beans.[133]

A 17-year-old girl who was abducted by the ADF and stayed with the group for 18 months said: "In the attacks I participated in… We opened houses, I would carry away the things that were there as well as goods we took from merchants."[134]

A 30-year-old woman who was abducted in late 2022 from a village in Ituri province and remained with the ADF for more than two years in one of their main camps said leaders would "sometimes send us from the camp to the community to get things".[135] She specifically described going into Kokola village, a site of frequent attacks by the group. After "taking things", fighters would sometimes kill people, she said, adding: "They gave me a weapon, but I never killed anyone. When we would reach a place, I would just take the things and return."[136]

The merchant from Ntoyo whose shop was burned during the September 2025 attack said fighters took some of the goods before burning the rest down. He said they also took US$3000 that was in the store, which he had just withdrawn that day to buy a house.[137]

The 31-year-old woman from Otmaber, who was shot by ADF fighters in a July 2025 attack, said that her house was spared from being torched that night but that her family still sustained a large financial loss. "My husband charges people's phones for a living. They took all these phones [from our house]. There were cell phones, batteries and power banks… They took one million Congolese francs [US$450] that we had just collected" from a community savings circle, she said.[138]

CHALLENGES TO PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS AND JUSTICE PROCESSES

The Congolese military should investigate incidents where troops failed or took too long to respond. The military appears to have signalled willingness to do so in putting on trial and sentencing commanders after ADF's attack on a church in Komanda killed more than 40 worshippers in July 2025.[139] Such inquiries and accountability processes are crucial, and so is closely monitoring response times and ensuring the presence of sufficient security actors in the group's areas of operation.

A former abductee interviewed by Amnesty International said he witnessed fighters plant IEDs along a main road in Ituri in October 2025. Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025. Another man who was abducted by the group when he was a child said one of the reasons stopping him from escaping from the bush was the fear of "running into the bombs they planted". Interview in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025. The use of IEDs by the ADF at a hospital would constitute an attack on a protected facility and would thus be unlawful. If the device is victim operated, its use would, furthermore, be inherently indiscriminate.

[129] Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), p. 45.
[130] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 52.
[131] Rome Statute, Article 8(2)(e)(v); ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 156.
[132] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[133] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[134] Interview in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025.
[135] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[136] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[137] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[138] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[139] See fn. 94 above.

Congolese officials in charge of security in North Kivu who were interviewed by Amnesty International, including the military governor, acknowledged weaknesses in responding to ADF's threat, but said the military and other security forces have been doing the best they can amid a myriad challenging circumstances. First and foremost, the ADF has been operating in a vast, triple-canopy rainforest, making finding and attacking fighters extremely difficult, and security forces are not equipped with the necessary intelligence and surveillance tools needed to repel the group.

Congolese authorities and analysts have also pointed out to the group's reliance on an extensive network of informants and collaborators embedded in communities, enabling the ADF to plan swift attacks and tactical movements. The FARDC commander in charge of directly supervising operations against the ADF reiterated this point about collaborators, and other challenges, in engagements with communities about the security situation.[140] Both government officials and outside experts said that the ADF has also amassed advanced technological capabilities, including access to the satellite-based internet system Starlink, jamming technology and cryptocurrency.[141]

An accumulation of threats in the eastern DRC and the resurgence of M23's violence and expansionist activity have placed significant demands on the Congolese security forces and MONUSCO.[142] Analysts who monitor ADF's operations and military response pointed out that as the ADF continued to expand its area of operation, UPDF troops have also become overstretched.[143] Additionally, the presence of FARDC troops is required during UPDF operations, but the reduced presence of Congolese troops due to their diversion to other areas of fighting has slowed down joint operations.[144]

Despite these challenges, state military forces still have a human rights obligation to protect civilians from actions by non-state actors. Authorities should strengthen mechanisms for the protection of civilians,

including by working with the UN and other partners, as well as with local communities, on improving and bringing to scale existing early warning mechanisms to allow rapid response ahead of attacks.[145]

Beyond the battlefield, there are dozens of ADF members and collaborators who were sentenced as well as suspects in custody awaiting trials.[146] Congolese military justice officials said they have been striving to investigate the group's activities and prosecute perpetrators but listed resource and capacity limitations among other hindrances.[147]

Military prosecution officials said they receive support from MONUSCO but much more was needed to help build internal capacities long term, including in forensics, evidence analysis and investigating crimes under international law.[148] Authorities should implement legal reforms that give civilian courts jurisdiction over war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, including by organizing training of judicial personnel and transfer of skills and expertise from military courts to civilian courts.

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[140] See, for example, Radio Okapi, "North Kivu: Civil society and the Sokola 1 command join forces in the face of security threats", 29 August 2025, https://tinyurl.com/46rcn95r (in French).
[141] Interviews in person, Beni, November 2025; Interviews by voice calls, February 2026. See also Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), pp. 41-42.
[142] Officials and observers cited this among the challenges to swiftly responding to attacks. Separately, Congolese officials have also pointed out that international peacekeepers used to support the FARDC in offensive operations against the ADF through the Force Intervention Brigade, but inflexible processes, operational constraints and specific requirements of contributing countries have prevented them from operating deep in the bush alongside Congolese soldiers the way UPDF soldiers do under Operation Shujaa. Interviews in person with officials in the North Kivu military government, Beni, 11-19 November 2025. For more on challenges facing MONUSCO, see, for example Institute for Security Studies (ISS), "MONUSCO's rigid mandate hinders civilian protection in eastern DRC", 12 January 2026, https://tinyurl.com/3z74x2vp; ISS, *Recalibrating MONUSCO: Mandate limits vs. political realities in eastern DRC,* 3 December 2025, https://tinyurl.com/mww3v4tv; News Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, "MONUSCO: A crossroads for modern peacekeeping", 11 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/325efy5w
[143] Interviews by voice calls, 30 January and 9 February 2026.
[144] Interviews by voice calls, 30 January and 9 February 2026. See also Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), para.14. Furthermore, other actions have caused tensions between the two allies engaged in Operation Shujaa, including unauthorized troop movement by Ugandan forces. See, for example, Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), paras 12-14.
[145] Designing and improving early warning mechanisms was among the key recommendations made at a forum held in Beni in February 2026 on dealing with the ADF crisis, bringing together various stakeholders including the FARDC, MONUSCO, civil society actors, community leaders and survivors. See, for example, Agence Congolaise de Presse, "Beni Forum: A task force has been established against the ADF", 26 February 2026, https://tinyurl.com/yc5c35fz (in French), Actualite.cd, "In Beni, the peace forum on the ADF issue is implementing strategies, including the creation of a 'local defense' task force", 26 February 2026, https://tinyurl.com/3f66rur8 (in French); Congo Forum, "End of the Beni Forum: towards an integrated strategy to eradicate the ADF threat", 26 February 2026, https://tinyurl.com/4w38fuuy (in French).
[146] Interviews in person with military prosecution and penitentiary officials, Beni, 21 November 2025.
[147] Interviews in person, Beni, 21 November 2025.
[148] Interviews in person, Beni, 21 November 2025.

ECONOMIC AND MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT OF ATTACKS

The ADF's relentless violence against civilians has had far reaching consequences. It has caused significant distress and trauma, has upended livelihoods, and disrupted entire villages' economies. Interviewees described to Amnesty International how their lives were no longer the same and how the impact of what they experienced has stayed with them long after surviving their encounters with the ADF.

The majority of the victims of the group's attacks in recent years have been farmers and others who live in villages with limited financial means. Death, destruction and displacement have put families in an even more precarious financial position and left many survivors embittered. Survivors have lost household items and belongings, merchandise, and money due to looting. Some former hostages end up paying off the debt incurred to make ransom payments for months after their release.

As mentioned above, the ADF's violence has prevented many fearful farmers from returning to their land. Survivors said they struggled to support themselves and their families as a direct consequence of missing out on harvesting their fields.

A woman who was abducted in an attack that left her husband dead in March 2025 said she now has to rely on people who are still able to farm to give her some food for her four children. "What I feed my children is not the same as before. It has become very difficult to pay rent; I left the house I was renting because I could not afford it and was obliged to find another place… My eldest child was in secondary school, but he has now stopped… because I can't pay his school fees," she said.[149]

Several interviewees were displaced more than once due to the ADF's violence. The older person who crawled out of the health facility that was raided in Byambwe in November 2025 had already moved three times prior due to attacks by the ADF in different villages in Lubero territory. The interviewee ended up staying with a relative in Butembo city after the latest attack. "It is very sad. What will finish us off here in Butembo is hunger. Everything is in the market, but you need money to get it," the older person said.[150]

A few interviewees who could no longer access their fields said that to make ends meet they have tried to take on daily wage work in the new locations to where they were displaced. But for some, their encounters with the ADF left them with serious health consequences. A former hostage who was forced to porter for days in the bush with fighters said it was not just that he was too afraid to return to his field, he has also been struggling with debilitating pain in his body for months since his release, such that he is no longer able to work. "The things they made us carry were too heavy, I have been struggling [since]," said the man who has eight children.[151]

The toll on interviewees' mental health was palpable during interviews. Several discussed experiencing flashbacks and nightmares. As mentioned in testimonies above, survivors witnessed loved ones being killed during attacks. Subsequent chapters detail how survivors were forced to watch inhumane acts and slaughtering of "offenders" in the group's camps, and how some were subjected to sexual violence and servitude.

These repeated attacks on civilians in and of themselves amount to torture and or cruel treatment, a war crime.[152] The mental health harm is long-lasting. A few interviewees said they had access to counselling through their churches or family members who paid for them to see mental health professionals. Survivors' testimonies highlighted the dearth of crucial mental health and psycho-social support services and the need for the government and international partners, including humanitarian and development actors, to ensure that these services are provided in an ethical and sustainable manner.

A woman who was abducted by the ADF in July 2025 and witnessed the fighters killing other civilians said: "When I returned home, that image kept coming to my mind. A psychologist helped me because I kept reliving what happened in my mind… the images of when they caught me, when they slapped me. Sometimes when I close my eyes, I see someone in a military uniform in front of me."[153] She said it helped to talk to the psychologist who was visiting her church from another place; she no longer has access to one and cannot afford to pay for counselling.

[149] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[150] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.
[151] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[152] Rome Statute, Article 8(2)(a)(ii).
[153] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.

A survivor of the Ntoyo attack, in which fighters killed more than 60 people, including mourners at a wake, said that two months after the attack he struggled with memory and concentration. "My mind is not sharp… and even until now, I always dream about what happened," he said.[154]

A farmer who was abducted for a month in April 2025 said intrusive thoughts about what he experienced consistently rendered him sleepless. "I keep praying to God to make me forget so that I can feel alive again," he said.[155]

At the end of interviews, Amnesty International asked survivors their reflections on what would make things right for them. Variations of that question included what justice would look like to them and what would they ask of their government and the international community. The vast majority of interviewees said first and foremost, peace and security need to be restored for them to be able to rebuild their lives; several interviewees said the international community should support Congolese authorities with the technical means needed to go after ADF fighters deep in the bush.

Many interviewees stressed how the ADF's violence has been a major barrier to their ability to support themselves and their families. Pending putting an end to this violence, interviewees said, livelihood opportunities are needed to support them in the interim.

Victims of violations of international law have the right to full reparation.[156] This right entails adequate, prompt and effective redress in the form of compensation, restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition.[157] Reparations must be gender sensitive and must consider pre-existing power imbalances.

In the words of an older woman who was displaced several times due to violence by both M23 and the ADF and narrowly escaped being caught up in the ADF's November Byambwe attack:

> **I am always wondering when this situation will end… People are being killed every day. When will it end? NALU and M23 are all in one basket. Over here M23 is killing people, and the ADF is also killing people. We always wonder and ask ourselves, are we not part of the international community? Why is this happening in the Congo... We know the international community cares about human rights and can stop this situation… Why are they not doing that?[158]**

[154] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[155] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[156] UN Basic Principles on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law, adopted on 16 December 2005, Principle 7(b). This is applicable also in the context of actions committed by private persons or entities. See, for example, UN Committee on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR), General Comment 31: The Nature of the General Legal Obligation Imposed on States Parties to the Covenant, 26 May 2004, UN Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add. 13, para. 8.
[157] For the general principle, see International Court of Justice (ICJ), *The Factory at Chorzów (Claim for Indemnity)*, 26 July 1927, https://tinyurl.com/38hxhkkm; International Law Commission, Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, 2001, Article 1. For more details on the international law principles that underpin the legal framework of reparations, see Octavio Amezcua-Noriega, *Reparation Principles Under International Law and Their Possible Application by the International Criminal Court: Some Reflections*, Essex Transitional Justice Network of the University of Essex, August 2011, https://tinyurl.com/mwemd24p
[158] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.

5. ABDUCTION, HOSTAGE-TAKING AND FORCED LABOUR

> **"If you got tired, they killed you."**
>
> A 23-year-old woman who was abducted by the ADF in March 2025.[159]

Amnesty International documented 46 cases of abduction by the ADF in North Kivu and Ituri provinces, directly interviewing 25 former abductees.[160] Out of the 46, seven were cases of hostage-taking.[161] Men, women and children spoke of agonizing stretches of time spent in captivity in the region's thick forests. Some were gone so long their families held funerals for them.

Abduction and hostage-taking were associated with ill-treatment, at times amounting to torture. Abductees were subjected to physical violence including beatings, forced labour, sexual slavery and at times unlawful killings. Some were forced to take part in attacks. Witnesses also said that abductees were killed by the FARDC and the UPDF in attacks targeting ADF fighters.

As mentioned above, ADF fighters abduct civilians en masse during incursions into communities. Witness testimonies also indicate that fighters routinely abduct farmers and other civilians one or two at a time during their signature pattern of constant movement through the region. The group also employs deceit to lure abductees. Two former abductees said they were tricked into traveling to other locations only to find themselves forcibly taken to the group's camps.[162]

The group has long set up camps deep in the forest. Locations and sizes of the camps have changed over the years, primarily in response to military operations. At the time of publication, the main camp Madina, where ADF's top leader Musa Baluku is based, is reported to be in the eastern part of Ituri's Mambasa territory; several other camps are also believed to be located in the province.[163] One of the ADF's deadliest groupings is based out of a camp in north-western Lubero territory in North Kivu.[164]

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[159] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[160] The remaining 18 cases were documented through interviewing relatives and others who witnessed the abduction and provided names of, and other details about, the abductees. More than half of the 46 documented cases of abduction were of individuals taken in 2025.
[161] The ICC defines hostage-taking as the act of seizing or detaining a person alongside threatening "to kill, injure or continue to detain" the person and conditioning the release and safety of that person on a third party carrying out – or abstaining from – an act. ICC, Elements of Crimes, Article 8 (2) (c) (iii) War crime of taking hostages, p. 23. See also ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 96.
[162] One interviewee said they were promised a job by an acquaintance; the other said they were deceived by a family member who told them they were being taken to another school. The interviewees said they found out that the acquaintance and the family member were ADF members after the abduction unfolded. Gender-neutral, third-person pronouns are used for the interviewees' safety and security. Interview in person, Lume, 22 November 2025; Interview in person, Beni, 24 November 2025.
[163] See, for example, Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), paras 15-16 and pp. 31-35.
[164] Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), para. 17 and pp. 31-35.

FARDC soldiers inspect the site of an ADF ambush on two vehicles on 7 April 2021 in Mbau. ADF fighters routinely abduct civilians during large-scale attacks as well as ambushes on roads and raids on farms. © Brent Stirton / Getty Images

Some of the abductees managed to escape, including during FARDC and UPDF operations. Several told Amnesty International that they ended up in Congolese and Ugandan military detention, sometimes for months, subjected to repeated interrogation.

The ADF relies heavily on abduction to fill its ranks – not just for fighting purposes but for basic day to day functions. Former abductees, researchers and others who spoke with Amnesty International reinforced that the group's leadership is primarily made up of foreign fighters. Meanwhile, the group's ideology and lack of popular support in the region where it operates in the eastern DRC has meant it does not draw many volunteers.[165] Combined, these elements are understood to be what fuels the group's ferocious use of abduction, with that then triggering a myriad other abuses.

This chapter details accounts of former abductees, including on forced portering and guiding during incursions as well as the various tasks abductees were made to do in ADF camps.[166] Hostage-taking and torture and other ill-treatment are serious violations of international humanitarian law and constitute war crimes. The chapter also highlights how, after coming out of the group's captivity, victims were further subjected to seemingly arbitrary detention by authorities.

HOSTAGE-TAKING

Amnesty International's interviews indicate that the ADF has increasingly turned to abductions for ransom. The UN Group of Experts made the same assessment and reported that this was likely due to ADF experiencing financial challenges.[167] Amnesty International interviewed seven former hostages who were abducted in 2025 and whose families were forced to pay a ransom in exchange for their release.[168] The amounts ranged between US$100 to US$10,000. Whatever the amount, though, it was exorbitant for all hostages – their families sold possessions, went into debt, and collected from loved ones to make the payments.

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[165] United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), *"Our Strength Is In Our Youth": Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, January 2019, https://tinyurl.com/4awxd8nr, p. 30.
[166] Two subsequent chapters will focus specifically on recruitment and use of children and the practice of taking women and girls as sex slaves.
[167] Group of Experts, *Final report*, 4 June 2024 (previously cited), p. 54.
[168] At least two others interviewed by Amnesty International mentioned rebels demanding a ransom in exchange for their release, but they did not end up paying for varying reasons.

A 23-year-old woman abducted in March 2025 while making charcoal in a village in Beni territory near Virunga National Park said:

> **When we got to the bush, they started asking for money. They gave me a phone to talk to my family. My family responded that the amount they were asking for was too much; they were asking for US$5,000. My family said they cannot get that amount. Then they said, 'If you don't get that amount, we will kill her.' After that, my family said they can get a part of the amount… My family started a collection for contributions… asking relatives to give what they can [169]**

Ultimately, it took the family a month to secure her release after sending the fighters US$1,000 through a mobile phone-based transfer, staggered over two payments.[170]

A farmer in his late 40s, who was abducted in April 2025, also in Beni territory, said the group of fighters that had taken him and others were asking hostages' families for US$5,000. His family was able to wire US$1,300. "[My family] borrowed from the neighbours… I have been paying it back, but have not yet paid it off completely," he said during the interview seven months after the abduction.[171] "I have not been able to go back to the farm. I am still afraid."[172]

A farmer who was likely taken by the same group of fighters said his family paid US$800 to secure his release. "My family was sending the money bit by bit" over the period of a month, he said.[173] They sold – at a significant loss – a motorcycle he had bought a few months prior, and initiated contributions from other family members, he added.[174]

Another former hostage with limited financial capabilities abducted in 2025 said the fighters initially asked for a US$15,000 ransom. His family had to both take a loan from a local financial institution and borrow from merchants in their area, he said. "It will take me time to pay off [the debt]… Every month there is interest… I don't have to pay interest to the merchants, but with the [financial] cooperative, it's different," he said, adding that he was released after the family paid US$10,000.[175]

A man in his early 40s, who was abducted for a few days in Irumu in October 2025, described to Amnesty International how he narrowly escaped having to pay a US$10,000 ransom. After he was taken by a group of fighters during an attack on a village, "their chief called on the phone and told them, 'If you haven't killed that man yet, tell his family to send US$10,000 and we will set him free,'" he said.[176] The fighters called his family and demanded they purchase mobile phone credit worth US$100, plus the US$10,000. The family wired the US$100 but he managed to escape from captivity shortly after.[177]

FORCED LABOUR AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Former abductees interviewed by Amnesty International described how physical and psychological abuse by the fighters started the moment they were captured. A pattern of using abductees for forced portering and guiding clearly emerged from the testimonies of both those who were held for short periods and others who remained in the group's captivity for a longer time. Former abductees who were held by the ADF for months and years also described a clear pattern of forcing abductees to carry out various tasks in the group's camps.

The 40-year-old farmer abducted in April 2025, who is mentioned above as a witness of looting, said as soon as ADF fighters took him, they forced him and others to carry the poultry they looted. He described being made to walk for eight hours on the first day before stopping at a site where the fighters decided to spend the night. He recounted:

> **When we reached that place, they took a rope and tied our legs. They took the rope that was already around our hands and wrapped it around our waist, tying us to a tree. That night, they did not tie up the**

[169] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[170] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[171] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[172] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[173] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[174] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[175] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[176] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.
[177] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025.

> **women. They gave the women bananas to feed us, a banana for each person. The women fed us while we remained tied. This continued for four days before we reached their camp.[178]**

He added that before reaching the camp he had noticed that another farmer from a neighbouring field who was abducted soon after him by the same group of fighters was no longer among the abductees. "One of the ADF fighters came to me and said, 'Do you see your friend? He was killed because he got tired.' He asked me to be very careful not to get tired," the farmer said.[179]

When the 23-year-old woman mentioned above was captured in March 2025 while making charcoal, she witnessed fighters kill and abduct other civilians as they headed towards the bush. The woman, who was displaced five times due to ADF's violence, said:

> **We were 10 [people] when they took me, but only three of us women made it to the camp…**
>
> **They cut [one] man's neck and proceeded to slaughter others on our way. On the way, if you got tired, they killed you. That's what happened to the others. They got tired and they killed them… We watched as they killed them… I thought they were going to kill me as well; I was astonished they didn't…**
>
> **They made us carry things they collected from farms… We ate from the banana load we were carrying… they gave us one banana in the morning and one banana in the evening.[180]**

Another farmer captured in the same region in April 2025 said fighters had abducted him while he was fetching water on his farm. The 38-year-old – who has three children, including an infant – described:

> **They came with other people they had captured… They caught me and tied my hands; we crossed a river and went into the bush. When we reached a certain place, they started taking food from farms and making us carry it. The whole way we were carrying this food. We spent four days before we met another group of theirs in the bush…**
>
> **We kept walking from 6am to 6pm. When it got dark, we slept. We were walking with many things on our heads. They were giving us two bananas to eat a day, one in the morning and one in the evening… On the eighth day, we crossed the Mbau-Kamango road. After that, we spent 15 days in the bush I don't know in which direction…**
>
> **The whole time I was thinking about my family. I was thinking about how young my children are and that I will die and leave them alone. It hurt a lot thinking about that.[181]**

The group's ill-treatment of abductees went beyond giving them very little food and making them walk for hours with heavy loads. A teacher in his 40s, who was abducted for nearly two weeks in September 2025, said:

> **They called me *kafiri* [or infidel]. I was not allowed to get inside their tent. I was exposed to insects, the rain, the cold… The water we drank, we fetched from the river… I was very weak… I had to spend one week in the hospital [after I came out of captivity].[182]**

Similar to other interviewees, he said fighters made a point to sow fear in abductees by making an example out of others. He described how abductees were made to walk through the bush in one line and that at one point when he caught up with another abductee who had been walking in front of him "they had chopped off his arm… and they left him there screaming".[183] The injured man was likely being punished for struggling with his load. According to the teacher, the injured man's wife stopped responding to the fighters' orders after seeing her husband maimed and left to bleed to death, which culminated in her, too, being killed later that night. "They said they can kill anyone who is not a Muslim… They said it was up to them who they kill and who they spare."[184]

A 40-year-old woman who survived two attacks by the ADF described serious complications she experienced with two pregnancies. In 2024, when she was abducted by ADF fighters during an attack on her workplace, she was three months pregnant.[185] She was not visibly pregnant at the time, and as they did with other

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[178] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[179] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[180] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[181] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[182] Interview in person, Beni, 13 November 2025.
[183] Interview in person, Beni, 13 November 2025.
[184] Interview in person, Beni, 13 November 2025.
[185] The details of the attack are being withheld for her privacy and security.

abductees, they gave her a heavy load to carry. After hours of walking, the fighters got into a gunbattle, and she managed to run away. No sooner had she arrived at home than she miscarried, she said.[186]

In August 2025, she was taken by ADF fighters again while on a farm in a different location in Beni territory. This time, she was eight months pregnant. She described what happened to her before she was let go and managed to connect with other survivors along a road:

> **[The fighters] asked me to carry a load… but one of them said 'No, she is pregnant and about to give birth. Maybe the child she gives birth to will help us one day. Let her go.' One of them who wanted me to carry a load hit me on my back and kicked me. I fell. I had complications with my pregnancy and was brought to the hospital for a caesarean section to deliver the baby, even though I had not completed term yet.[187]**

In both instances, fighters had asked her to provide directions to where they wanted to go to next, she said. At least four other former abductees mentioned to Amnesty International that they were forced into guiding or were asked for directions.

Another woman who was pregnant when she was abducted in July 2025, also in Beni territory, had a similar experience. She was on a farm working alongside several members of her family, including her husband and one of her children. Her family members ran and were chased by several fighters, while she and others were captured and stayed with the rest of the group. She recounted:

> **I was three and a half months pregnant… My belly was showing and they saw that… They asked one [fighter] to tie me. But another one said not to do so because I was pregnant. One of them slapped me because I was crying. The one who said I should be left untied asked the one who slapped me to take me to their chief…**
>
> **The chief started asking me questions. He asked me which direction [a village] was…They took the money and food I had on me and asked me to accompany them on the road leading to [another village]… There they killed four boys… The chief said they won't kill me because I am pregnant. They left me two days after that.**
>
> **When they let me go, I thought they had killed my family. I was so shaken, like my life was shattered. I was very weak, I couldn't run. I walked slowly for two days until I got out of the bush.[188]**

Mercifully, she said, her husband and child managed to evade being captured by the fighters who had chased after them. But the child was injured while running, she said.[189]

A 31-year-old woman who was abducted while shepherding her family's livestock in the summer of 2024 in a village in Lubero territory said: "They caught me and all our goats… They asked me for directions and told me I am the one who will take them to [another village]… Anyone they found on the road, they killed. I spent one month walking in the bush with them," she said, adding that she was set free after ADF fighters got into a gunbattle with an armed group on the government's side.[190] "At that time, I had a little child who I had left with my grandmother [the day I was abducted]. When I came back, they were surprised. They thought I was killed."[191]

A farmer in his early 40s who was abducted in Beni territory in February 2025 while checking on his crops said he was asked by the fighters about the location of the military camp in the area. He added that the fighters then tried to probe further about the size of the camp and the capabilities of the force there and that he told them he wouldn't know.[192] He was released by the fighters a few hours later after they became concerned that their location was compromised. When he got home, "I hugged my children really hard; they were almost going to become orphans."[193]

Former abductees who were held in captivity for months and years described being moved from smaller camps, predominantly made up of fighters who carry out incursions and other attacks, to larger camps where the group's leadership, their dependents, and many more abductees were present. Abductees –

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[186] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.
[187] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.
[188] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[189] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[190] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025. The interviewee was not sure if the other side with whom the ADF fighters got into a gunbattle were UPDF soldiers or a local armed group aligned with the Congolese government.
[191] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.
[192] Interview in person, Beni, 17 November 2025.
[193] Interview in person, Beni, 17 November 2025.

adults and children – were compelled to carry out specific communal tasks in the camps or face death. This included fetching food and water, cooking, providing care for others, going into communities to collect information, picking up deliveries dropped in the bush, mining and performing different tasks during attacks.

Amnesty International interviewed a woman who was abducted in 2025 and taken to one of ADF's camps in Ituri.[194] There, camp supervisors determined she was not strong enough to carry food and instead assigned her the task of looking after women who gave birth and their newborns.[195] She recounted:

Amnesty International interviewed a woman who was abducted in 2025 and taken to one of ADF's camps where she was assigned to care for women who gave birth and their newborns. © Amnesty International

I started cooking for these women. I would help the women who gave birth move to another place if a [military] drone flew above us. I would gather all their things and give them to those in charge of carrying items…

One day, Ugandan soldiers attacked us… [Camp leaders] asked us to gather all the food and put it in a basket. Some of the women who gave birth had undergone [caesarean section] surgeries, some gave birth the normal way. For those who gave birth through surgery, we covered the wound with some sort of plastic we had, and we put the baby on their back. Those who gave birth [without surgery] helped us carry our dishes because we had to move the camp when the UPDF was attacking us. We moved with all the children and gave them some of the load to carry.[196]

She said that in the camp where she stayed, those who were given tasks and not "married off" were assigned a "father" to supervise them. She described her experience with the man who supervised her, saying: "He was strict… If you did something he didn't like he would hit you… For example, if you ate with your left hand… if you didn't wash the children… if you spread your legs while kneading bread, he would beat you… He told us we must keep our legs closed."[197]

She added that, like others in the camp, she was also made to take part in attacks. "I did not kill anyone. But I participated in attacks where they killed people… My task was to collect mobile phones and ID cards from people they were going to kill."[198] She said, "there were two kinds of people" in the camps: those who did what they had to do to spare their lives, and "those who were helping them because they work with them".[199]

As mentioned above, fighters systematically force abductees to carry goods when they abduct them from their communities until they reach the group's camps. For some who remained in the camps for months and years, that became their "job". A former abductee who remained captive for six months before escaping said:

> **When they took us to the bush, they taught us how to become Muslim. They said, 'If you refuse, you will be slaughtered.' We were like slaves there. My task was to carry loads… My job was only to carry loads and pray…**
>
> **[Fighters] would go on attacks and abduct people. Before they went, they would tell us to wait somewhere. The people they abducted would come with them carrying the load until the place where they asked us to wait. Then, they would kill those people, and we would carry the load [to the main camp]… I was afraid when we went on attacks because there was so much gunfire.[200]**

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[194] Details about this interviewee and the circumstances of her abduction, including exactly when and where she was abducted, are withheld for her safety.
[195] Interview in person, Beni, 17 November 2025.
[196] Interview in person, Beni, 17 November 2025.
[197] Interview in person, Beni, 17 November 2025.
[198] Interview in person, Beni, 17 November 2025.
[199] Interview in person, Beni, 17 November 2025.
[200] Interview in person, Beni, 24 November 2025.

A variation on that task was described by another former abductee who said she had told camp leaders she couldn't go on attacks because the sight of blood left her unwell. "They have many informants and collaborators who work for them in town. They buy stuff [for the group] and drop it off at a certain place... [They sent me] to pick up those things and bring them back to the camp," said the woman who remained captive for three years until she escaped in early 2025.[201]

Several former abductees described how civilians who were captured by the group became unwilling recruits. One woman who was abducted in Irumu and escaped in late 2024 after more than two years in captivity recounted:

> **One month after we arrived at the camp, they showed us how to use a machine gun, how to kill someone and how to cook their way… We were suffering…**
>
> **They taught us how to kill with weapons and with blades. They had books on all these weapons. The day they taught us how to kill, they demonstrated on a child… They killed the child. They showed us how to start with the neck and separate it from the body… He was maybe two years old. His mother died and left him, so they demonstrated on him… She died in an attack… and he was very malnourished.**
>
> **In the bush, you had to do what you were told. You cannot be weak. When they say, 'cook', you cook. When they say, 'go fetch water', you do that…**
>
> **When we were being trained, they taught us, 'just shoot on everything you see'. You couldn't know if you killed someone or not during attacks. But we would listen to the news after that to know how many people were killed.[202]**

A woman in her 30s, who spent years with the group after being abducted from her home during an attack on a village in Beni territory, described how various forms of forced labour imposed on abductees were at the heart of the group's financial survival. One of the examples she gave – and which she witnessed and partook in – involved gold mining in an area on the border of North Kivu and Ituri. "We were collecting gold… they gave us shovels and other instruments… We did that in our own quarries… and sometimes we went to other quarries and took gold from there."[203]

The UN Group of Experts has cited former fighters and others as saying that the ADF has also been extorting abductees by conditioning their release on becoming collaborators.[204] Security officials, human rights defenders and researchers have told Amnesty International that the group heavily relies on an elaborate network of collaborators and informants.[205]

ENDANGERMENT AND DEATH

Forced labour and other inadequate living conditions in the bush have resulted in many deaths of abductees, witnesses said. The ADF also endangered abductees' lives by placing them in the company of fighters and at the locations of military operations.

Practically all those who were abducted described the terrain and overall conditions they experienced in the forests alongside ADF fighters as challenging and extremely difficult. At least three interviewees recounted how abductees with whom they were in the bush died of apparent malnutrition and exhaustion.[206]

One interviewee described how her camp was ordered to relocate and join another leader's camp further south, resulting in a months-long trek. "We started walking today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow… without any rest. At that time, people died not from being shot, but from getting tired, and others from hunger… So many people died."[207]

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[201] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.
[202] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[203] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.
[204] Group of Experts, *Final report*, 4 June 2024 (previously cited), p. 52. Human rights defenders also mentioned this in conversations with Amnesty International, however, none of the former abductees interviewed by the organization relayed that this was their personal experience.
[205] Interviews in person and by voice call, October 2025 – January 2026. Authorities have arrested and prosecuted several such individuals. See, for example, Africa News, "DRC: Military court convicts 23 people over collaboration with Allied Democratic Forces", 7 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/2dzmvk45
[206] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November; Interview in person, Lume, 22 November 2025; Interview in person, Beni, 24 November 2025.
[207] Interview in person, Lume, 22 November 2025.

Many former abductees said that when they were in the bush, they had no idea where they were and that they feared getting lost, or worse, if they attempted to break away from the group. One man who escaped after several days of captivity in Irumu described seeing the fighters boobytrap the path they took with him. "While we were walking, they were leaving bombs on the road… They would take the panga and dig a small hole. They would take batteries and connect some wires and fix it there [in the hole]. Then we would go… I saw them doing that twice," he said.[208]

Civilians who are not taking part in hostilities are not a legitimate target of attacks, and the emplacement of IEDs may constitute indiscriminate attacks. In addition, the ADF also failed to take precautions to protect the civilians they abducted from the effects of attacks by the FARDC and UPDF.

Several former abductees said their time in the bush was essentially a state of constantly being on the run. They described having to repeatedly duck and run whenever drones believed to belong to the UPDF hovered above them. One woman who was captive for several months said:

> **There weren't four days that would pass before we saw a drone… When the drone flew above us, we would hide. When it passed, we would start moving… On the first day I arrived at the camp, the drone dropped bombs… After a few minutes we heard the explosion and saw the smoke… Many of us were injured… Some died… I don't know how many.[209]**

A former abductee taken from Mayangose, a site of frequent ADF attacks, described how a few days into his captivity, FARDC shelling caused him and other abductees to scurry in the bush accompanied by fighters. "We could see the bombs that were being fired from Mavivi [base] landing where we were," the former abductee said.[210] The abductees had to manage running while carrying on their heads the load the rebels had forced them to carry.[211]

That witness said the group of fighters he was traveling with had additionally dodged at least two clashes with FARDC soldiers. The first one was on the first day he was abducted and it resulted in one abductee being injured by gunfire and then subsequently being slashed to death by the fighters.[212] The second involved a group of hostages who had paid ransoms and were leaving the bush alongside a few ADF fighters who were guiding them. They encountered FARDC soldiers who shot at them, resulting in the death of a hostage, he said.[213] At least two former hostages who secured their release after ransom payments said the fighters told them to follow the same path they travelled in the bush on their way out lest they get lost and subsequently killed by FARDC soldiers.

Indeed, abductees who managed to escape from fighters in the melee of exchanges of fire with the FARDC or the UPDF said they still faced danger when they encountered troops. A woman who was abducted in Mayangose said:

> **[The ADF] started fighting with the FARDC and that's when I escaped. I had no idea where the direction I took was leading. I took the same direction as a man who was also among those who were abducted. We came face-to-face with a soldier who wanted to shoot us. The man with whom I ran knelt on the ground, raised his hands up and pleaded, 'We are not rebels. We are civilians.'[214]**

The soldier did not shoot but, as mentioned above in this section on 'Endangerment and Death', several other witnesses recounted incidents in which other abductees lost their lives when FARDC and UPDF troops pursued ADF fighters in the bush or when they targeted the group's camps.

Another fear highlighted by abductees who managed to escape is the reaction they encountered from civilians when emerging from the bush. Several former abductees said they returned to their communities dirty and dishevelled and from the direction of ADF strongholds. Interviewees said that civilians who met them on the way often suspected that they were ADF fighters not civilians who were abducted, exposing

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[208] Interview in person, Beni, 18 November 2025. By "bombs", he was referring to improvised explosive devices. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the ADF has a record of making and using IEDs.
[209] Interview in person, Beni, 17 November 2025.
[210] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025. The witness used the word "bombs", but it was most likely ground shelling, not air-dropped bombs.
[211] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[212] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[213] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[214] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.

them to the risk of street justice. There have been instances of community members lynching people they suspected to be ADF fighters.[215]

Several former abductees said that as a result of that fear, they chose to directly go to their village chiefs or other authorities upon escaping so that they are not suspected as collaborators. But even that included risks. A former abductee said when he came out of captivity, he did not stop by the FARDC camp fearing that if he reported his abduction, authorities would suspect he was being sent to spy. Ultimately, he went to the local office of the national intelligence, as the fighters who had seized his mobile phone were using it to make calls and community leaders he contacted advised him that he needed to notify intelligence officials.[216]

ADF violence against civilians that is documented in this chapter undermines a myriad of rights, including the rights to life; to liberty and security; to freedom from torture, cruel or inhuman treatment; to freedom from forced labour; and to physical and mental health.

As a party to an internal armed conflict, the ADF is obligated to respect international humanitarian law, including prohibitions against murder of civilians or captured fighters; enforced disappearances; and arbitrary deprivation of liberty.[217] The group is also required to respect the right to family life, which includes an obligation to inform family members about whether their relative is being detained or has been killed.[218]

The instances of hostage-taking documented in this chapter are violations of the norm of customary international law prohibiting hostage-taking in non-international armed conflict.[219] Hostage-taking is also prohibited by Common Article 3 to the Geneva Conventions.[220]

Customary and treaty-based international humanitarian law also prohibits torture and cruel and unusual punishment.[221] The DRC is a party to other key treaties that explicitly prohibit torture, including, the Convention against Torture (CAT), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).[222]

Taking of hostages, and torture and cruel treatment are war crimes.[223]

Under international humanitarian law, uncompensated or abusive forced labour during conflict is prohibited.[224] Forced portering and guiding also violate international human rights law, including provisions of the Forced Labour Convention, which the DRC has ratified.[225]

The fact that the ADF abducted these civilians, severely restricted their movements and prohibited them from leaving ADF camps unless instructed to may constitute the crime against humanity of imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty.[226] Furthermore, since civilians were subjected to beatings for punishment, intimidation or coercion, in addition to other physical and mental pain or suffering while held under ADF's control, and as part of a widespread and systematic attack on a population, it may also amount to the crime against humanity of torture.[227]

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[215] See, for example, Group of Experts, *Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 2 June 2020, UN Doc. S/2020/482, para. 138; Al Jazeera, "Crowd in DRC lynches 2 'suspected rebels' as UN envoy visits", 1 December 2019, https://tinyurl.com/zuhfpm3t; New Vision, "Three dead in protests after DR Congo massacre", 18 August 2016, https://tinyurl.com/y7radxvs
[216] Interview in person, Beni, 17 November 2025.
[217] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rules 89, 98, 99.
[218] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rules 105, 98, 117.
[219] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rules 96 and 97.
[220] Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention), Article 3.
[221] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 90; Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 3.
[222] UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies, UN Treaty Body Database: Ratification Status for Democratic Republic of Congo, https://tinyurl.com/bddfwzde (accessed on 30 March 2026).
[223] Rome Statute, Article 8(2)(c)(iii) and (i).
[224] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 95. Some experts have also argued that forcible recruitment of adults by non-state armed groups also amounts to outrages upon personal dignity, which is a war crime. See Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre, *Legal Brief: Forcible Recruitment of Adults by Non-State Armed Groups in Non-International Armed Conflict*, May 2019, https://tinyurl.com/bdefey7f, pp. 17-19. See also Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 3; ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 90; Rome Statute, Article 8(2)(c)(ii).
[225] Forced Labour Convention (International Labour Organization Convention 29), ratified by the DRC on 20 September 1960. ILO, Information System on International Labour Standards: Ratifications for Democratic Republic of Congo, https://tinyurl.com/2r9baa2n (accessed on 30 March 2026).
[226] Rome Statute, Article 7(1)(e).
[227] Rome Statute, Article 7(1)(f). See also ICC, *Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen*, ICC-02/04-01/15, Trial Chamber IX judgment, 4 February 2021, paras 2702-2704. In the Ongwen case, the ICC found that the beatings, constant threat of beatings or death, being forced to walk barefoot or not fully clothed through the bush for long distance that abductees suffered in the hands of the armed group LRA was considered torture.

MODUS OPERANDI, STRUCTURE AND CAPABILITIES

Amnesty International interviewed former abductees who spent time in captivity in all ADF's major camps, including Madina, and witnessed the presence of several of the key leaders who were identified by the UN Group of Experts and included in the Security Council's sanctions list.

Former abductees confirmed the group's functioning under a centralized command and control structure under the leadership of Musa Baluku, who was repeatedly referred to by interviewees as akin to a "president".[228] They identified other commanders as heads of the subgroups operating other camps, corroborating UN-reported locations of these main camps, as well as their merging, dispersal and territorial shifts due to military operations.[229]

A few interviewees also made references to the group's affiliation to the Islamic State, including hearing about the existence of a higher leader above Baluku (that is, the Caliph of the Islamic State) and to channels of communication and reporting to an entity in Somalia.[230] Analysts, who have tracked the group's actions and hierarchy over time, told Amnesty International that information aligns with what they know about the group reporting to an Islamic State centralized guidance bureau in Somalia.[231]

Testimonies confirmed the group's mobile nature and its operation through smaller attack cells that carry out orders and bring back loot for distribution and abductees to sustain the camps. Witnesses said that in addition to Ugandan leaders and members, fighters included individuals from other foreign countries, including Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan and Tanzania.[232]

Witnesses also confirmed UN reporting about the group's use of AK style assault rifles, PKM machine guns, mortar launchers, IEDs and drones.[233]

DETENTION BY THE MILITARY

Ten former abductees told Amnesty International that when they encountered soldiers or civilians after emerging from the bush, they were taken into the custody of the military intelligence, colloquially known as T2, primarily in a detention facility in Beni.[234] Interviewees said they were detained for varying periods that ranged between seven days to five months.[235]

Testimonies indicate that the former abductees were crammed in crowded and unsanitary rooms and provided insufficient food. Interviewees said men and women were held in separate quarters but that only one wash facility was available for both.

A former abductee in her 20s who remained in detention for two weeks said:

> **I slept on the floor… There were more than 14 of us [in that room]… It was a building like a prison. We were in a room for women [detainees], and there was another room for men [detainees]. In my room, we were 14 women who had come from ADF [camps]. There was another cell where there were women who came out from other [armed] groups… In my cell, there were also some children born in the bush with the ADF. [The place] was dirty… Some people were caught in the bush, others on the road, and all of us were sleeping next to each other.[236]**

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[228] Interviews in person, November 2025. See also Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), paras 23-25.
[229] Group of Experts, *Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 10 June 2021, UN Doc. S/2021/560, paras 11-15 and pp. 45-53; Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), paras 15-17.
[230] Interviews in person, November 2025.
[231] Interviews by voice calls, 30 January 2026 and 9 February 2026.
[232] Interviews in person, November 2025.
[233] See also Group of Experts, *Final report*, 3 July 2025 (previously cited), p. 219; Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 27 December 2024 (previously cited), p. 41-42; Group of Experts, *Final report*, 10 June 2021 (previously cited), paras 17, 19-25 and pp. 58-62.
[234] This section details arrest and detention by Congolese authorities and touches on conditions of detention in the eastern DRC. It does not cover the arrest and detention of civilians captured in operations against the ADF by Ugandan troops in the Congo and their transfer to Uganda. Amnesty International did interview five former abductees who spent time in various detention facilities, as well as a rehabilitation centre, in Uganda after being apprehended by the UPDF either in military operations in the eastern DRC or when they crossed into Uganda with ADF fighters. More research is needed to document conditions of detention in Uganda.
[235] All 10 interviewees were adults. The fate of children associated with the ADF who were apprehended by authorities is addressed in a subsequent chapter.
[236] Interview in person, Beni, 17 November 2025.

Several former abductees expressed dismay that after their ordeal in ADF captivity seemed to have ended, they found themselves deprived of their liberty again. A former hostage who was released by the rebels after her family paid a ransom said of her experience in military detention:

> **They interrogated me every day… They were rough… They were saying the ADF sent us to the community with a mission… They were asking us about that. We told them we were suffering from this bad situation; how could we accept to work for the rebels… I told the military these rebels killed many in my family, how can I work for them?[237]**

She remained in T2 custody for seven days. Another former hostage, whose family also paid a ransom in exchange for his release from ADF captivity, said he remained in FARDC custody for three weeks. "There is no justice in Congo! If there was, we would not have been stuck at the military intelligence," he said.[238]

A former abductee who escaped from captivity said he was with the fighters for five days only, while the FARDC detained him for three months. "They took me and put me in jail. I started telling them, 'What is the matter? I just came back from a dangerous place and instead of taking care of me, you are jailing me?' Their response was that they were investigating my case," he said, lamenting that he missed the birth of a child as a result.[239]

Not all interviewees said they felt the interrogators – or overall conditions – were harsh. A woman who was detained for three months said the soldiers "were very kind to us". She added: "The only problem at the military intelligence was the food… We were eating just once a day… in the evening at 5pm… They were giving us maize and beans."[240] She and others said families were allowed to visit and to bring them food, clothes and hygiene supplies.[241]

Interviewees said that, in most cases, after the military had concluded their interrogation, the former abductees were handed over to civil society leaders, who in turn took them home.

Amnesty International did not investigate the legal basis of these detentions, but, prima face, the lengthy periods of and conditions in confinement are of concern. Further research into this issue is needed.

Soldiers conduct a rapid deployment exercise on 24 May 2021 on the outskirts of Mutwanga, which has been repeatedly attacked by the ADF. © Alexis Huguet / AFP via Getty Images

[237] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[238] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[239] Interview in person, Beni, 12 November 2025.
[240] Interview in person, Beni, 19 November 2025.
[241] Interview in person, Beni, 19 November 2025.

6. RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN

> **"We were not allowed to play."**
>
> A young man who was abducted by the ADF when he was under 15 and stayed with the group around two years.[242]

Amnesty International interviewed two formerly abducted children, plus three young people abducted when they were children, who were used by the ADF for various purposes. A sixth case was documented of a boy who told Amnesty International he was abducted by fighters for the purpose of being used but he managed to escape after a few days in captivity. The interviewees were aged 13-17 when they were abducted.[243]

Many former abductees and witnesses of attacks interviewed by Amnesty International said they saw children believed to be as young as 10 participating in the group's activities.[244] Numerous former abductees and other witnesses also identified children they knew who were abducted and used by the ADF.

Armed groups operating in the eastern DRC, including the ADF, have a long history of recruiting and using children,[245] including as fighters, porters, cooks, messengers and spies. Despite consistent efforts by the DRC government in partnership with the UN to end and prevent the recruitment of children, armed groups continue the practice.[246] In a report submitted to the UN Human Rights Council in early 2026 by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, DRC topped the countries being reported on with the highest numbers of abducted and recruited and used children.[247] The ADF has been consistently listed by the UN among the actors most responsible for abuses against children in the DRC, including specifically abduction and recruitment and use.[248]

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[242] Interview in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025.
[243] At the time of the interviews, three of the six were still under 18.
[244] In talking about the children, some of the witnesses used the word *kadago*, the colloquial term used to refer to children associated with armed groups.
[245] See, for example, Amnesty International, *Democratic Republic of Congo: Children at War*, (Index: AFR 62/034/2003), 8 September 2003, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr62/034/2003/en/; MONUSCO, *"Our Strength Is In Our Youth": Child recruitment and use by armed groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, January 2019 (previously cited).
[246] See, for example, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, *Preventing and Addressing Grave Violations Against Children During Armed Conflict in Domestic Law: Lessons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Colombia, and Ukraine*, November 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4mhppdv3
[247] UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *Children and Armed Conflict*, 23 December 2025, UN Doc. A/HRC/61/37, para. 7. Abduction and recruitment and use of children are two of the six "grave violations" against children monitored by the UN and periodically reported on by the Secretary-General per a 1999 UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution. UNSC, Resolution 1261 (1999), adopted on 25 August 1999, UN Doc. S/RES/1261. In 2005, the council created a Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) to document and report on the six grave violations, and to provide the basis for the Secretary-General to list state forces and non-state groups committing such violations, and for the UN to engage with such actors so as to secure concrete commitments – through action plans – to end and prevent them. UNSC, Resolution 1612 (2005), adopted on 26 July 2005, UN Doc. S/RES/1612.
[248] See, for example, UN Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 15 October 2024, UN Doc. S/2024/705, paras 22, 29, 66. See also UN Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict*, 17 June 2025, UN Doc. A/79/878-S/2025/247, paras 56, 62 and p. 38.

The ADF has been listed by the UN among the actors most responsible for abuses against children in the DRC, including abduction and recruitment and use. © Amnesty International

Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions sets the minimum age for recruitment or use in armed conflict by all parties to the armed conflict at 15 years old.[249] More recently, The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), ratified by DRC on 11 November 2001, prohibits the recruitment or use in hostilities of persons under 18 years old, including by non-state armed groups.[250] The recruitment of children under 15 years old or their active participation in hostilities are war crimes.[251]

CONSTANT MISERIES AND DEPRIVATIONS

Interviewees abducted as children spoke of how they were compelled into a variety of tasks during attacks, as well as to support life in the camps, including engaging in looting, carrying supplies and collecting food. Girls were also forced into "marriages".[252] Other witnesses also described that children were sent into communities to spy. Witness accounts drew a picture of robbed childhoods and a life of servitude.

A young man, who was abducted when he was under 15 and who ended up staying with the group around two years, described being taken alongside family members while on their farm.[253] After two months in a camp, he was separated from his family members and taken to another bigger camp. He recounted:

> **They put me in a group in charge of looking for food… There were other boys and girls in the group… Our principal activity was collecting food. We also washed our clothes and arranged where we slept.**

[249] Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), Article 4(3)(c).
[250] Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), Article 4(1). The Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention – to which the DRC is a party – prohibits the use of children in forced labour or in unlawful activities and requires state parties to assist victims of these violations with rehabilitation, social integration, and access to education. ILO Convention 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labour), Articles 3(a), 3(c), 6, 7(2). ILO, Ratifications for the DRC, https://tinyurl.com/2r9baa2n (accessed on 30 March 2026). More on how these children are also victims of trafficking in persons will be covered in the next chapter.
[251] Rome Statute, Article 8(2)(e)(vii); ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rules 136 and 137.
[252] The experiences of women and girls forced into marriages and the sexual slavery they sustained will be detailed in the next chapter.
[253] Amnesty International is withholding biographical and other details for the interviewee's privacy and security.

> **They preached Islam to us… They did that in Arabic; it was difficult for me to follow… When it was time to pray, I prayed with them. If you refused, they could kill you… They told us that.**
>
> **I was too afraid to attempt to escape. If you do and the population catches you, they would be the first to kill you. You can also run into the bombs they planted there and die… I saw them place bombs on the road… They do that in case FARDC is following them.[254]**

He described one incident when the group went on an attack and he was given bullets to carry for the commander leading the advance. "The [children] who were born there [in the bush] took part in fighting… For us who were abducted, they didn't give us weapons to fight so we don't escape," he said. He added that when boys turned 16, they were "given a wife", and that girls were "married off" at a younger age than that. The whole time in captivity, "I was thinking how can I leave this bush," he said, adding:

> **One day, I tried to escape [with a friend], but they caught us… They hit me until I was unable to walk… Living conditions there were not good at all… We were not allowed to play… I was lucky that when they caught me, they only hit me. There was a woman who tried to escape and when they caught her, they killed her in public. They called everyone to come and watch.[255]**

The young man was ultimately captured by UPDF and ended up spending around 18 months in detention in Uganda, bouncing between various facilities.[256] When he was sent back to the DRC, he spent a shorter period in detention before being released to his family.

A girl who was abducted when she was under 15 said she was taken from her house alongside an adult family member, but only she ended up being confined in the group's camps. She said she and other girls who were abducted were given "husbands" in the camp. She added: "They started teaching us Arabic because they were Muslims. After the Arabic lessons they gave us fighting training. When we finished that training, we started taking part in some attacks."[257]

She said she was given an automatic weapon – when she was still under the age of 15 – and that she took part in five attacks over a year and a half. Her role, she said, was to carry items looted during the attacks. She added that while she didn't kill people in the attacks she participated in, the group's fighters "killed people before my eyes".[258] Her time with the group came to an end after she was captured by UPDF soldiers. When she finally made it back home, "It was joyful. I was wondering, 'Am I really home!'" she said.[259]

A young woman, who was abducted when she was above the age of 15 after being tricked by a family member to travel to a location away from her home, described what it was like for her living with the group. She said she spent days crying and screaming after realizing she was abducted and learning that her family member was a member of the group, adding:

> **Many women came to our place to greet me. Some started telling me they joined the camp when they were young and now they have grown up, that I don't need to worry and that 'everything will be OK'. That's how I started living in the bush…**
>
> **When I had spent two weeks there, they started teaching me how to dress like a Muslim and how to pray. I did the *shahada* ceremony to become Muslim. Two months after that, they started training me to use a weapon… They gave us sticks and told us to pretend they were weapons… We would go to collect food.[260]**

She said that, unlike other girls, she was not given a "husband" and attributed that to having been brought into the group's fold by a family member. Like the two other interviewees above, she too was captured by the UPDF and spent time in detention there. "I ask the government to do all it can to release the many people who are in the bush unwillingly. There are many people there who were taken against their will," she said.[261]

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[254] Interview in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025.
[255] Interview in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025.
[256] Five former abductees told Amnesty International they spent time in various detention facilities in Uganda after being apprehended by the UPDF either in military operations in the eastern DRC or when they crossed into Uganda with ADF fighters.
[257] Interview in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025.
[258] Interview in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025.
[259] Interview in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025.
[260] Interview in person, Beni, 24 November 2025.
[261] Interview in person, Beni, 24 November 2025.

A teenage boy who was abducted in 2025, when he was over the age of 15, said he was taken from a farm alongside adult family members and neighbours. He said the adult abductees were killed and he and other children were taken by the fighters for days of travel into the bush. He added:

> **They said, 'You have become part of us. We will take you to [the main camp]'… They said, 'From now on, you will be called Ismail' and they gave my friend the name Hassan.[262] Other boys [who were with the group] said, 'If you accept to be with us here… if you want even eight wives, you will get them'…**
>
> **They took our pictures and sent them to their chief in [another camp]. They spoke to him on the phone saying, 'These young boys will be part of us, what do you think?' The chief approved.[263]**

The boy said he had been thinking of ways to escape throughout his seven days with the fighters, and when he heard that the chief approved of his recruitment, he decided he must try to flee. He managed to escape with another boy when the fighters were asleep. They reported themselves to a Congolese military camp on their way out of the bush and remained in detention for a week.[264] When he returned to his family's house, he said he realized the rebels had killed his father and lied to him about it when he had asked about the man's whereabouts "so I would work with them".[265]

A 30-year-old woman who was in ADF captivity for more than two years described her interactions with children who were receiving weapons training alongside her in one of the camps. She said:

> **There were child fighters [attending the training]… I would joke with these boys… There was one who was eight years old and another one who was 10… Before the attacks, they would send them in advance… [The boys] would start talking to people and saying they were hungry, meanwhile, they were looking around and then they would come back and tell us what they saw… They would collect information about the area we will attack.[266]**

REINTEGRATION CHALLENGES

The DRC has a long history of working on the issue of children associated with armed forces and armed groups.[267] That has entailed engaging with some armed groups to work on preventing the recruitment and use of children in the first place, as well as ensuring the release of children from these groups. However, according to child protection specialists working in the country, the ADF has not been one of the armed groups open to official engagement.[268] This has left child protection actors with a sizeable population of children associated with the ADF that requires care and that is only accessible after escape or capture by security forces.

The UN also reported that despite the existing framework for handing over children associated with armed groups to civilian protection actors, their detention – in contravention of international child justice standards – remains a concern.[269] Meanwhile, child protection actors have worked on providing support to children coming out of ADF captivity, including placing them in transit and orientation centres (CTOs) and transitional family-based care before unifying them with relatives in the DRC or abroad, or connecting them to foster

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[262] The names they were given have been changed here.
[263] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[264] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[265] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[266] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[267] The government signed a landmark action plan with the UN to end child recruitment in 2012 and followed that by a road map for implementation and the creation of associated working groups. See, for example, ICRC, "Ending the recruitment of children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): 2012–2017", IHL in Action, https://tinyurl.com/3wswkmkt; Watchlist, *Preventing and Addressing Grave Violations Against Children During Armed Conflict in Domestic Law: Lessons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, November 2025 (previously cited); UN Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 15 October 2024 (previously cited), paras 78-98. The DRC's 2009 law on child protection criminalizes child recruitment. DRC, Loi 09/001 portant protection de l'enfant [Law on the Protection of the Child], 10 January 2009 (available at https://tinyurl.com/bdz7cheh). Authorities prosecuted and convicted at least one ADF member for involvement in recruitment and use of children, handing her a sentence of 20-year imprisonment with hard labour. See, UN Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 15 October 2024 (previously cited), para. 88.
[268] Interviews in person and by calls with child protection specialists and others involved in reintegrating children, November 2025 – February 2026.
[269] See, for example, UN Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 15 October 2024 (previously cited), para. 103. One child protection actor told Amnesty International that it was their experience that security forces have a tendency to not view children associated with the ADF through the human rights framework of "victims first and foremost" and that they were, at times, suspicious of attempts to reintegrate children in communities without sufficient time interrogating them to verify their stories. Interviews by voice calls, 11 and 16 February 2026.

families in cases where the children's relatives and nationalities remain unidentified after an extended period.[270]

The government and its partners must redouble efforts to raise awareness that children associated with the ADF are victims first and foremost.[271] Experts have noted that despite steady efforts by the government and relevant partners, societal acceptance for child protection norms remains a challenge.[272] Donors must assist in addressing this challenge to ensure effective community healing.

Indeed, former abductees spoke about struggles with community acceptance and the economic challenges they face. For example, one of the girls who was abducted and spent close to two years with the group said: "I have a relative who says that since I was held by the ADF, I should not be back living with the family… I stay quiet, but it hurts."[273] A young woman who was abducted when she was 16 years old and stayed with the group for three years similarly said that when she ultimately returned to her village, whispers among community members have been hard to ignore. "They say 'that one lived with NALU. She has a bad heart like them,'" the young woman said.[274]

A former child abductee who was placed in the care of a foster family – because there were no relatives to care for her – said she felt she was being treated differently. "You are not treated the same way if you are an outsider and not a child of the house," she said.[275] She added that she had already developed anxiety as a result of what she experienced with the group and that her anxiety has been compounded by concerns that her future is entirely dependent on the support of the NGO that has helped with the placement and continued to pay for her education, rather than the love and care of the foster family that took her in.[276]

Actors involved in reintegration efforts said that psycho-social support was among the services provided to children associated with the group who came into their care,[277] and the UN has reported that there have been efforts to expand the network of social workers in communities.[278] But UN staff and others pointed out to the challenging aid environment, especially after the US rollback of international aid,[279] and preexisting concerns about the absence of predictable, sustainable support needed for long-term child reintegration programming.[280] Donor states should consider these challenges and ensure sustainable funding to child protection and reintegration programming, especially given MONUSCO's funding challenges.

As it is, several children and young adults associated with the group who were interviewed said that while they were grateful for the support they received from NGOs, it had not been enough to cover many of their basic needs, like clothing, or in providing sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Furthermore, interviews with former abductees also show that not all children abducted by the group have been connected with NGOs that provide support, leaving them behind when it comes to the possibility of accessing services, including psycho-social support. This seemed to be especially the case for those who did not spend lengthy periods in the bush with the group.

The teenage boy mentioned above who narrowly escaped being forced to join the group's ranks was one of those interviewed who was not connected to any services provided for children with similar experiences. Yet the impact on him was palpable. "Nowadays if I hear a gunshot, I don't feel well... I also no longer stand the sight of blood, even if it is that of a chicken or a goat," said the boy who had witnessed ADF members hack to death another abductee before his eyes.[281]

One challenge that children associated with the ADF raised in interviews is a persistent fear that they would be pursued by the group after they had escaped or been released. Several interviewees spoke of the group's expansive network of informants and feared that they would be identified by these informants. One former child abductee said she felt especially let down that authorities she was in touch with did not take her

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[270] Interviews in person and by calls with child protection actors and others involved in reintegration efforts, November 2025 – February 2026.
[271] See Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Principles), February 2007, https://tinyurl.com/y2uh2vwy, para. 3.6. For information on the DRC's endorsement of the Paris Principles see, ICRC, "Paris Principles Signatories", 30 September 2011, https://tinyurl.com/bdhshufc
[272] Watchlist, *Preventing and Addressing Grave Violations Against Children During Armed Conflict in Domestic Law: Lessons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, November 2025 (previously cited), p.9.
[273] Interview in person, Oicha, 13 November 2025.
[274] Interview in person, Lume, 22 November 2025.
[275] Interview in person, Beni, 24 November 2025.
[276] Interview in person, Beni, 24 November 2025.
[277] Interviews by voice calls with actors from two NGOs that work with children associated with the ADF, February 2026.
[278] See, for example, UN Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 15 October 2024 (previously cited), para. 98.
[279] Interviews in person and by voice calls, October 2025 – February 2026.
[280] See, for example, UN Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 15 October 2024 (previously cited), para. 110.
[281] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.

concern seriously when she raised the issue, including after she had mentioned that she had come across an ADF member who recognized her in the community where she was relocated after her release.[282]

The young woman said she had to move to another location as a result. Her message to the government: "I tell them they need to follow our cases. We need so much support. They shouldn't leave us on our own; we need a lot of support."[283]

More broadly, interviews with children and young adults who were formerly abducted and child protection actors in North Kivu highlighted gaps in existing reintegration programming for children associated with armed groups, including the ADF. In Beni, for instance, funding for the final phase of this crucial programming that would typically provide holistic post-release support, such as education expenses, vocational training, start-up costs and support for income-generating activities, has dried up since 2024.[284] That has meant that beyond the financial support provided for reunifying children with their families or placing them in foster care, long-term support required for at least two years of post-reunification follow-up – essential to ensure that these children have opportunities to rebuild their lives – is no longer being provided.

The CRC and its optional protocol require states to take measures to support the reintegration of all children who have been subject to any form of exploitation or abuse.[285] The government should collaborate with donors and other child protection actors to ensure that reintegration programming for children associated with the ADF is comprehensive and inclusive, guided by the principle of the best interests of the child.[286]

Comprehensive reintegration support is an issue that goes beyond children associated with armed groups to include adult ex-combatants and former abductees who were forcibly recruited by the ADF. While the country does have a 2022 national strategy for the implementation of the Disarmament, Demobilisation, Community Recovery and Stabilization Programme (known by its French acronym P-DDRCS), funding has not been made available to translate this framework into effective, meaningful and comprehensive reintegration programming.[287] Experts have argued that lack of sustainable funding was among the reasons resulting in failure of previous similar programmes in the past.[288] Sustained technical and financial assistance from the international community is indispensable.

[282] Details of the date and location of the interview withheld for the interviewee's safety and security.
[283] Details of the date and location of the interview withheld for the interviewee's safety and security.
[284] Interview by voice call with a child protection actor, 16 February 2026.
[285] Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 39; OPAC, Article 6(3).
[286] See CRC, Article 3(1), which requires states to consider the best interests of the child in all actions concerning children.
[287] See, for example, African Security Analysis, "P-DDRCS in the DRC: A peacebuilding illusion without funding", 25 June 2025, https://tinyurl.com/n3etmaum
[288] See, for example, International Peace Information Service (IPIS), "Promoting DDR programmes while arming non-state armed groups: Congo's paradoxical conflict resolution policies in the context of the M23 insurgency", 11 February 2025, https://tinyurl.com/mrxss82d

7. FORCED MARRIAGE, SEXUAL SLAVERY AND OTHER SEXUAL VIOLENCE

> **"They told me if I refused, they would kill me."**
>
> A woman who was abducted by the ADF said of being forced to "marry" a fighter.[289]

Amnesty International interviewed five women and two girls who were abducted by the ADF and then forced into "marriages".[290] Five of the seven had children as a result of these "marriages" and one suffered a miscarriage.[291] The duration of their confinement in the bush ranged between 18 months to four years. These interviewees and others spoke of more women and girls they knew – and whom they identified to Amnesty International – who were abducted with them and taken as "wives".

Interviews with former abductees indicate that the ADF gave "wives" to fighters as a recruitment incentive and that the practice is systematic in the group's camps. Most of the women and girls were given additional communal tasks to perform.

The practice of sexual slavery in ADF's camps was also documented by the UN Group of Experts who also concluded it was systematic.[292] The ADF is listed in the UN Secretary-General's report on conflict-related sexual violence among the armed groups credibly implicated in this conduct in the DRC, for its abduction and sexual enslavement of women and girls during attacks on communities and forcibly marrying them to fighters.[293]

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[289] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.
[290] One of the women was abducted and subjected to forced marriage when she was 16, that is, a child.
[291] One of the women gave birth to two children in the bush.
[292] See, for example, Group of Experts, *Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 30 December 2023, UN Doc. S/2023/990, p. 48.
[293] UN Secretary-General, *Conflict-Related Sexual Violence*, 15 July 2025, UN Doc. S/2025/389, para. 32 and p. 31. Between 2009 and 2010, the UNSC established the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict; created the UN Team of Experts on the Rule of Law and Sexual Violence in Conflict; and put in place monitoring, analysis and reporting arrangements (MARA) on conflict-related sexual violence to ensure the systematic gathering of such information. UNSC, Resolution 1888 (2009), adopted on 30 September 2009, S/RES/1888; UNSC, Resolution 1960 (2010), adopted on 16 December 2010, UN Doc. S/RES/1960. Since 2009, the UN Secretary-General has published an annual report to the Security Council which provides an overview of UN-verified information on the use of conflict-related sexual violence and, in its annex, includes a list of parties credibly suspected of committing patterns of rape or other forms of sexual violence.
The DRC and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict signed a Joint Communiqué in 2013 and an addendum to it in 2019 on combatting sexual violence in conflict. Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, "Joint Communiqué of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the United Nations on addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence", 30 March 2013, https://tinyurl.com/2r6zfvay; DRC, "Addendum to the Joint Communiqué on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the United Nations", 3 December 2019, available at https://tinyurl.com/y2zjzhpv (in French).

The ADF has systematically abducted women and girls and subjected them to forced marriage, sexual slavery and other serious violations. © Amnesty International

Amnesty International's interviews show that the women and girls were prohibited from exercising any agency whatsoever over decision-making pertaining to their bodies or otherwise, including reproductive choices, and were subjected to domestic servitude and extended periods of sexual and physical violence. Forced marriage and forced pregnancy, as well as a slew of other abuses associated with them, amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

FORCED MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL SLAVERY

Women and girls described to Amnesty International a shared experience of being forced to convert to Islam and subjected to indoctrination into the group's version of the religion. They were compelled to cover their hair and bodies, with only their eyes showing, they said. They were explicitly told by women trainers and camp chiefs they had to accept being given "husbands" or face death. They recounted ill-treatment at the hands of their "husbands" and others in the camp, including the fighters' longtime wives, who seemed to not be abductees and upon whom a higher status was bestowed than those who were abducted.

A 30-year-old former abductee, who remained confined with the group for more than two years, said one of the first things forced on her was an Arabic name. She was trained how to use a weapon and given one during attacks where she would help collect loot. She said:

> **They started preaching to us and we started praying with them… They started teaching us to read Arabic and pray… A woman [was teaching us]… She was very tough.**
>
> **For us women, we couldn't leave our face exposed. They gave us a scarf; we could only show our eyes. Our bodies could not be exposed… I did not like it; I was not used to dressing like that…**
>
> **Sometimes we would be back from an attack very tired and when you try to rest, [the woman teacher] would come and say, 'Get up! When you're a soldier, you can't be weak.' She would wake us up to train. We could spend all morning training…**

> **They gave me a husband after two months… They came and informed me, 'Today, we will give you a husband'… They didn't ask me. They planned it for me. It was by force.[294]**

She added that while her husband – who told her he was Rwandan – sometimes advocated for her with the chief to get a rest when she was sent out on back-to-back attacks, he sometimes had sex with her "when I was not ready."[295] She added: "I had no choice. If I refused, I don't know what would have happened to me."[296]

Another woman who was abducted and stayed with the group for more than three years said the consequences for refusing sex were made very clear in the training she and other prospective "wives" were given by the older woman who supervised their indoctrination. "Before taking a woman to her husband, [the woman teacher] advised us, 'You have to do this and that. If you refuse, know that you will be killed. If you want to stay alive, do everything you are being told.' So, I went prepared [to accept what my husband asks]," said the woman who was separated from her toddler when she was abducted. She recounted:

> **They told me, 'Here, no one is allowed to stay single. You must learn our religion and take a husband first'…**
>
> **They saw milk coming from my breasts. They asked if I had a child, and I said yes. They asked where the child was and I said I had left him in [my town]… They told me, 'Forget that one, we will give you another one here'. I accepted because they told me if I refused, they would kill me like they killed others.**
>
> **They gave me a different name… Whether I liked it or not, it became my name… The man who was in charge of slaughtering people [in the camp] is the one who gave me that name…**
>
> **They don't show you your husband. They take a picture of you and send it. If there is someone who chooses you, they will tell you, 'You have got a husband, come, we will take you to him.'[297]**

The woman, who is in her 20s, added that she and others were made to watch the killing of a young woman who had refused to convert to Islam. One of the fighters waived the blood-soaked machete in their faces afterwards and rhetorically asked them to make their choice. She added that another girl was also killed for asking her "husband" to help her escape, explaining that "husbands" were instructed to tell on their "wives", which resulted in detention, caning and ultimately killing for repeat offenders.[298]

A woman in her 30s said she was separated from her children, including a baby she had just given birth to, when she was abducted from her family's house.[299] She remained confined with the group in the bush for three years, where she had one child and from where she escaped while pregnant with another.[300] She described being forced to take part in attacks, saying:

> **You would carry your child on your back, take your weapon and go to the frontline… We would be in the front. We would shoot bullets without having a target while another group took things from people's houses. When I fired, I didn't know if I killed someone or not. It was to allow the group to take things from the houses… I used a PKM [machine gun]… Just one week after [arriving at the camp] they teach you how to use a weapon. They check your weight to see if you can use that machine gun…**
>
> **I did not like the way of life in the bush. I thought of my children who were left behind. Life there was very difficult… Imagine watching them slaughter people every day. That is not a life…**
>
> **They forced me to do the things I did. None of it was willingly.[301]**

She added that her "husband" had multiple "wives", including ones who were from his country of origin.[302] Each of the "wives" had her own tent and the "husband" rotated between them. "Sometimes when they

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[294] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[295] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[296] Interview in person, Oicha, 14 November 2025.
[297] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.
[298] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.
[299] The exact number of her children is withheld to protect her privacy and security.
[300] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.
[301] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.
[302] The husband's country of origin is withheld to protect the interviewee's privacy and security.

came back from the frontline and it was your day to receive him, you would suffer. That day he would be very rough. He would do that act until you were unable to walk for two days after," she said.[303]

A young woman who was abducted when she was a teenager said that when she was taken to the camp's chief, he said she was going to be given a "husband" with no regard to her young age. "I said I'm still young. He asked how old I was and I said 16. He said, 'That is [old] enough; here we give girls as young as 12 husbands. Either you accept a husband or we kill you.'"[304] She described repeated ill-treatment by her "husband". At one point, she said, he threatened that she will be "slaughtered" if she attempted to flee like two girls from her town who tried to escape from the camp and were executed.

She said she was sick and missed the mandatory viewing of the two girls' execution, but that her "husband" brought her one of the girls' sons that day and ordered her to feed him. When she responded that she was too ill to get up and cook, she said the "husband" retorted, "You can let him die then."[305] His cruelty continued. When the camp was ordered to move, the "husband" ordered her to carry a load plus the child, all while pregnant herself. She ended up falling and miscarrying.[306]

A girl who was abducted when she was 15 and stayed in the bush for a year said she was given a Ugandan husband who had other wives who came with him from Uganda. "He had a hut, but I was made to sleep out by the fire… The other wife slept inside… My task was to do things for her like fetch water… She was not kind to me… She would insult me and call me *kafiri* [or infidel]," the girl said.[307]

A woman in her 20s who stayed in the group's captivity for four years said she was taken alongside two sisters. All three of them were given "husbands", she said, even though one of the sisters was just 12. "They don't care if you are young or old. They always rape… they took underage girls against their will," the woman said.[308]

Although the women and girls who were forced into "marriages" – as well as other abductees and researchers – said "extra-marital" relations were not allowed and were cause for punishment in the camps,[309] several interviewees who spoke with Amnesty International mentioned incidents of sexual violence by members of the group towards women and girls who were not their "wives".

A woman in her late 20s who escaped after one month in captivity said she was pregnant when fighters abducted her from the family farm in Ituri. She said that the man who led the fighters in the small camp where she was taken told her and others that he intended to take her as his "wife" after she gave birth. In the meantime, "he would touch my breasts… he would kiss me… I had no choice… I knew I had to escape".[310] At least two other women relayed similar experiences pertaining to sexual threats starting as soon as they were abducted from their communities, with attack group leaders pointing to certain abductees soon after the abduction and telling other fighters that "this one will be my wife".

A psychologist at an NGO in Butembo city who provided care for survivors of sexual violence said he counselled women who were subjected to various forms of sexual violence by ADF fighters. He said that in 2025 this included two women who were forced to have "occasional sex" with fighters and were not taken as "wives".[311] He also said that, while not common, his group documented in 2025 at least three incidents of women who were raped outside of "marriage" by ADF fighters; one of them was of a woman who was abducted during the notorious Ntoyo attack documented above in Chapter 4.[312]

Sexual violence is prohibited under customary and treaty-based international humanitarian law.[313] The acts documented above in this chapter constitute the war crimes of outrage upon personal dignity constituted of

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[303] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.
[304] Interview in person, Lume, 22 November 2025.
[305] Interview in person, Lume, 22 November 2025.
[306] Interview in person, Lume, 22 November 2025.
[307] Interview in person, Beni, 24 November 2025.
[308] Interview in person, Beni, 24 November 2025.
[309] See also Group of Experts, *Midterm report*, 30 December 2023 (previously cited), p. 48.
[310] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.
[311] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[312] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[313] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rules 90 and 93; Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 3. Sexual violence also violates international human rights law that the DRC has ratified, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies, UN Treaty Body Database: Ratification Status for Democratic Republic of Congo, https://tinyurl.com/bddfwzde (accessed on 30 March 2026). See UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), General Recommendation 19: Violence Against Women, 1992, UN Doc. A/47/38; CEDAW, General Recommendation 30: Women in Conflict Prevention, Conflict and Post-conflict Situations, 1 November 2013, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/30; CEDAW, General Recommendation 35: Gender based Violence Against Women, updating General Recommendation No. 19, 26 July 2017, CEDAW/C/GC/35. These rights are similarly enshrined and guaranteed in the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), ratified by the DRC. African Union, Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, https://tinyurl.com/ysxf5tnf (accessed on 30 March 2026).

humiliating and degrading treatment;[314] as well as rape, sexual slavery and sexual violence.[315] Given the severe physical or mental pain or suffering inflicted on victims, they also constitute the war crime of cruel treatment and torture.[316]

All the above-mentioned acts, when committed in the context of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population, may constitute the crime against humanity of enslavement,[317] that is "the exercise of any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership over a person and includes the exercise of such power in the course of trafficking in persons, in particular women and children."[318] Torture, rape, sexual slavery and other forms of sexual violence are also crimes against humanity.[319] Forced marriage has also been recognized as the crime against humanity of other inhumane acts.[320]

Furthermore, the women and girls whose accounts are documented in this chapter – as well as boys abducted to be used by the group as detailed in Chapter 6, and other women and girls abducted for other forms of exploitation – are victims of trafficking in persons by the ADF. Their situation aligns with the elements set out in the in the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol). These elements are: an action, such as the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person"; the means, including "the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability"; and finally the purpose being exploitation, including slavery or practices similar to it.[321]

Fifteen former abductees interviewed by Amnesty International gave accounts indicating that they were victims of trafficking by the ADF. Trafficking victims have a range of rights, including protection through the non-punishment principle. This principle protects them from being re-victimized by being detained, charged or prosecuted for activities that are a "direct result" of being trafficked.[322]

FORCED PREGNANCY

Six of the seven women and girls who were taken as "wives" said they ended up pregnant as a result of the forced marriages. All but one gave birth, including one woman who had two children in the bush. Interviews indicated that these pregnancies were foreseen and planned for by the group, such that other abductees – and in some cases medical professionals – were specifically assigned to deliver the babies in the forests' harsh settings, including by caesarean section.

The woman who gave birth to two children while in captivity said: "In the bush, we helped each other give birth. [At one point] there was a doctor from Oicha who performed surgeries in the camp, but he died during an exchange of fire with the FARDC… We were on the frontline with the doctor."[323]

As mentioned in Chapter 5, one of the cases of abduction documented by Amnesty International included that of a woman who was assigned the task of looking after women who gave birth and their newborns. She said that her supervisor was a foreign doctor who oversaw the deliveries and that caesarean sections were performed without anaesthesia.

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[314] Rome Statute, Articles 8(2)(c)(ii).
[315] Rome Statute, Article 8(2)(e)(vi).
[316] Rome Statute, Article 8(2)(c)(i).
[317] Rome Statute, Article 7(1)(c).
[318] Rome Statute, Article 7(2)(c).
[319] Rome Statute, Article 7(1)(f) and (g).
[320] Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), *Prosecutor v. Brima and others*, Case SCSL-2004-16-A, Appeal judgment, 22 February 2008 para. 196 (first time forced marriage was recognized by an international court as the crime against humanity of "other inhumane acts"); ICC, *Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen*, Trial Chamber IX judgment (previously cited), paras 2748-2751 (developing the definition of forced marriage as "other inhumane act").
[321] Only the action and purpose, not the means, elements are required to establish trafficking for children as they cannot consent to their intended exploitation. For adults, where any of the means are used, any consent they appear to have given to their intended exploitation is "irrelevant". Palermo Protocol, Article 3(a), (b) and (c). The DRC ratified the Palermo Protocol in October 2005. UN Treaty Collection, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, https://tinyurl.com/25wamthm (accessed on 30 March 2026), "Depositary". See also Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, "Country visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo 15-25 July 2025: End of mission statement", 25 July 2025, https://tinyurl.com/5d7ksh52, pp. 3-4.
[322] CEDAW, General Recommendation 38: Trafficking in Women and Girls in the Context of Global Migration, 20 November 2020, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/38, para. 98; OHCR, Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking, 20 May 2002, UN Doc. E/2002/68/Add.1, paras 7-11 (protection and assistance); *Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, Report on the Implementation of the Non-Punishment Principle, 17 May 2021, UN Doc. A/HRC/47/34, para. 18. Furthermore, international law and guidelines call for the treatment of children who are accused of crimes during their association with an armed group "primarily as victims" and to not prosecute or punish children solely for their membership in an armed group. Paris Principles, paras 3.6 and 8.7.
[323] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.

She recounted a conversation with one of the women she looked after: "I asked her why she chose to have a child with [an ADF fighter]. She said, 'I did not choose, I am obliged. I am protecting my life.'"[324]

These pregnancies must indeed be viewed in the context of the women's deprivation of liberty as women were enslaved and at risk of being killed if they tried to flee their "husbands" or the group's camps. Such confinement did not allow women any reproductive autonomy, meaning that the acts above also amounted to the war crime of forced pregnancy.[325] Amnesty International's documentation indicates that the ADF wanted these women and girls to become pregnant and keep their pregnancies though this specific intent is not required for the crime of forced pregnancy to be established.[326]

When committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population, forced pregnancy also amounts to a crime against humanity.[327]

INSUFFICIENT SUPPORT AND STIGMA

Women and girls who were forced into "marrying" ADF fighters and giving birth in the bush – as well as others who survived rape and other forms of sexual violence by the group – require specialized healthcare. For example, one NGO worker told Amnesty International that all ADF sexual violence survivors who sought the NGO's help in 2025 tested positive for sexually transmitted infections.[328] Two of them tested positive for HIV, he added.[329] While these survivors were able to access free care through this aid worker's NGO, many others are left without care. Several interviewees told Amnesty International they faced severe economic challenges upon release from the group and could barely afford feeding themselves and their children, let alone securing access to any medical services and specialized care.

Several interviewees also pointed out how the harsh conditions of life in the bush and the inadequate food left them sick and weak for extended periods. Additionally, girls forced into unplanned pregnancies face significant health risks, including obstetric-related complications since young girls' bodies are not fully developed for childbirth.

Meanwhile, humanitarian workers in eastern Congo have consistently raised the alarm over shrinking international assistance, especially after the shutdown of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This halt came at a time when the DRC was the largest recipient of US humanitarian assistance in the world, with more than two thirds of the $1.3 billion funding received in 2024 coming from the US.[330]

Physicians for Human Rights and others reported that the US aid cuts particularly impacted survivors of sexual violence in the conflict-affected eastern part of the country, including access to post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) kits, preventative HIV medication and treatment for sexually transmitted infections.[331] Two

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[324] Interview in person, Beni, 17 November 2025.
[325] Rome Statute, Article 8(2)(e)(vi). See also Amnesty International, *Forced Pregnancy: A Commentary on the Crime in International Criminal Law* (Index: IOR 53/2711/2020), 30 June 2020, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior53/2711/2020/en
[326] The intent requirement for the crime includes the general intent to unlawfully confine the victim while knowing they were forcibly made pregnant, and a specific intent requirement of doing so to affect the ethnic composition of the population or to carry out other grave violations of international law. The general intent requirement appears to have been met in these instances as the perpetrators who were unlawfully confining the victims did so intentionally, and would have known the victims were pregnant, at least at later stages of the pregnancies. They would also have known that these pregnancies came in the context of forced marriages where the conditions were so coercive that genuine consent was not possible, and indeed women feared being killed if they refused orders by their "husbands". The specific intent requirement is also met as the perpetrators also intended the confinement of the victims for ongoing sexual slavery, rape, forced marriage, and other severe violations, as already set out in this report. See Amnesty International, *Forced Pregnancy* (previously cited), pp. 16-22.
[327] Rome Statute, Article 7(1)(g). See also ICC, *Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen,* Trial Chamber IX judgment (previously cited), paras 2717-2729; and Amnesty International, *Forced Pregnancy* (previously cited).
[328] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[329] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025.
[330] Interview by video call with senior humanitarian worker in Kinshasa, 10 November 2025. See also UN News, "Humanitarians uphold commitment to support civilians in eastern DR Congo", 11 February 2025, https://tinyurl.com/5n79ujur
In February 2026, the DRC and the United Sates of America signed a "strategic health partnership" agreement that would see the US contributing US$900 million in targeted assistance to the healthcare system over five years. Reuters, "Democratic Republic of Congo and US agree $1.2 billion strategic health partnership", 26 February 2026, https://tinyurl.com/mttuz7ph; Business Insider Africa, "Congo says yes to $1.2 billion U.S. health deal amid Africa's divided response to U.S. aid", 27 February 2026, https://tinyurl.com/5cvenjxt
[331] Physicians for Human Rights, *Abandoned in Crisis: The Impact of U.S. Global Health Funding Cuts in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)*, 24 July 2025, https://tinyurl.com/m599knt9, p. 6; UNICEF, *The Hidden Scars of Conflict and Silence: Sexual Violence Against Children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (2022-2025), 16 December 2025, https://www.unicef.org/media/177741/file, p. 15, Care, "A kit, a clinic, a chance: For survivors of sexual violence in DRC, safety depends on dwindling supplies", 2 December 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4x57fzpr; UN News, "DR Congo crisis: Funding cuts curtail assistance to victims of sexual violence", 5 September 2025, https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/09/1165782

humanitarian workers, one from an international NGO and another from a Congolese NGO, said their organizations had to scale back programming as a result of the aid cuts.[332]

States have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.[333] This requires ensuring the availability, accessibility, affordability and acceptability of quality health facilities, goods and services, including mental health treatment and care.[334]

In 2022, the DRC government established a reparations framework, including for survivors of sexual violence, called the National Victims' Reparations Fund or *Fonds National de Réparation des Victimes* (FONAREV). But even before the sweeping aid cutbacks, the fund had been struggling to cater to the needs of the ever-expanding population of sexual violence survivors in the country.[335] International assistance is required to support the government in meeting these obligations.[336] In light of accusations of misallocation of funds, the government should also ensure that FONAREV's intended purpose is meaningfully fulfilled and that aid does reach survivors of sexual violence and other crimes.[337]

Against this backdrop of shrinking international assistance and limited resources, former abductees detailed – in agony – experiences of rejection after returning to their communities. Their testimonies underscored the unique barriers women and girls face and the absence of comprehensive reintegration programming.

As mentioned above, the woman who had given birth to two children while in the bush already had multiple children before she was abducted. When she came back home, her in-laws said she could no longer be with their son, and she was forced to look for a place to live with all her children. She said:

> **They asked me to throw my baby in the river… Many people told me to do that because [the baby] is a rebel's child… My husband's family told me I either throw my children [who were born in the bush] in the river or kill them another way myself…**
>
> **I have been let down by this world. I just want to die. I have been suffering for so long… People look at me differently. When I ask my husband's family to help me with the children's school fees, they don't accept…**
>
> **Where I am staying now, people don't know [that I was in the bush]. But before, when I was staying with my in-laws, my mother-in-law was the first to tell everyone that I became NALU…**
>
> **I was feeling very bad. At one point, I wanted to hang myself, but my pastor forbade me… I have been through so much. There are so many of us who have this same experience.[338]**

Another former abductee said when she called her family from the military intelligence facility where she was kept after she escaped from the bush, they refused to believe it was her until they showed up in person and saw for themselves.[339] The family's surprise was compounded when they saw she was with a child, the

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[332] Interview in person, Butembo, 15 November 2025; Interview in person, Beni, 17 September 2025.
[333] International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Article 12.
[334] UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), General Comment 14: The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health (Article 12), 11 August 2000, UN Doc. E/C.12/2000/4, paras 12 and 17. See also Maputo Protocol, Article 14.
[335] See, for example, NYU Center on International Cooperation, "Responding to violence against women and girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Proposals for a people-centered system", 25 November 2024, https://tinyurl.com/3hmvp6vx; Human Rights Watch, "DR Congo: Surge in conflict-related sexual violence – Urgent support for survivors needed after US aid cuts", 12 January 2026, https://tinyurl.com/4pvrpx4y
[336] Parties to the ICESCR have an obligation to take steps both "individually and through international assistance and co-operation" to progressively realize the covenant's rights. ICESCR, Articles 2(1), 22, 23. International declarations and commitments, including the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action and the 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development have also affirmed the importance of international assistance and co-operation, underscoring the co-responsibility of the international community in fulfilling human rights. See also the following general comments by treaty bodies: CESCR, General Comment 2: International Technical Assistance Measures (Article 22), 2 February 1990, UN Doc. E/1990/23; CESCR, General Comment 3 (previously cited); Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment 4: Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1 July 2003, UN Doc. CRC/GC/2003/4, para. 43.
[337] Kivu Today, "DRC's first lady foundation caught up in corruption scandal", 23 September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/2vprwsft; "Human Rights Watch, "DR Congo: Surge in conflict-related sexual violence – Urgent support for survivors needed after US aid cuts" (previously cited); TV5 Monde, "War in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Where are the millions of dollars from the fund for reparations for victims of sexual violence going?", 14 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/3v7aum5a (in French); Mines, "FONAREV: The unmet expectations of 400,000 victims of sexual violence and war", 27 December 2025, https://tinyurl.com/47z3wj93 (in French); Actualite.cd, "DRC: On the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the mapping project, Mukwege denounces alleged embezzlement of reparations funds", 1 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4xd5ad9r (in French).
[338] Interview in person, Butembo, 20 November 2025.
[339] Not only had the family held a funeral for her a long time ago, but they had also buried someone else's mutilated body thinking it was her. Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.

woman said.[340] She added that her family does not treat the child (a girl) well, including refusing to pay for her medical care.

The woman, who remained in captivity for three years, added that her distress over her family's resentment was aggravated by the fact that her own son, who was a toddler when she was abducted, did not recognize her when she came back home. "Until now, he doesn't know me. We are living together… but for him, my mother is his mother… My mother tells me when he grows up, he will understand," she said.[341]

The sense of rejection was not just at home, she said, but also in the community. "People say the ADF will come and finish the population off because we are coming with their children here to the city," she said.[342]

The child who was born in the bush remains unregistered, she said, explaining: "They will ask me many questions, like her original village, the name of her father. I wouldn't know what answers to give."[343] Other women and girls who returned from the bush with children shared the same concern when asked by Amnesty International whether they tried to register their children's birth, adding that they could not afford the birth registration fees.

[340] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.
[341] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.
[342] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.
[343] Interview in person, Oicha, 19 November 2025.

CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

Crimes against humanity occur when certain prohibited acts – such as murder, enslavement, torture, sexual violence, enforced disappearance – are committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population.[344]

"Widespread" can be demonstrated by the number of victims or the magnitude of the acts, as well as the acts' geographical reach.[345] "Systematic" has been held to "signif[y] the organised nature of the acts of violence and the improbability of their random occurrence".[346] Courts have held the "systematic" threshold to be met when there are "[p]atterns of crimes – that is the non-accidental repetition of similar criminal conduct on a regular basis".[347]

As detailed in this report, the ADF has carried out attacks on civilian populations in the eastern DRC in North Kivu and Ituri provinces, in both a widespread and systematic manner, though either suffices under international law to establish crimes against humanity. Interviews have confirmed preexisting, credible reporting of a command structure. The existence of an organizational policy to attack a civilian population can be determined both by public statements by ADF leaders and inferred from the widespread and systematic nature of the attacks.

In a 2020 report, the UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) – which includes the Human Rights Division of MONUSCO and the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) in the DRC – determined that attacks by the ADF amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes.[348] "The context and modus operandi of the ADF when committing abuses and violations of human rights and international humanitarian law leads to the conclusion that they… constitute crimes against humanity," the report said.[349] This attack against the civilian population is ongoing; the factual patterns UNJHRO and others continue to document are consistent with what was highlighted in that 2020 report.

Since certain violations documented in this Amnesty International report were committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack by the ADF against the civilian population, the organization therefore maintains that they amount to the following crimes against humanity: murder; imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty; enslavement; torture; rape; sexual slavery and other forms of sexual violence; forced pregnancy; and forced marriage as other inhumane acts.[350]

ADF members and commanders responsible for these crimes should be investigated, prosecuted and judged in fair trials before national courts or the ICC. At minimum, they should be investigated and prosecuted for war crimes as detailed above in the report.

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[344] Rome Statute, Article 7; ICC, Elements of Crimes, pp. 3-9.

[345] See International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), *Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, Case ICTR-96-4-T, Trial Chamber judgment, 2 September 1998, para. 579; International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), *Prosecutor v. Kordic and Cerkez*, Case IT-95-14/2-T, Trial Chamber judgment, 26 February 2001, para. 179. The ICC has held that an assessment of the quantitative and geographic facts will depend on the facts of each case. ICC, *Situation in the Republic of Kenya*, Case ICC-01/09, Pre-Trial Chamber II decision, 31 March 2010, para. 95. See also ICC, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Case ICC-01/05-01/08, Trial Chamber III judgment, 21 March 2016, para. 163.

[346] ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac and others*, Trial Chamber II judgment, 22 February 2001, para. 429. See also ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Blaškic*, Case IT-95-14-T, Trial Chamber judgment, 3 March 2000, para. 203; and ICTR, *Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, Trial Chamber judgment (previously cited), para. 580.

[347] ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac and others*, Trial Chamber II judgment (previously cited), para. 429. See also ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Tadic*, IT-94-1-T, Trial Chamber opinion and judgment, 7 May 1997, para. 648.

[348] UN Human Rights Council, "DRC: Attacks by ADF armed group may amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes", 6 July 2020, https://tinyurl.com/ymusyysk

[349] UNJHRO, *Report on Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law by the Allied Democratic Forces Armed Group and by Members of the Defense and Security Forces in Beni Territory, North Kivu Province and Irumu and Mambasa Territories, Ituri Province, Between 1 January 2019 and 31 January 2020*, July 2020, https://tinyurl.com/mr3zyjhf, p. 20.

[350] Rome Statue, Article 7(1)(a), (e), (g), (c), (f) and (k). For more on forced pregnancy, see also ICC, *Prosecutor v. Ongwen*, Trial Chamber IX judgment (previously cited), paras 2717-2729; Amnesty International, *Forced Pregnancy* (previously cited). For more on forced marriage as other inhumane acts, see SCSL, *Prosecutor v. Brima* and others, Appeal judgment (previously cited) para. 196; ICC, *Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen*, Trial Chamber IX judgment (previously cited), paras 2748-2751.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The ADF has been waging a brutal attack against civilians in the eastern DRC for years. Fighters have raided communities and fields, attacked medical facilities, and looted and burned homes in a methodical manner. They have abducted men, women and children and forced them to take part in attacks and carry out different roles in the group's camps scattered across the region's vast forest. Women and girls have been forced into "marriages" and pregnancies and compelled to live a life of servitude. Amnesty International maintains that ADF members and commanders responsible for crimes should be investigated and prosecuted for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Despite military offensives by the Congolese military, supported by international peacekeepers or in collaboration with Ugandan troops, the group continues to expand operations targeting civilians. After M23's renewed wave of violence in 2025, the ADF seemed to capitalize on security gaps and diverted international attention. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of civilians continue to pay the price in many forms including displacement, death and destruction.

Congolese authorities must do more to ensure the protection of civilians against the ADF's violence. The international community must support this effort, including through helping the government and its partners improve early warning mechanisms.

A holistic approach is needed to address the needs of communities and survivors and ensure effective justice and accountability processes. A meaningful reintegration programme for former abductees is crucial to ensure successful reinsertion and long-lasting community healing.

As the ADF continues to expand its area of operations, the violence and deprivations experienced by civilians are likely to worsen. The Congolese government and international partners must act decisively before the group's hit-and-run modus operandi turns into the ability to seize territory akin to other armed groups operating in the country and on the continent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE ALLIED DEMOCRATIC FORCES (ADF)

- Immediately renounce and cease attacks against, and killing of, civilians; attacks on and looting of health facilities, and crimes against related protected persons; the burning of homes and civilian property; the pillaging of livestock and other belongings; and any other war crimes;
- Immediately renounce and cease abductions of civilians and end forcible recruitment of civilians, including the recruitment and use of children under the age of 18;
- In cooperation with the UN and other international organizations, release all those who have been abducted. Ensure that anyone wishing to leave ADF camps can do so, without fear of punishment;
- Immediately renounce and end forced marriage and all forms of sexual violence against women and girls, including sexual slavery and forced pregnancy.

TO THE CONGOLESE AUTHORITIES

- Strengthen mechanisms for the protection of civilians, including by working with the UN and other partners, as well as with local communities, on improving and bringing to scale early warning mechanisms to allow rapid response ahead of attacks on civilians;
- Investigate allegations of failure or delays in response to attacks by FARDC troops, monitor and evaluate response times and carry out lessons-learned exercises;
- Improve and enhance coordination and communication with the UPDF to ensure effective protection of civilians under Operation Shujaa and ensure consultation with communities on protection needs;
- Work closely with neighbouring and other regional countries to stem the flow and infiltration of foreign fighters joining the ranks of the ADF;
- Continue and step up investigations and judicial proceedings into crimes committed by the ADF to ensure that perpetrators are held to account in fair trials and without recourse to the death penalty. Ensure that laws regarding division of jurisdiction between military and ordinary courts, which establish that war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide shall primarily be investigated and prosecuted by ordinary appeals courts, are implemented in practice;
- Ensure humane treatment and end prolonged detention of escapees from ADF captivity, including at all military intelligence facilities. Ensure the prompt handover of children in detention facilities to civilian child protection actors;
- Ensure that all victims and survivors of human rights abuses committed by the ADF receive psycho-social and other forms of support and guarantee their access to justice, truth and reparations;
- Ensure that survivors of sexual violence can access comprehensive reproductive health services and other forms of assistance;
- Ensure that trafficking victims are identified through survivor-centred, trauma-informed, and human rights compliant processes and that they are protected from punishment for acts they committed as a direct result of being trafficked. This includes ensuring the provision of capacity building for law enforcement and judicial staff;
- Ensure that the national programme for disarmament demobilisation, community recovery and stabilisation known as P-DDRCS and associated actors, including those focused on child protection, have budget lines and sufficient funds to be able to implement meaningful reintegration programming for children and adults associated with the ADF.

TO THE UGANDAN AUTHORITIES

- Improve coordination and communication with FARDC and Congolese authorities to ensure effective protection of civilians under Operation Shujaa. Improved communication should include transparency over transfers of detainees to Uganda and ensuring the ability of Congolese authorities to bring to justice perpetrators of crimes committed in the DRC;
- End the prolonged detention of former ADF abductees at detention facilities in Uganda.

TO THE UNITED NATIONS

- MONUSCO should take all possible measures to protect civilians in its areas of deployment, including by working closely with Congolese authorities on improving and bringing to scale existing early warning mechanisms and coordination pathways with communities;
- MONUSCO should continue supporting Congolese judicial authorities in investigating and prosecuting crimes committed by the ADF to ensure that perpetrators of abuses are brought to justice in fair trials. This includes building capacity within prosecution teams, including in forensics and evidence gathering; prosecuting international crimes; and identifying trafficking victims and protecting them from punishment for acts they committed as a direct result of being trafficked;
- MONUSCO and UN agencies involved in protection working groups should ensure that the state's national disarmament and demobilization programme as well as local groups engaged in the protection space have sufficient funds to implement effective and holistic reintegration programming, including comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare;
- In line with its mandate, MONUSCO should accelerate and strengthen the implementation of its monitoring, analysis and reporting arrangements (MARA) on conflict-related sexual violence to

ensure that patterns of abuse by armed groups such as the ADF are fully captured and reflected in its reporting and protection responses, including by ensuring that Women Protection Advisers and Gender Advisers are adequately resourced and supported to carry out their mandates effectively;

- MONUSCO should also support efforts to fully implement the 2013 Joint Communiqué and its 2019 addendum signed between the Government of the DRC and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, including by ensuring that their implementation adequately reflects conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated by groups such as the ADF;
- The Human Rights Council, and states engaging through it, should enhance focus on abuses by the ADF as part of the overall examination of the human rights situation in the DRC. States should ensure that relevant human rights mandates have the support needed to fulfil their mandates, including with respect to the ADF crisis;
- The UN Security Council should ensure that MONUSCO, including its Force Intervention Brigade, has the necessary resources to respond to the ADF's growing threat and challenging operational environment pursuant to its resolutions expressing concern over the group and recognizing it among the groups responsible for persistent violence in the eastern part of the country.

TO THE OFFICE OF THE PROSECUTOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT

- Consider investigating allegations of crimes under international law by the ADF in line with its decision to revive investigative efforts in the country, including crimes committed in North and South Kivu since 1 January 2022.

TO INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS AND DONORS

- Significantly increase assistance to the humanitarian response and development programming, and ensure that pledges are met;
- Provide adequate and sustained technical and financial assistance to Congolese authorities to enable them to improve mechanisms for protection of civilians and to fulfil their obligations, including in ensuring justice and reparations for victims of abuses by the ADF;
- Support local and international NGOs engaged in protection programming to ensure the creation of gender-sensitive and child-friendly reintegration support for children and adults associated with the ADF, in line with international standards and law;
- Ensure that comprehensive sexual and reproductive health programmes supporting survivors of sexual violence remain funded amid severe impacts resulting from shrinking international support in recent years;
- Support the reconstruction of civilian infrastructure and services destroyed by the ADF and consider providing assistance to those displaced by the group's violence while ensuring pathways for their return to their homes and communities.

TO THE AFRICAN UNION (AU)

- The AU Peace and Security Council should continue to closely assess and monitor the human rights situation and various conflicts in the eastern DRC, ensure meaningful deliberations over the ADF crisis and provide full and effective support to the Government of the DRC in its efforts to end ADF's acts of violence and crimes under international law;
- The AU Peace and Security Council should consider the situation of children formerly associated with the ADF during its annual session on the theme of children affected by armed conflicts. It should request the Africa Platform on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts and the Special Envoy of the African Union Commission on Women, Peace, and Security to conduct visits to the DRC;
- Further to its resolution 643 passed on 30 October 2025, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights should ensure when it holds a hearing on the development of an effective justice and accountability process for victims of human rights violations and international crimes in the DRC, that the experiences and perspectives of victims and survivors of ADF's abuses and crimes are included;
- The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights should assess the government's efforts to fulfil the human rights of victims of ADF abuses, including survivors of trafficking, when reviewing the DRC's state party report submitted to it under Article 62 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

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“I’D NEVER SEEN SO MANY BODIES”

WAR CRIMES BY THE ALLIED DEMOCRATIC FORCES IN THE EASTERN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Based on 71 interviews – including with 45 victims and survivors – Amnesty International examined the impact of the violence by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) on civilians in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Fighters have deliberately killed civilians, attacked medical facilities, and looted and burned homes. They have abducted men, women and children and forced them to take part in attacks and carry out different roles in the group’s camps. Women and girls have been forced into “marriages” and pregnancies and compelled to live a life of servitude. The group’s actions amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The report shows how despite efforts by the Congolese military, supported by international peacekeepers or in collaboration with Ugandan troops, the ADF continues to expand its attacks on civilians. In 2025, after M23’s renewed wave of violence, the ADF further capitalized on security gaps.

The Congolese government must do more to ensure the protection of civilians. The international community must support this effort.

A holistic approach is needed to address the needs of communities and survivors and ensure effective justice and accountability processes. A meaningful reintegration programme for former abductees is crucial to ensure successful reinsertion and long-lasting community healing.

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