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The State of the World's Human Rights; Democratic Republic of the Congo 2025

Armed groups, some of which were backed by government forces, increasingly committed serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, which may have amounted to war crimes. The March 23 Movement (M23) summarily killed civilians, and subjected detainees to torture and other ill-treatment and inhumane conditions. Its fighters attacked hospitals in Goma and abducted patients, caregivers and, in some cases, Congolese soldiers hiding in the hospitals. Incidents of conflict-related sexual violence continued at an alarming rate. Fighters of the M23 and Wazalendo armed groups gang-raped women in North-Kivu and South-Kivu provinces. Armed groups and authorities restricted civic space. M23 fighters detained, tortured and threatened journalists, human rights defenders and civil society members because of their work. Hundreds of people perceived to be opponents of M23 were forcibly disappeared. Tens of thousands of internally displaced people were forced from camps near Goma. A regional commission ordered the government to prosecute members of government forces for acts of sexual violence against women in South-Kivu during 2011.

Background

The conflict in the east intensified when the March 23 Movement (M23), a Rwandan-backed armed group, captured in January and February the cities of Goma and Bukavu in North-Kivu and South-Kivu provinces, respectively. M23 clashed with the Congolese army and Wazalendo ("patriots" in Swahili), a coalition of armed groups, some of them backed by the Congolese army.

The conflict led to various diplomatic efforts to stop the fighting. In June officials from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda signed a peace agreement that called for the "neutralization" of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) (an armed group primarily active in North-Kivu) and Rwanda's "lifting of defensive measures" in the DRC. The agreement was formalized on 4 December when the DRC and Rwandan presidents signed the Washington Accords that reinforced previous commitments to end the fighting (see Rwanda entry). However, the fighting continued.

Separately, mediation facilitated by Qatar led to a "declaration of principles" signed in July by DRC and M23 representatives. A framework for a peace agreement was signed in November by the two parties, containing eight protocols, most of which still required negotiation.

Other armed groups operating in the DRC included the Cooperative for the Development for Congo/Union of Revolutionaries for the Defence of Congolese People (CODECO/URDPC),

which carried out attacks in January and February that killed more than 150 people; and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a Ugandan armed group, which killed hundreds of civilians. The Congolese and Ugandan armies conducted military operations against both groups.

Unlawful attacks and killings

Armed groups carried out serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, which may have amounted to war crimes.¹

M23 and other armed groups intensified attacks against civilians perceived to be associated with their opponents. The UN documented at least 70 incidents of targeted killings by M23 in Goma, which resulted in more than 200 fatalities between 28 January and 9 April.

Between late February and mid-May, M23 fighters carried out six raids on hospitals in Goma. Fighters abducted and detained patients, caregivers, and Congolese soldiers or members of the army who were either patients or were hiding in the hospital. On three occasions, M23 fired their weapons near or inside hospitals, including in mid-March when they fired live rounds inside CBCA Ndosho hospital, damaging the emergency room. In early April, M23 fighters shot live rounds in Kyeshero hospital, killing one person and injuring at least two others.

On 22 February, during a gunfight in Goma's Kasika neighbourhood, Yannick Zirhumanana was shot in the ribs. It was unclear if he was deliberately targeted. After he was shot, M23 fighters searched his house and accused him of being a government soldier, which he denied. An M23 fighter accompanied him to a health centre and shot him in the forehead at point-blank range, killing him.

Between February and May, M23 killed at least three men in Goma and a father and son in South-Kivu. Some were shot while others had their throats cut.

On 10 April, a man believed to be linked to M23 shot Gilson Kasareka Makembe, a shopkeeper, in the face in Goma's Nyabushongo neighbourhood. Although two M23 fighters were outside his shop at the time, they did not pursue the fleeing assailant nor investigate the incident. It remained unclear why Gilson Makembe was killed.

On 12 May, truck driver Alain Byamungu was killed in Goma by M23 fighters following an argument with a motorcyclist with whom he had avoided a collision. Following the incident a group of M23 fighters in a vehicle and on a motorcycle pursued Alain Byamungu, shooting at his truck and into the cab, killing him and injuring his crew members. M23 fighters accused him and his crew of being FDLR members.

In June in Nyabiondo, a town in Masisi territory, North-Kivu, an M23 fighter shot a man at point-blank range, killing him. The man's arms were bound behind his back when he was shot. M23 fighters had accused him of stealing.

According to OHCHR, the UN human rights office, between 9 and 21 July, M23 fighters backed by members of the Rwanda Defence Force killed at least 319 civilians, including women and children, in Rutshuru territory.

Between July and August, the ADF killed more than 250 civilians in multiple attacks in Ituri province and Lubero, a territory in North-Kivu. The attacks were apparently in retaliation for the Congolese and Ugandan government forces' military operations to eradicate the ADF.

Sexual and gender-based violence

Incidents of sexual violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, were staggeringly high in eastern DRC where between January and September, according to the UN, more than 81,000 rapes took place, an increase of 31.5% compared with the same period in 2024. Members of armed groups and government security forces were the main perpetrators.

Between January and April, staff at Ministry of Health facilities in Goma, supported by the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières, treated more than 7,400 survivors of sexual violence. In Sake, a city west of Goma, 2,400 survivors were treated during the same period.

In February the UN established the OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission on the situation in the South and North Kivu provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (OFFMK). OFFMK documented cases of gang rape and other conflict-related sexual violence by M23 fighters. Wazalendo fighters also gang-raped women in Masisi and in Kabare territory in South-Kivu. One survivor said that a Wazalendo fighter told her: "Any women who come to the field, we will always rape them."

Torture and other ill-treatment

M23 maintained at least seven detention sites in Goma and Bukavu where detainees were subjected to torture and other ill-treatment. M23 fighters beat detainees with flexible wooden rods, boards, electric cables, engine belts, gun butts or sticks on their backs, legs, buttocks and genitals. At its Chien Méchant (vicious dog) detention facility in Goma, M23 fighters took detainees from their cells to flog them in the courtyard with rubber electric cables or wooden rods. In April, an M23 fighter beat a detainee so badly at Chien Méchant that he could neither stand nor sit and could only lie on the ground.

In late February and early March, M23 used the Unity Stadium in Goma as a site to torture abducted hospital patients and caregivers, as well as some Congolese military personnel hiding in hospitals (see above, Unlawful attacks and killings). In March, a video showed uniformed men beating a man with wooden rods at the stadium.

Several videos published on social media during the year showed M23 fighters in various locations beating or whipping people.

The UN identified at least 13 detention sites controlled by Wazalendo leaders where detainees were frequently subjected to torture and other ill-treatment.

Inhumane detention conditions

Detainees at M23 detention facilities (see above) experienced inhumane and degrading detention conditions. M23 fighters forced detainees to sleep while sitting or standing on a concrete floor. Cells were dark, hot and poorly ventilated. Detainees received only one meal a day, usually consisting of a plate of boiled corn to be shared. There was often no running water and detainees spent weeks without bathing. Some detainees drank each other's urine or rainwater. At the Mount Goma detention site, there were three toilets for hundreds of detainees who were allowed to use the bathroom once a day; some resorted to defecating into bags or boxes.

Human rights defenders

Numerous human rights defenders based in North-Kivu and South-Kivu fled M23-controlled areas; many sought refuge in neighbouring countries. M23 repeatedly detained, interrogated, intimidated, ill-treated and, in some cases, tortured civil society members, human rights defenders and journalists. In February an M23 representative stated publicly that the group did not want civil society groups to be active in areas under its control, and that all problems should be brought to them, not to civil society organizations. In March, an M23 fighter detained a civil society activist in Goma and threatened to kill him for denouncing M23 abuses. The group held him at the 34th Military Region Compound where they whipped him and beat his ears until his nose bled. He was later released.

In the same month, M23 fighters detained another civil society member outside Goma. They demanded that he explain why he had defamed their movement, and also to tell them how they killed civilians, and how many people they had raped. They made him lie on his stomach while a man sat on his shoulders and another on his legs. Meanwhile, an M23 fighter whipped his buttocks and thighs. He was released later that evening.

According to the UN, Rwandan authorities arrested a civil society member from North-Kivu on 1 February at the border crossing between Goma and the Rwandan town of Gisenyi. He was released after four days.

Arbitrary detention

Throughout the year, M23 conducted cordon-and-search operations, primarily in Goma and Bukavu. They unlawfully detained large numbers of people who were taken to sports stadiums and subjected to lectures by M23 or pressured to join the movement. Many were later taken to undisclosed locations. M23 fighters frequently claimed the search operations were aimed at stopping criminality. They told some detainees that they would be taken to

Rumangabo and Runyoni village, sites in Rutshuru used by M23 for military and other training. During these operations, M23 fighters used arbitrary criteria to determine who was a civilian and who was a DRC government soldier or an armed opposition member. They made judgements based, for example, on appearance.

Enforced disappearances

In May, M23 abducted hundreds of people, including women and children, during raids in several neighbourhoods in and around Goma. Many of the men and women detained in these raids as well as in similar raids were forcibly disappeared. Family members looking for missing relatives said they approached M23 fighters in Goma detention centres but were unable to locate their loved ones.

During the raids, M23 took hundreds of men, boys, women and girls to a football field in Goma. On one occasion, an M23-appointed mayor picked out Aloys Bigirumwami, a member of civil society movement Fight for Change (Lutte pour le Changement). After the mayor accused Aloys Bigirumwami of hiding weapons, he and five others were driven away. When his family asked M23 fighters at three detention facilities about his whereabouts, they were told he was not being held there. His whereabouts remained unknown at the end of the year.

Internally displaced people's rights

In February, M23 closed several camps for internally displaced people near Goma, further displacing tens of thousands of people amid the deteriorating security situation.

Death penalty

In January, the then minister of justice announced that more than 170 inmates under sentence of death would be executed for armed robbery and were allegedly linked to criminal gangs commonly known as *kuluna*, or bandits. The executions had not apparently been carried out by the end of the year.

Former president Joseph Kabila was sentenced to death in his absence by a military court on 30 September, after he was found guilty of treason, murder, sexual assault, torture and insurrection in relation to his alleged support for M23, charges that he denied. Joseph Kabila was not represented by legal counsel during the proceedings and was ordered to pay USD 33 billion to the state and to victims' associations.

Military courts continued to be used to try civilians, in breach of international fair trial standards. Some civilians were sentenced to death.

Right to truth, justice and reparation

In September, a high court in the capital, Kinshasa, convicted the former justice minister of embezzling USD 19.9 million in public funds to finance the construction of a prison. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment with hard labour and barred from standing for election for five years after the expiry of his sentence.

In October, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights found the DRC accountable for widespread acts of sexual violence, including rape and torture, committed by its military forces against more than 50 women in Fizi territory in South-Kivu in 2011. The Commission ordered the DRC to prosecute and sanction the perpetrators within six months, compensate survivors of rape and provide them with free medical and psychological care.

1. [*Democratic Republic of the Congo: "They Said We Would Die" M23 and Wazalendo Abuses in Eastern Congo, 20 August*](#) ↩

