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UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

NONSTATE VIOLATORS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC)

March 2026

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USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

Introduction

Against the backdrop of prolonged political instability, weak state authority, and chronic insecurity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)—a vast and resource-rich yet poverty-stricken country that has faced recurring armed conflict since the mid-1990s—nonstate actors have recently escalated attacks on religious communities. Such armed groups operate with relative impunity amid ongoing gaps in governance, contested territorial control, and limited civilian protection, particularly in the country's eastern provinces.

Within this context, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – the Democratic Republic of Congo (ISIS-DRC), has posed an especially alarming threat to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the DRC by violently targeting religious communities and their houses of worship, particularly in North Kivu and Ituri provinces. The group's affiliation with Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) and its invoking and forcibly applying a violent interpretation of Islam have fueled its intensified attacks on religious communities—especially Christians—and their leaders.

This publication provides an overview of these worsening religious freedom conditions in the DRC at the hands of nonstate actors, with an emphasis on the ADF. It also evaluates state and international responses to these challenges while considering ongoing implications for religious freedom in the country.

State Fragility and Demographic Complexity

The DRC is one of Central Africa's most diverse countries, with more than 200 ethnic and tribal groups within a population of approximately 115 million. About 95 percent of the population identify as Christian, approximately one to two percent identify as Muslim, and three to four percent likely adhere to indigenous or other religious beliefs.

Political and societal instability—resulting from decades of weak state authority, disputed governance, and a series of armed insurgent movements—have plagued the DRC's eastern region in particular, since conflict and mass displacement spilled over from neighboring Rwanda in the aftermath of that country's genocide in the mid-1990s. Nonstate actors have long proliferated in eastern DRC, including groups such as Mai-Mai militias, the Cooperative for the Development of Congo (CODECO), and the dominant March 23 (M23) movement. M23 first rebelled near Goma in 2012 and has staged a resurgence since 2021 with reported Rwandan support, despite a recent peace agreement.

The ADF: Acute Threat to Religious Freedom

The ADF has long posed a direct and significant threat to religious freedom in the DRC. The group first emerged in the mid-1990s in nearby Uganda as a collaboration of militants espousing a violent interpretation of Islam with armed opposition elements that sought to overthrow the Ugandan government. Ugandan military operations forced the group to relocate to eastern DRC in the early 2000s, where it sought to establish a long-term foothold in North Kivu and Ituri provinces. Although the ADF began its operations in the DRC as a localized insurgency with limited ideological coherence, it quickly gained a reputation for its horrific violence against civilians as well as its mass looting and exploitation of local resources—including metals and rare earth minerals that have long attracted violent competition rather than economic prosperity—to sustain its operations.

From Local Insurgency to Transnational Alignment

The ADF began to align itself with ISCAP in 2017, adopting aspects of the terrorist group's ideology, rhetoric, and tactics. It formally pledged allegiance to ISCAP in 2019, rebranding itself as ISIS-DRC and strengthening its operational capabilities as well as its ideological alignment with the broader network of ISIS affiliates across central Africa. While experts have debated the actual degree of ISCAP's oversight and involvement in the ADF's operations, both groups have since shared responsibility for committing religious freedom violations of escalating brutality, including mass killings, abductions, and other attacks explicitly targeting religious communities.

Presently, the ADF does not exercise sustained or significant territorial control, instead pursuing dominance through a combination of transient, elusive presence and tactical operations in select areas of eastern DRC. As such, it does not meet the [*standard*](#) for designation as an entity of particular concern (EPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended by the [*Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act*](#) of 2016.

The ADF's Escalation: Targeted Assaults on Christian Communities

The ADF has stepped up its operations in the last two years, carrying out a sustained pattern of attacks in eastern DRC that represents a direct assault on religious freedom,

particularly for Christian communities in North Kivu and Ituri provinces. In 2024, ADF fighters reportedly carried out multiple assaults on predominantly Christian villages and church gatherings in and around Beni, North Kivu, including attacks on prayer meetings and the killing of local pastors and congregants. Over the course of one week in July that year, the ADF killed an estimated 40 Christians, which led to a series of abductions and forced displacement that prompted some churches to suspend services or close altogether.

This pattern intensified in 2025 with several high-profile massacres linked to religious settings and gatherings. In February of that year, ADF assailants abducted civilians from Christian villages in North Kivu and later killed dozens at a Protestant church in the Kasanga area. In July 2025, the group [*carried*](#) out a major assault on worshipers attending a night vigil at a Catholic church in Komanda, Ituri Province, killing dozens of men, women, and children gathered for prayer. Attacks throughout the year continued to strike Christian villages, funeral wakes, and facilities, reinforcing community members' fears that religious spaces made them more vulnerable rather than offering them a refuge from violence. These incidents [*drew*](#) heightened international concern from governments, human rights bodies, and religious freedom advocates.

Early 2026 has brought no respite from ADF violence, as the group has continued to carry out attacks on predominantly Christian areas. In one display of its depravity, the group executed around 70 civilians in a Christian village in North Kivu in February, beheading men, women, children, and elderly victims alike.

Peacebuilding Efforts and Persistent ForB Challenges

Despite its ongoing struggle to establish long-term stability and comprehensive governance, the DRC government has collaborated over the last five years with regional and multilateral partners to stem ADF, M23, and other nonstate violence. In 2021, it deployed the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) in sustained operations against the ADF—including the joint Operation Shujaa with Ugandan forces—and [*increased*](#) patrols in Beni, Lubero, and Ituri. The DRC's cooperation with the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) has further [*bolstered*](#) its troop presence and civilian protection. In 2025, a military court convicted 23 people for collaborating with or supporting the ADF.



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U.S. Engagement in Multilateral Efforts toward Regional Peace

In late 2025 and early 2026, the United States has directly engaged in efforts to address insecurity in eastern DRC; in 2025, the administration of President Donald J. Trump helped [broker](#) the Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity between the DRC and Rwanda while also supporting related diplomatic initiatives, targeted [sanctions](#) against armed groups, and humanitarian and democratic assistance [programs](#).

Despite these efforts, insecurity remains high in eastern DRC as authorities face serious challenges in safeguarding civilians and preventing reprisals. The ADF and other nonstate actors represent persistent threats to religious communities in the area, as mass killings, abductions, and attacks on places of worship continue to generate widespread fear, drive displacement, and disrupt communal religious life. These challenges highlight the pressing need for sustained security operations, strengthened accountability, and robust civilian protection measures in the DRC to ensure that all are able to live, worship, and practice their religion or belief freely.

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