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‘Ticking time bomb’: DR Congo turns to abusive militias to fight M23 rebels

‘Some of them are bandits, some are youth who were given a weapon.’



The sound of gunshots pierced through thunder as a column of rag-tag fighters patrolled the town of Sake in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, dressed in a mix of civilian and military clothes, lugging assault rifles and brand new grenade launchers.

Among the group were fighters from a militia responsible for grave human rights abuses as well as dozens of minors, standing on the frontline of an increasingly tumultuous and deadly conflict, wearing rubber boots that were too big for their feet.

“Suffering is what drives us... we are here to protect our people,” said Gilbert, a commander of the group, which is called the Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS), while flanked by a dozen young ‘bodyguards’.

For the past year, the Congolese army has been supporting several militias like the APCLS, using them as proxies to combat the M23 rebel group, [which has seized swathes of territory in the east](#) of the country with the backing of thousands of Rwandan troops.

The militias, collectively known as Wazalendo (‘patriots’ in Kiswahili), are being used because of [poor motivation and dysfunction](#) within the ranks of DRC’s army, which has seen [dozens of soldiers and officers prosecuted](#) for deserting the battlefield.

Yet the Wazalendo groups – some of which have previously fought each-other – are committing serious human rights abuses and bringing large numbers of child soldiers to the frontlines, thwarting long-running efforts to prevent their recruitment.

UN experts say the militias are using the Wazalendo banner to legitimise their existence and criminal activities, expanding territory in some cases and taxing and exploiting civilians in others.

Weapons transfers from the army to the militias have [undermined prior calls by the government for armed groups to demobilise](#) and are planting the seeds of future conflicts by further militarising the region, according to Congolese analysts.

DRC’s anti-M23 campaign – which includes military alliances with southern African troops, Burundian soldiers, and private security contractors – has proved ineffective against the rebels, which began their latest insurgency at the end of 2021.

Increasing Rwandan support has allowed the M23 to massively expand its footprint this year, overshadowing other insurgencies in the east and raising the risk of a major regional conflagration between Rwanda and DRC and its allies.

The combat has uprooted [1.7 million people](#), and the use of increasingly heavy and sophisticated weapons has led to a surge in casualties, many of them Wazalendo fighters and child soldiers.

“I was in hospital for three months and I didn’t receive a single visit – neither from the authorities, nor from our commanders,” said Jaffar Abubakar, a 27-year-old father of two, who joined a Wazalendo-affiliated militia around a year ago.

Abubakar told The New Humanitarian that he had been shot through his arm, legs, and stomach while patrolling around Sake. Jaffar walked with a limp, his right hand was twisted unnaturally, and he had a colostomy bag hanging under his t-shirt.

From feuding militias to ‘resistance movement’

The Wazalendo armed groups came together in mid-2022, vowing to put aside their differences to fight a common enemy in the M23, which many of them see as a foreign imposition.

The M23 is led by Congolese Tutsi who say they are fighting because the government failed to implement a 2013 peace accord with the group. But they belong to a long line of Congolese rebel movements supported by neighbouring Rwanda.

Rwanda sees eastern DRC as its backyard and wants to maintain political and economic influence there. It also worries about the presence of the FDLR, a militia founded by exiled Rwandan Hutus

who were behind the 1994 genocide against Tutsis.

Selected Wazalendo militias were chosen by the government to be part of a volunteer defence group last year, and have since received cash, food, ammunition, and arms from the army, which also coordinates their activities.

“We couldn’t let them be like sheep without a shepherd,” said Peter Cirimwami, the military governor of North Kivu, the province where the M23 is most active. “We must speak together within the resistance movement, and that needs to be coordinated.”

Around a dozen Wazalendo fighters interviewed by The New Humanitarian over recent months in Sake and elsewhere offered different reasons for wanting to join the army’s anti-M23 operations.

Héritier Ndagendange, the spokesperson for the APCLS – which recruits from the local Hunde community and is led by Janvier Karairi, who was placed under European Union sanctions last year – said his group joined to “fight the foreign invaders”.

“Without our resistance, the enemy would have already taken Sake, but we won't give up,” Ndagendange told The New Humanitarian. “There are thousands of us; we are an army.”

Another APCLS fighter said he was motivated by financial reasons. “For me, it’s a job. We were short of money,” said the young man, who had a scarf tied around his forehead, an automatic rifle in his hand, and an ammunition belt over his shoulder.

Child soldiers

Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi has praised the Wazalendo groups for defending their communities. Like Karairi, however, several Wazalendo leaders are under international sanctions, and Congolese authorities have even issued arrest warrants in the past for some of them.

On a recent visit to Sake, which is on the frontline of the conflict, The New Humanitarian observed fighters with blue armbands showing affiliation to Nyatura, a Hutu militia accused of kidnappings, sexual violence, and summary executions.

The New Humanitarian also met a woman who said she was part of the FDLR, the rebel group founded by exiled Rwandan Hutu genocidaires, which [has a long history](#) of committing massacres and other abuses in DRC.

In [a recent media interview](#) Tshisekedi admitted that Wazalendo groups have not undergone training and may be committing atrocities. “They are in such a state of mind that they no longer obey anything, including ourselves,” Tshisekedi said.

By knowingly collaborating with militias that are committing abuses, Congolese army commanders could be held accountable under international law and sanctioned, said a well-placed UN source in DRC, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisals.

One of the biggest concerns around the Wazalendo is their massive use of child soldiers, which has set back efforts to [prevent their recruitment](#) by many years, according to UN officials, civil society groups, and local and international NGOs.

Some of the children may have been forcibly recruited by Wazalendo groups, though many are thought to have joined from displacement camps, where a lack of education and jobs makes joining an armed group seem like an attractive opportunity to make money.

Isaac Kabuyire, a former child soldier who now works in a centre for demobilised children, said the recruits will be “suffering” and are likely to be affected for the rest of their lives.

However, Kabuyire, who was recruited when he was 13, said he is not surprised that the current war has produced a new generation of what locals call kadogos, which means “little ones” in Kiswahili.

“Our country is being invaded. Anyone who can carry a weapon feels that they must help the fight,” Kabuyire said. “This is a situation where even a 12-year-old child might feel that he needs to protect his family and his land.”

Francine Kongolo, a public relations officer in DRC for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), said surgery teams in North Kivu and South Kivu have seen an increase in the number of children injured by weapons over recent months.

Some of the casualties are civilians, while others are child soldiers, their bodies mutilated by bullets or shells that have exploded in front of them, according to doctors and medical staff who spoke to The New Humanitarian.

Abuses against civilians

The proliferation of Wazalendo combatants has also led to escalating criminality and insecurity, especially around the city of Goma. The provincial capital of North Kivu is close to Sake and has taken in some 700,000 displaced people over the last two years.

Thousands of Wazalendo fighters have moved to protect Goma from a M23 takeover, yet they are carrying out robberies, shootings, extortion, and rapes within the city and in the surrounding areas.

“There are gunshots every night,” said a politician in Goma who is a member of Tshisekedi’s ruling party but disapproves of the collaboration with militia groups. The politician’s name is not being used to protect them from reprisals.

“We were supposed to neutralise the armed groups who have now become our allies,” the politician said, referring to a recent disarmament and demobilisation programme that was intended to take guns away from militia and rebel groups.

A woman living in a displacement camp north of Goma said she was recently raped by armed men while travelling to collect firewood in a forest with a group of four other women. Three were able to escape, but she didn’t have the strength to run, she said.

“I tried to resist, they hit me, then they raped me,” said the woman, whose name is not being used out of respect for her confidentiality. The woman said the assault was the second she has experienced this year in the forest, but she expects to return because there is no food in her camp.

The woman did not name the group responsible for either attack, but Wazalendo and government soldiers are present in and around the camps and both have been [accused of many similar offences](#).

Outside of Goma, Wazalendo groups have used their newfound legitimacy to increase their revenue-raising activities, setting up roadblocks in the areas they control where trucks, motorbikes, and pedestrians must pay taxes to get through.

Several Wazalendo commanders have accumulated enough wealth to buy land and build houses in Goma, according to residents of the city that live in neighbourhoods where purchases have been made.

Meanwhile, foot soldiers of local militias say they are struggling to survive for lack of food. “Nothing was left for us,” said a 15-year-old girl who spent a year and half with the FDLR and had to hand over all the taxes she had collected to a colonel.

The FDLR is not part of the Wazalendo grouping though it has [received support from the army](#) to fight the M23. The group has also been involved in the illicit trade of natural resources in parts of North Kivu for many years. The current war has given them more freedom to expand their activities, according to the UN [and media reports](#).

The M23 and Rwanda have been critical of the Congolese army's collaboration with the FDLR and other Wazalendo groups, accusing them of targeting Congolese Tutsi, thousands of whom have [sought refuge in camps in Goma and Rwanda](#).

However, [independent researchers](#) have pointed out that these collaborations were activated by the army as a strategy to combat the M23 insurgency, and were not what triggered the rebellion.

A 'ticking time bomb'

Congolese analysts who spoke to The New Humanitarian said they worry that Kinshasa's support for local armed groups could result in many future security problems.

"These are ethnic militias that still have their own interests as a priority, and they now have an even bigger feeling of impunity," said Onesphore Sematumba, a researcher for the International Crisis Group. "How could the heroes of today ever be judged as criminals tomorrow?"

Adolphe Agenonga from the University of Kisangani described the Wazalendo as a "ticking time bomb" and said the support they have received has undermined the government's recent efforts to launch a [demobilisation programme](#) for rebels.

"Is there even a will to demobilise them when they have been legitimised by the authorities and are currently wearing the same uniforms as the army?" Agenonga said.

Many Wazalendo groups have expectations that they will be rewarded by the government for their loyalty, including by being given permanent positions within the military.

Ndagendange, the APCLS spokesperson, said he wants the group to act as "a military reserve force", though with fighters stationed in the area they currently operate rather than being moved around.

The government's policy is to oppose the wholesale integration of armed groups into the army – a position taken to avoid rewarding and incentivising rebellions – yet given its need to keep the Wazalendo close, it is unclear if this will remain its stance.

If renewed efforts are made to demobilise Wazalendo and other groups, the government will need to [improve on past schemes](#) that failed to provide durable livelihoods for fighters or address the political factors that drew them into armed groups.

"It's not just a matter of distributing a few goats and bicycles," said Lwambo Mupfuni, a youth leader and former APCLS member who has worked on disarmament programs. "There is a need for development, for professional training, and transitional justice within communities."

Mupfuni said he had spoken to certain Wazalendo commanders about them letting go of the children but always faces the same dilemma: "If I take them out, where are they supposed to go?"

As things stand, Wazalendo groups have proved incapable of weakening the M23 and their Rwandan allies. Violent internal disputes and clashes between factions and with army soldiers – often fuelled by alcohol – happen frequently and haven't helped.

Meanwhile, many of the Wazalendo fighters are being maimed on the battlefield because they are fighting without protective equipment, said Abdou Rahamane Sidibe, a surgeon with the ICRC.

“We see more abdominal injuries than in conflicts where soldiers usually wear a flak jacket,” said Sidibe, who works in a hospital in Goma that has been seeing newly wounded people arriving every day.

Abubakar, the 27-year-old Wazalendo combatant, said the deaths, injuries, and lack of support from the government won’t stop new recruits from joining the fighting. “It’s mostly the young ones,” he said. “They don’t have a family to take care of; they have no fear.”

Edited by Philip Kleinfeld.