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‘People started to point the finger’: How the M23 conflict endangers DR Congo’s Tutsi communities

‘We didn’t agree to create this group.’



The war between the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s military and the Tutsi-led M23 armed group is having a harmful impact on the country’s Rwandophone Tutsi communities, some of whom have been unfairly typecast as rebel collaborators.

Interviews with nearly a dozen Tutsi civilians underscore the diverse ways their communities have been affected by the war, which began in late 2021 and has seen the M23 seize large chunks of eastern DRC with the military backing of neighbouring Rwanda.

“People started to point the finger and say we were Rwandans, to say we were complicit in this war,” said Providence Muhorakeye, speaking from a tarpaulin tent at a displacement camp in Goma, eastern DRC’s largest city. “But we didn’t contribute. We don’t know anything about it.”

Muhorakeye, a 36-year-old Tutsi woman, said armed men wearing military fatigues killed two of her uncles in late 2022, prompting her to flee her village for Goma. She said her mother was also attacked and later succumbed to her wounds.

The M23 began its insurgency because it felt the Congolese government had failed to implement a 2013 peace accord with the group. Yet the rebels are now using the abuse against Tutsi as a justification for the ongoing rebellion.

The M23 has received massive backing from Rwanda, which has up to 4,000 troops on the ground and de facto control over the group, [according to UN experts](#). Kigali sees eastern DRC as its backyard and wants to claw back influence there from regional rivals.

Analysts say the combat [increasingly resembles a regional conflict](#), with the Rwandan soldiers fighting next to the M23, and southern African troops – from Malawi, South Africa, and Tanzania – as well as Burundian soldiers, fighting with Congolese government forces against them.

Nearly two million people have been displaced by the conflict, according to the UN, with an estimated 700,000 camping in [dire conditions around Goma](#). Thousands more have fled to neighbouring Uganda or Rwanda.

The Congolese presidency has warned against discrimination targeting Rwandophone communities, yet Tutsi who spoke to The New Humanitarian described facing extreme violence, verbal abuse, and the theft or killing of their livestock.

Some interviewees said they were targeted by people in their villages, while others blamed their abuse on a poorly controlled coalition of local militias that have been supporting the Congolese army in its floundering counter-insurgency campaign.

Charles, a displaced person living in a camp sheltering Congolese Tutsi in Rwanda, told The New Humanitarian he just wants the war to stop. “Children are not going to school and we cannot afford them an education now,” he said. “I want to go back to DRC.”

‘We didn’t agree to create this group’

Congolese Tutsi are a small minority but have long faced discrimination. Members of the group have lived in DRC for many generations, yet their citizenship was increasingly questioned by politicians in the decades after independence in 1960.

Large numbers joined Rwandan-led rebellions against the Congolese government, initially launched after Hutu genocidaires fled from Rwanda to eastern DRC in the 1990s. This alliance hardened negative feelings towards Tutsi by other communities.



Read more: Tutsi communities in eastern DRC

Discrimination did drive some Tutsi to join the M23 and its predecessor groups, and it has increasingly been wielded as a justification for the current insurgency, according to public statements by the rebels and their Rwandan backers.

The M23 and Rwanda are especially critical of the Congolese army’s collaboration with Nyatura, a Hutu-dominated militia, and the FDLR, a rebel group founded in DRC by the exiled Hutu extremists behind the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

However, independent researchers point out that these collaborations were activated by the army to combat the M23 insurgency, and were not its proximate trigger. They [also point out](#) that anti-Tutsi abuse has soared as a direct result of the rebellion.



Read more: Was anti-Tutsi abuse the trigger for the M23 insurgency?

It is unclear how many Tutsi have experienced abuse and violence over the past two years, and Tutsi communities are not alone in feeling they have been profiled and targeted by the conflict parties.

Still, thousands of Tutsi have arrived in camps in Goma and Rwanda, and UN officials and rights groups have drawn attention to [public lynchings and hate speech](#) against Kinyarwanda speakers, which includes both Tutsi and Hutu communities.

Prominent Tutsi leaders from North Kivu – the main province where the M23 is active – have also been arrested by Congolese authorities, or have fled because they fear persecution, according to [information gathered by independent UN experts](#).

“We have lots of members of our families who have disappeared. Others have been massacred unjustly,” said David Karambi, president of the Isoko Mutuality, a Tutsi association in North Kivu.

Karambi said leaders of Tutsi communities have tried to make clear that they should not be associated automatically with the M23. But he said these efforts have often felt like “preaching in the desert”.

Karambi added that the M23 is partly right to say that it is fighting to protect Tutsi, because the “FDLR is very active”. “It is not really just out of kindness that they say they want to defend the members of the community,” Karambi said.

Other displaced Tutsi expressed deep scepticism of the M23. “We didn’t agree to create this group,” said Emmanuel Nsengiyumva, a community leader at the Acogenoki camp. “We didn’t consent. For everything they are doing, we are also victims.”

Killings, cattle theft, and continued abuse

The New Humanitarian interviewed five displaced Tutsi civilians in Acogenoki and four in the Nkamira transit camp in western Rwanda. Interviews were also carried out with leaders of Tutsi communities like Karambi, and several independent researchers.



Andrei Popoviciu/TNH

Thousands of refugees have taken shelter at the Nkamira transit camp in western Rwanda since the M23 conflict erupted. The refugees have been arriving with bullet wounds and severe mental health issues.

Interviewees described facing a low-level of discrimination in their villages and towns before the current conflict. However, they said the abuse then increased significantly in scale and severity once the M23 began its insurgency.



Read more: Who is part of the M23?

One interviewee mentioned seeing violent anti-Tutsi rhetoric on social media, while six described experiencing discrimination in their villages. One said their children were attacked by other pupils in school last year.

Of those describing physical attacks, six said their cattle were stolen or killed by militias; two described women and girls who had been raped by militias; and seven said they had seen family members or neighbours killed over the past two years.

A 49-year-old Tutsi woman called Mukanoheri said she fled her Congolese village last year after Nyatura fighters carried out violent acts, including hanging the head of a Tutsi woman in the village square.

Mukanoheri is now living in the Nkamira transit centre, which is set among western Rwanda's lush green hills. The camp has seen more than 15,000 mostly Congolese Tutsi pass through it since last year.

"It was a massacre," said Mukanoheri, who gave only her first name for fear of reprisals, recalling last year's attack. "This group was telling us there were no Tutsi allowed to live in Congo."

Akim Rwubusisi Ezayi said his family moved to the Nkamira camp last year after seven people in his village were attacked by Nyatura and FDLR fighters. He said his village was mixed but that "only the Tutsi were targeted" by the militiamen.

At the Acogenoki camp in Goma, displaced Tutsi fled fighting between the M23 and opposing forces, as well as specific targeted threats, said camp president Alice Maombi.

“They started coming to our houses to kill us. We saw many murders,” Maombi said, referring to militia groups without naming any specifically. “That is why we came here to find shelter.”

“There are people who are putting our camp on social media, saying that there are Tutsi here. Others say that we will be stoned, or the camp burned down. It scares us and we don’t feel secure.”

Justin Mugabo, another resident of Acogenoki, which houses around 10,000 people, said militia fighters killed two of his brothers and several other people close to him “before my eyes”.

Mugabo said he was grateful for being provided a safe haven in Acogenoki, which is under police protection. Still, he said he is afraid of leaving the camp for a nearby market because people outside have accused residents of being rebels.

Maombi, the camp president, shared similar fears. “There are people who are putting our camp on social media, saying that there are Tutsi here,” she said. “Others say that we will be stoned, or the camp burned down. It scares us and we don’t feel secure.”

The Tutsi refugees living in Rwanda’s Nkamira transit centre face fewer security risks but poor humanitarian conditions, camp director David Rwanyonga told The New Humanitarian.

Rwanyonga said refugees have been arriving with bullet wounds and severe mental health issues, and that survivors of rape – including girls as young as 14 – have come to the camp alone, pregnant, and infected with HIV. He added that medical services are strained in the camp due to budget cuts by the UN’s refugee agency, UNHCR, which funds the site almost entirely.

Feeling trapped

While critical of the government collaborating with militias like the FDLR and Nyatura, several Tutsi interviewees said the Congolese government had made some efforts to protect them, such as setting up the camp in Goma.

President Félix Tshisekedi has said publicly that Tutsi are just as Congolese as other communities, and the presidency [has warned](#) that hate speech against Rwandophones will only lend support to the M23.

In interviews with The New Humanitarian, some members of government-aligned militias expressed nuanced views about the conflict and the involvement of Tutsi communities.

“We are not fighting the Tutsi, we are fighting the M23,” said Janvier Ngoa, a commander in the APCLS, one of the largest pro-government armed groups, with its roots in North Kivu’s Hunde communities.

Mistaken popular prejudice against Tutsi exists because of the community’s long history of being involved in rebellions, Ngoa explained, blaming this on Rwandan meddling.

Still, most Tutsi interviewees said they feel trapped and wary about the future. Mukanoheri, the woman in the Nkamira centre, said her daughter was killed while fleeing to Rwanda, and she now has to care for her surviving two grandchildren.

“We didn’t belong there, but we don’t belong here either,” said Mukanoheri. “In Congo, I couldn’t sleep well. I was scared I’d be killed in my sleep,” she added. “At least here, we sleep peacefully.”

Providence Muhorakeye, in Acogenoki, said that her neighbours had killed her mother. “How can I live with someone who killed my mother?” she said. “I wouldn’t be able to go back home even if peace were declared.”

Refugees interviewed in Rwanda were selected by UNHCR, which also provided translation support.

Edited by Philip Kleinfeld.