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DR Congo's war-displaced face rebel shelling and militia abuses

'Displaced people today find themselves in a situation similar to the one they initially fled.'



Residents of displacement sites in Goma, the largest city in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo say they are living in constant fear after deadly artillery strikes hit their homes last month, and because of sexual violence and robberies occurring in the camps.

Thirty-five civilians were killed on 3 May when [shelling hit two camps](#) sheltering people displaced by the two-year conflict between the M23 rebel group – which is supported by neighbouring Rwanda – and DRC's army, which is backed by local militias, Burundian soldiers, and southern African troops.

The M23 and the Rwandan army [were blamed](#) for the strike, yet residents said the Congolese military is also responsible because it is operating heavy weapons from positions around the camps, many of which are on the outskirts of town and are close to M23 positions in the surrounding hills.

"In wanting to destroy [the] heavy weapons, the rebels shoot at populations displaced by war," said Éric Chiza, a displaced person from the 8th CEPAC camp, which is in the grounds of a local church and is one of the two sites hit last month.

Chiza said his brother was badly wounded, several of his friends were killed, and his house was destroyed by the artillery strike. He said residents have asked authorities to move their weapons and positions away from the population.

The M23 is led by Congolese Tutsis who say they are fighting because the government broke a 2013 peace accord with the group, and because local Tutsis are at risk from local militias. Yet

Rwanda is widely thought to be pulling the strings, using the group to assert influence in eastern DRC.

Some 1.5 million people have been displaced by the still-escalating conflict, including 700,000 who have taken shelter in Goma, either with [host families](#) or in camps, which The New Humanitarian [has reported on extensively during](#) the conflict.

Goma residents have set up [numerous humanitarian](#) and [cultural initiatives](#) to aid people in the camps – and support is also being provided by international relief organisations – yet the sites remain overcrowded and lack basic facilities.

The camps and the city itself have also become increasingly militarised, as pro-government forces – including the army, private security contractors, and local militias known as Wazalendo (‘patriots’ in Swahili) – try to halt the M23 advance.

Chiara Maugeri, field coordinator in Goma for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), said the presence of armed men around and inside the camps has exposed residents to a “very high level of violence”, including [sexual violence](#).

“Displaced people today find themselves in a situation similar to the one they initially fled,” Maugeri told The New Humanitarian. “They are still in total insecurity and have no escape.”

‘The fear is still permanent’

Rashidi Myanitse, who also lives in the 8th CEPAC camp, said his family was struggling even before last month’s deadly shelling. He said finding food was a “headache” and that sleeping in tents was “very complicated”, especially when it rains.

Since the shelling, Myanitse, who escaped his village of Kimoka in February, said he could not put into words how he felt on a daily basis. He said the artillery strike severely wounded his older sister and killed three of her children.

“At home I lived well and ate well, but since I fled the war to come and live in this camp I have suffered with my family,” Myanitse said, adding: “This is not the first nor the last time [there have been attacks]. These rebels continue to drop bombs to this day.”

Kanari Osse, another resident of the 8th CEPAC camp, said he lost his brother in the shelling. He said he survived only because he was out working as a day labourer in town.

“The displaced are still the target, and this danger has not yet been ruled out.”

“Since that day, I have lived with fear,” said Osse, who also arrived at the camp in February. “I spend my time worrying because I know that at any moment another bomb could explode.”

Christophe Muissa, a human rights defender and activist from Filimbi, a citizen movement that advocates for the promotion and protection of human rights, said his group has made recommendations to authorities that they should move the camps or the army positions, but the proposals have not been acted on.

Muissa said he even wonders if the Congolese army is deliberately exposing the population as part of a “military strategy” to make the M23 look bad and the state seem empowered in the eyes of the international community.

“The fear is still permanent because there is no measure to spare this population [and remove] the order to maintain these positions around the camps,” Muissa said. “The displaced are still the target, and this danger has not yet been ruled out.”

Maugeri of MSF said it is “really important” that the warring parties respect international humanitarian law and “ensure the protection of civilians in urban areas and displaced persons camps”.

“It is clear that if the fighting and clashes near the sites do not stop, the civilian population and the displaced could be affected again by these attacks, by these bombings,” she said.

Robberies, extortion, and sexual violence

Displaced people said armed men affiliated either to the Congolese army or the Wazalendo are also causing major problems in the camps, from assaults on women and girls to robberies and extortion.

Given the risks posed by both sides of the conflict, Osse, who lost his brother in the May shelling, said displaced people are currently “doubly threatened”.

“In this camp, we have patriots and armed people, [and] there are some among them who take advantage, making this camp insecure, even extorting goods from certain displaced people,” he said.

Their protection should not be left to armed soldiers, whose presence “arouses a certain fear” among residents.

Residents of the nearby Lushagala displacement camp, which was also hit by an artillery strike last month but did not record any fatalities, are facing similar insecurity, according to camp president François Batege Ndayambaje.

Ndayambaje said the Lushagala camp has been erected close to the main road from Goma to Sake, which is on the front line of the conflict. He said the military and its allies regularly take the road when heading to the battlefield.

Ndayambaje said camp residents have asked for the government to deploy well-trained police officers to secure the camp. He said their protection should not be left to armed soldiers, whose presence “arouses a certain fear” among residents.

MSF’s Maugeri said displaced people in the camps are often afraid to move around for fear of being attacked or raped. She said aid groups, including MSF, have also been impacted by the insecurity, and have had to sometimes suspend activities.

Maugeri said MSF works in eight camps around Goma, and described humanitarian conditions at the sites as “deplorable”. She said displaced people lack access to sanitation infrastructure, drinking water, food, and shelter.

Who is taking responsibility?

Muissa, the human rights defender and activist from Filimbi, called on the state to take “responsibility” for the security of people in the camps, and for providing for their basic needs.

“There have still not been serious measures to secure the displaced people who are victims and represent no threat in this war,” he said. “They are neither protagonists nor belligerents in the war. They are just innocents in search of peace and security.”

Ndayambaje, the president of the Lushagala camp, said he is trying to encourage the population not to despair and to remain perseverant, though he acknowledged how difficult this would be given the conditions and the regular shelling.

“This fear cannot disappear so easily,” he told The New Humanitarian. “The fear will disappear when we have peace and when we are asked to return to our homes where we were before.”

Edited by Philip Kleinfeld.