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DRC: M23's rampant human rights abuses demand concerted international action

Since capturing the city of Goma in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in January, the Rwandan-backed M23 armed group has raided hospitals, abducted patients, including civilians and hospitalized Congolese soldiers, from their beds and subjected them to acts of torture, Amnesty International said today.

The organization also documented cases of gang rape committed by M23, as well as acts of ill-treatment against human rights defenders after the group seized Goma, the capital of North Kivu province, on 27 January, and Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu province, on 16 February. Amnesty International is calling on the East African Community, the Southern African Development Community, the European Union and other international actors to increase pressure on all parties to the conflict to protect civilians and treat detainees humanely, in accordance with international humanitarian law.

"Since taking control of Goma, the M23 has instilled a climate of fear and vicious reprisals among the local population. The alarming scale and frequency of abuses in eastern Congo should shock the world. The violence has been enabled by decades of impunity for serious abuses and human rights violations," said Tigere Chagutah, Amnesty International's Regional Director for East and Southern Africa.

Amnesty International interviewed 25 survivors, eyewitnesses, civil society activists, human rights defenders, journalists inside the DRC and in exile.

Abductions at hospitals

On the night of 28 February and the morning of 3 March, M23 armed fighters forcibly entered Heal Africa and CBCA Ndosho hospitals in Goma where they abducted more than 130 people. These included members of

the Congolese army, some of whom had been wounded, and caregivers. They were taken to a stadium in the city where some were tortured. M23 fighters forced some abductees to lie on the ground, whipped them, and pressured them to join M23. Some civilians were released, but many individuals remain missing.

“(At the stadium), M23 asked civilians to stay together,” said a person who was abducted in the hospital raids. “We were whipped. We were made to lie down and beaten on our buttocks and hands. They said: ‘If you’re a soldier, admit it.’”

Sultani Makenga, the military leader of M23, said in a recent [interview](#) that members of the Congolese army at the hospitals pretended to be patients or caregivers. He said M23 found 14 weapons in the hospitals and that hospital staff had alerted them to the situation. He also said M23 detained those who did not belong in hospital.

Under international humanitarian law, all persons who are wounded and sick must be respected and protected. Civilians must not be targeted. Torture, inhumane treatment and the taking of hostages by M23, if targeted against civilians or wounded members of the military, may constitute war crimes.

“All patients and caregivers, including soldiers in need of medical care, should be immediately released and returned to hospitals so they can continue their treatment,” said Tigere Chagutah.

Hundreds of dead bodies found in South Kivu

Amnesty International received eyewitness accounts and numerous photos of dead bodies frequently found in neighborhoods in Bukavu, a city of more than one million residents. From 17 February to 13 March 2025, the Congolese Red Cross collected 43 dead bodies in Bukavu, including 29 civilians. Across South Kivu province, during the same period, the Congolese Red Cross collected 406 bodies, including 110 civilians.

Human rights defenders, journalists and civil society workers targeted

Amnesty International has documented cases of human rights defenders, journalists and civil society activists who have been detained by M23 in recent weeks. They were held in both makeshift and official detention centres, some were tortured and threatened. Dozens of activists have gone into hiding or fled Congo in search of safety.

But even outside the country, threats continue. A human rights defender, who has documented violations committed by M23 since 2023, said that he had received a text message that said: “If we find you, you’re going to be in trouble. Stay where you are.”

Another defender described how M23 arbitrarily arrested and whipped him after he was recognized by an M23 official. He was briefly detained for speaking out against violations committed by M23 before Goma was taken over.

People deprived of their liberty, including civilians and members of the military or the M23, are protected under international humanitarian law. M23 must treat humanely all people who it detains. Acts of torture or inhumane treatment may constitute war crimes.

Alarming levels of sexual violence

Humanitarian organizations have [reported](#) an alarming increase in rapes and other sexual violence cases in North and South Kivu. Survivors told Amnesty International how they were raped by M23 fighters and threatened with death.

In one case, a woman said M23 fighters suspected she was a spy. She said five M23 fighters, wearing military uniforms and armed with weapons, gang-raped her. In another case, two men in Congolese military uniforms raped a pregnant woman and abducted her husband.

“M23 and the Congolese army, which are bound to international humanitarian law, must be held to account for the rapes. The world must not ignore the crimes taking place in eastern DRC,” said Tigere Chagutah.

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