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AFRICA FILE, MAY 1, 2025: AU, TURKEY, AND UNITED STATES SURGE TO HALT AL SHABAAB; DRC PEACE TALKS; UGANDA'S ROLE IN THE EASTERN DRC

May 1, 2025 - ISW Press



Africa File, May 1, 2025: AU, Turkey, and United States Surge to Halt al Shabaab; DRC Peace Talks; Uganda's Role in the Eastern DRC

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The Critical Threats Project's Africa File provides regular analysis and assessments of major developments regarding state and nonstate actors' activities in Africa that undermine regional stability and threaten US personnel and interests.

Key Takeaways:

- **Somalia.** Somalia's international partners are increasing their efforts to counter al Shabaab in response to the group's significant gains in 2025. The African Union (AU) peacekeeping mission in Somalia has proposed nearly doubling the number of troops in Somalia. This surge would represent the largest AU presence in Somalia since the end of the 14-year AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in 2022. Turkey and the United States have already increased their support for Somali security forces in 2025. Al Shabaab threatens US regional interests in the Red Sea through its collaboration with the Yemeni Houthis.
- **Democratic Republic of the Congo:** A détente between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda will likely limit the scale of violence in the eastern DRC, but proxy fighting between the various pro-Congolese militia groups and Rwanda-backed M23 rebels will almost certainly continue in the absence of a broader agreement with M23. Qatar and the United States have successfully advanced peace talks between the DRC and Rwanda over the conflict in the eastern DRC. Separate negotiations between the DRC and Rwandan-backed M23 rebels have made much slower progress, however, and fighting involving M23 has continued despite the peace talks. Pro-government Wazalendo fighters and other anti-Tutsi militias are a significant obstacle to peace- and trust-building efforts—regardless of DRC-M23-Rwanda negotiations—because the militias are not involved in these talks and the DRC is likely unable to control the militias.
- **Uganda.** Uganda is working with actors on multiple sides of the conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to hedge and strengthen its sphere of influence. Uganda has developed a security partnership with the DRC in recent years. However, Uganda also maintains ties to the Rwandan-backed M23 rebel movement and has activated its own rebel proxies in the eastern DRC. Uganda is using these relationships to counterbalance Rwandan influence in the eastern DRC and unilaterally influence Congolese affairs. Ugandan meddling perpetuates conflict in the eastern DRC by proliferating the number of armed actors, injecting regional competition into local conflicts, and complicating peace efforts.

Somalia

Author: Kathryn Tyson with Liam Karr

Members of the African Union (AU) peacekeeping mission in Somalia called to surge troop numbers in Somalia to the highest levels since 2022 to combat al Shabaab.[1] Leaders from

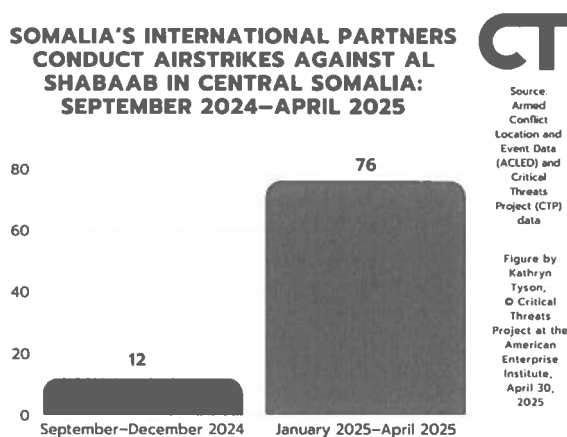
Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda discussed recent al Shabaab military gains and the AU Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) during high-level meetings in Uganda on April 24.[2] The AUSSOM partners said that there is an “urgent need” to increase AUSSOM by 8,000 soldiers.[3] AUSSOM succeeded the previous AU peacekeeping mission in January 2025 and has approximately 11,900 soldiers in Somalia to combat al Shabaab, support the development of Somali security forces, and facilitate the transfer of security responsibilities to the Somali government by 2029.[4] The AUSSOM partners also proposed increasing Somalia’s air assets and capabilities, fortifying AUSSOM bases, and strengthening civil-military relations to deter and degrade al Shabaab.[5]

The AUSSOM partners are “deeply concerned” about al Shabaab gains since January 2025 that threaten to reverse the first successful Somali-led counterterrorism offensive in 2022.[6] Al Shabaab has made major advances in central Somalia, which has enabled it to relink its support zones in central and southern Somalia for the first time since 2022 and threaten the main roads linking Mogadishu to central Somalia.[7] Al Shabaab separately captured villages south of Mogadishu in March that are crucial for Somali forces to defend the capital from al Shabaab vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices.[8] CTP continues to assess that al Shabaab is unlikely to launch an offensive on Mogadishu to seize power in the short term, but its gains in central and southern Somalia will allow the group to increase economic and military pressure on Mogadishu and thus destabilize the Somali Federal Government (SFG) and undermine its legitimacy.[9]

The potential deployment of 8,000 additional troops would represent the largest AU presence in Somalia since the end of the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in early 2022. The previous AU mission—the AU Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)—succeeded AMISOM in April 2022 with 18,500 troops and drew down to around 12,500 troops by the end of 2024.[10] AMISOM had been in Somalia since 2008, when al Shabaab controlled almost all of southern Somalia and nearly toppled the Somali government.[11] The mission had 20,000 troops in the country in 2021 and early 2022 when al Shabaab was last at a high point, including al Shabaab’s first multiday campaign inside Ethiopia.[12]

Other international partners, such as Turkey and the United States, have already increased military support to Somali security forces. Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States have coordinated an increased number of airstrikes in Somalia amid the al Shabaab offensive. The SFG and these international partners have coordinated at least 76 airstrikes in 2025, according to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data.[13] The United States has conducted at least nine airstrikes across Somalia in 2025.[14] Turkey sent additional ground forces to help train and coordinate drone strikes in April.[15]

Figure 1. International Partners’ Airstrikes against al Shabaab in Somalia: September 2024–April 2025



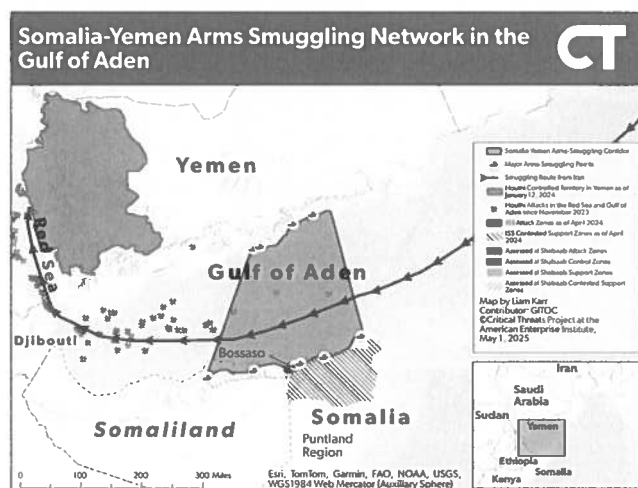
Source: Kathryn Tyson; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data.

The AU mission faces significant funding gaps that undermine its ability to increase its presence. AUSSOM’s logistics and supply lines are severely stretched due to a \$96 million funding deficit.[16] The United States has signaled that it will not support the proposed funding model for AUSSOM in an upcoming UN Security Council vote in May.[17] Analysts agree that this funding obstacle is unlikely to end the peacekeeping mission, but prolonged negotiations could cause further funding gaps.[18]

Al Shabaab threatens US regional interests in the Red Sea through its collaboration with the Yemeni Houthis. US intelligence officials told CNN in June 2024 that the Houthis and al Shabaab discussed a deal for the Houthis to provide weapons to al Shabaab.[19] Al Shabaab could use Houthi-provided attack drones and surface-to-air missiles to target US drone systems and allied personnel in Somalia.[20] Al Shabaab attacks on US drones would degrade US and partnered intelligence collection and strike capabilities, which would strengthen al Shabaab’s freedom of movement throughout Somalia. The group could alternatively use attack drones to target US ships in the Gulf of

Aden from its small enclaves in northern Somalia to boost its propaganda and indirectly support the Houthi attack campaign on Red Sea shipping.[21]

Figure 2. Somalia-Yemen Arms Smuggling Network in the Gulf of Aden



Note: "ISS" stands for IS Somalia Province.

Source: Liam Karr; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Authors: Yale Ford and Liam Karr

The following text is adapted from "Congo War Security Review Special Edition: Slow and Steady—What to Make of DRC-M23 Peace Talks"

Qatar and the United States have advanced peace talks between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda over the conflict in the eastern DRC since March. Qatar mediated a ceasefire between the DRC and Rwanda on March 18.[22] Rwandan Foreign Minister Olivier Nduhugirehe said that Qatari-mediated peace talks between the DRC and Rwanda resulted in "significant progress toward peace" on April 15.[23] US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, DRC Foreign Minister Thérèse Wagner, and Nduhugirehe signed a declaration of principles agreement on April 25, which "outlines a pathway to peace, stability, and integrated economic development" in the eastern DRC.[24] US President Donald Trump's senior adviser for African affairs, Massad Boulos, had met with several heads of state in the Great Lakes region and the Qatari foreign minister in April to lay the groundwork for the agreement.[25]

The DRC and Rwanda agreed to six points as part of the US-mediated peace framework. The DRC and Rwanda agreed to "acknowledge each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity" and find solutions to the conflict in the eastern DRC "by peaceful means." [26] The DRC and Rwanda acknowledged each other's "legitimate security concerns in their shared border region" and committed to "limiting the proliferation of nonstate armed groups" and "refraining from providing military support to nonstate armed groups." [27] The two parties agreed to a "phased regional economic integration framework" backed by "significant investments," including from the United States in infrastructure, mining, and hydropower, among other sectors.[28] The DRC and Rwanda also agreed to facilitate the return of Congolese refugees living in Rwanda to the eastern DRC and internally displaced persons in the eastern DRC to their areas of origin.[29] The two parties committed to support UN-backed peacekeeping forces in the eastern DRC.[30] The two parties committed to formalize these commitments into a comprehensive peace agreement and coordinate an initial draft "for mutual review" by May 2.[31] Representatives from the DRC, France, Qatar, Rwanda, Togo, and the United States met in Qatar on April 30, presumably to work on the initial draft agreement.[32]

Peace efforts have led to a decrease in fighting between the Congolese army (FARDC) and the thousands of Rwandan forces in the DRC and FARDC and Rwanda-backed M23 rebels since early April. Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) reported in early April that Rwandan forces had ceased direct operations after the ceasefire and that FARDC's involvement in engagements in North and South Kivu provinces declined to 20 percent of all clashes.[33]

Separate negotiations between the DRC and M23 have made much slower progress. The DRC and M23 released a joint statement on April 23 after several weeks of negotiations.[34] The two parties jointly committed to "an immediate cessation of hostilities" for the first time publicly and a "categorical rejection of any hate speech." [35] The joint statement added that the DRC and M23 "agreed to work toward a truce that would facilitate a broader ceasefire." [36]

The joint statement represents a minor DRC concession. The DRC had previously rejected M23's demands for direct negotiations and labeled the group as "terrorists" before the Qatar-mediated talks. [37] The joint statement marks a shift in this stance by publicly recognizing M23 as a peace partner.

[38] The joint statement mirrored some talking points often repeated by M23, including "addressing the root causes" of the conflict and refraining from targeted hate speech against ethnic communities.[39]

The DRC-M23 joint statement indicates that the two sides have not yet reached a stable ceasefire or made significant steps toward a long-term peace agreement. The joint statement is vague, unclear, and lacks tangible details. The joint statement committed both parties to continue to observe the informal pause in fighting, which has not actually stopped fighting in the eastern DRC, as they continue negotiations toward a "truce" that will support the broader ceasefire.[40] The statement did not go beyond previous African-led peace initiatives' readouts, which have failed to produce a stable peace deal. French media characterized the joint statement as a fragile "statement of intent" rather than a binding ceasefire agreement.[41] CTP continues to assess that both sides will remain open to short-term and nonbinding ceasefires as they seek to manage international pressure and set military conditions for future offensives.[42]

The DRC and M23 likely disagree on several preconditions for more substantive discussions. Initial talks in late March failed to produce "concrete results," and the latest talks were briefly postponed in early April.[43] Multiple Congolese and French media sources reported that several "deep disagreements" impeded negotiations as early as April 13.[44] M23 rejected the DRC's demand that M23 demobilize and disarm before further discussions.[45] M23 additionally claimed that the DRC had not met its preconditions to grant amnesty to a specific list of individuals and had instead released detainees who were not on the list.[46] The DRC rejected M23's demand that the Congolese army (FARDC) and pro-Congolese government militia fighters demilitarize Walikale town—a district capital from which M23 withdrew in early April as talks began in a gesture of "goodwill." [47]

These disputes have significantly impeded progress toward a ceasefire or a broader peace deal, nearly derailed the joint statement, and are an obstacle to future talks. Reuters reported on April 23 that the DRC and M23 delegations were frustrated with the pace of negotiations.[48] The French magazine *Jeune Afrique* on April 24 cited a "source close to the Qatari mediation" team who said that M23 officials used the reports that talks were moving slowly to pressure the DRC delegation.[49] Continued negotiations and plans to release the joint statement were reportedly in jeopardy for nearly a week, and M23 had even left Qatar due to the disagreements before either side had signed the document.[50] DRC government spokesperson Patrick Muyaya said on April 24 that "some points remain to be resolved to allow for significant progress" in DRC-M23 negotiations.[51] The Congolese media outlet Radio Okapi reported April 23 that M23 conditioned another round of talks on the DRC replacing its negotiating team.[52] It remains unclear when the next round of negotiations will occur.

The Congolese government is likely unable and unwilling to agree to M23's maximalist demands, which makes a long-term peace agreement far off. M23 aims to at least legitimize control over the areas that it has captured in North and South Kivu, including in two provincial capitals, Goma and Bukavu, and likely wants to expand its influence in the DRC as a legitimate political party. [53] The group has given conflicting statements on its desire to take over Kinshasa directly, but has repeatedly signaled it wants to oust current DRC President Félix Tshisekedi.[54] M23 has demanded that the DRC implement the 2013 Nairobi peace deal, which stipulated that M23 would demilitarize and become a political party and that the DRC would facilitate the return of refugees, among other provisions.[55] Tshisekedi is unlikely to support a deal that legitimizes M23 control of eastern DRC because such a deal would severely undermine his legitimacy and power base in Kinshasa, especially given M23's threats to unseat him.[56] M23 also currently does not pose a direct existential threat, as it would have to travel roughly 500 miles to reach the DRC's economic engine in the mineral-rich Katanga region and nearly 1,000 miles to Kinshasa across poor roads. Reuters quoted a "Congolese government source" on April 23 who said that the Qatari-mediated talks had faced obstacles because M23 "asked for too much" and the DRC "could not give in to every whim." [57]

The DRC has pushed nonstarter conditions for M23 despite M23 holding significant leverage in the eastern DRC. The DRC demanded that M23 and "other armed groups" in its alliance disarm without reintegration into FARDC.[58] This stance is a demand for M23 to capitulate with none of the economic, security, or political benefits that reintegration would bring and is at odds with M23's advantageous position in the eastern DRC. The group currently controls Goma and Bukavu, plus half of the district capitals across the two provinces. Pro-Congolese government militias have pressured M23-controlled areas in recent weeks, but these militias and FARDC have not shown that they can recapture key M23-held population centers.[59]

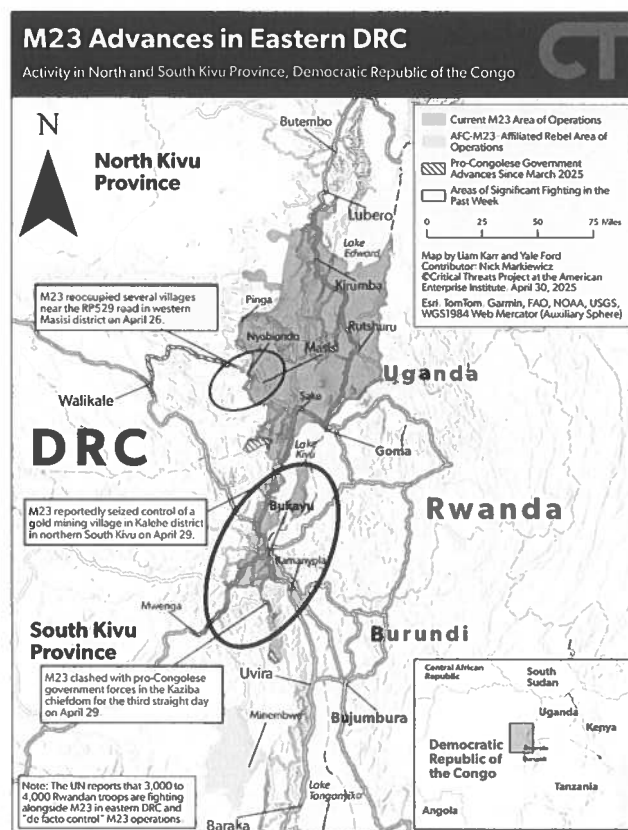
The underlying disagreements between the DRC and M23 parallel previous collapses in negotiations where the DRC refused to accede to M23's demands. Former Congolese President Joseph Kabila initially agreed to the 2013 Nairobi peace deal but never implemented it. Negotiations stalled in November 2021 after the DRC refused to implement the 2013 Nairobi peace agreement.[60] The core elements of the DRC's and M23's current demands include aspects of the 2013 deal, including M23 amnesty and demobilization without integration.[61] This saga shows that Congolese politicians will negotiate with M23 and even agree in principle to power-sharing settlements but are ultimately unwilling to accede to M23's demands and commit to lasting solutions to the conflict due to domestic political constraints and the group's distance from more politically sensitive areas of the DRC.

Qatar and the United States have helped drive the little progress that DRC-M23 talks have made. Reuters reported on April 9 that the United States "directly" pressured M23 to withdraw from Walikale town and FARDC to not attack as M23 retreated.[62] Boulou met separately with Tshisekedi and Rwandan President Paul Kagame in early April and said on April 17 that US pressure on Rwanda and M23 halted M23's offensive toward Kisangani—the DRC's fourth largest city and 265 miles west of its furthest advance—and led it to withdraw from Walikale town.[63]

Qatari mediation efforts have also contributed to progress in the negotiations. Qatar contributed to M23's withdrawal from Walikale town.[64] M23 spokesperson Lawrence Kanyuka claimed on April 3 that M23 withdrew from Walikale town to foster goodwill for the planned talks on April 9.[65] *Jeune Afrique* reported in late March that Qatar had "opened a channel of communication" with M23 and "sent discreet messages to slow down their advance [in the eastern DRC]" and see M23 "show good faith." [66] Reuters cited diplomatic sources on April 23 who said that Qatar pressured the two sides to release the joint statement and commit to working toward a truce.[67]

The détente between the DRC and Rwanda will likely limit the scale of violence in the eastern DRC, but proxy fighting between the various pro-Congolese militia groups and M23 will almost certainly continue in the absence of a broader agreement with M23. Pro-Congolese government militia groups—known as Wazalendo—have attacked M23 positions across the eastern DRC in April despite the DRC-Rwanda ceasefire. ACLED recorded a significant increase in Wazalendo involvement in fighting since late March, and Wazalendo groups launched offensives on M23 positions near Goma and Bukavu in mid-April.[68]

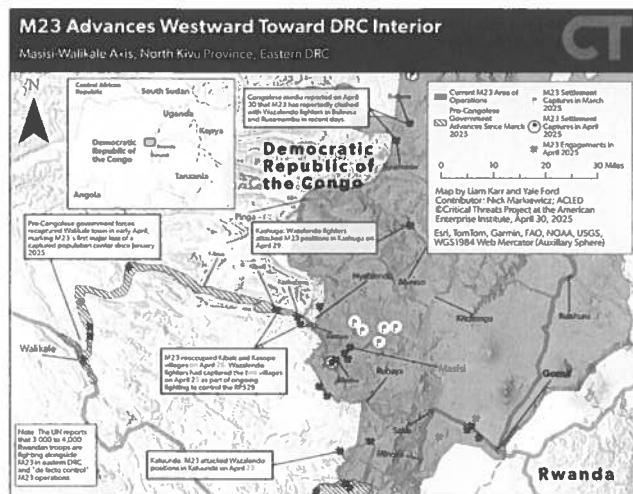
Figure 3. M23 Advances in Eastern DRC



Source: Yale Ford and Liam Karr.

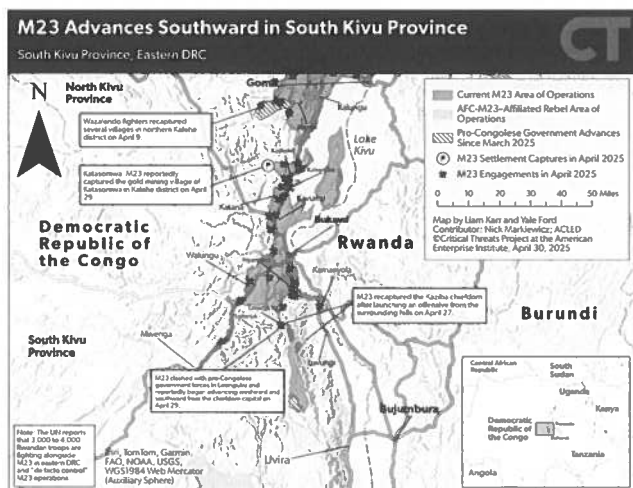
M23 has launched counterattacks against pro-Congolese government militias and said that it would continue fighting despite the peace talks. M23 has already conducted clearing operations north of Goma and around Bukavu in March and April in response to the militia attacks.[69] M23 attacked militia forces on the road (RP529) between M23-controlled Masisi town and Wazalendo-controlled Walikale as the M23 delegation left Doha on April 22 for the first time since M23 withdrew from Walikale town in early April.[70] M23 attacked Wazalendo positions near Nyabiondo—about 10 miles west of Masisi town on the RP529—on April 25 after redeploying forces from Masisi town.[71] Congolese media have reported multiple times in late April that M23 has massed forces and military equipment on the RP529.[72] M23 separately recaptured the operationally significant area of Kaziba in central South Kivu after several days of fighting on April 27 and has since advanced westward toward Mwenga district and southward toward the Fizi highlands.[73] The FARDC reportedly repositioned its forces around Uvira and in the Fizi highlands to protect Uvira from a potential M23 offensive on the town on April 24.[74] The leader of M23's political coalition, Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC), said on April 29 that the AFC will keep fighting despite peace negotiations and rejects any long-term ceasefire that comes from DRC-Rwanda negotiations.[75]

Figure 4. M23 Advances Westward Toward DRC Interior



Source: Yale Ford and Liam Karr.

Figure 5. M23 Advances Southward In South Kivu Province



Source: Yale Ford and Liam Karr.

Wazalendo and other anti-Tutsi militias are a significant obstacle to peace- and trust-building efforts—regardless of DRC-M23-Rwanda negotiations—because the militias are not involved in these talks and the DRC is likely unable to control the militias. M23 and Rwanda have demanded that FARDC turn on Wazalendo and suspected militants from the ethnic Hutu armed group Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR)—a group linked with the 1994 Rwandan genocide and continued anti-Tutsi activity—as part of any long-term peace agreement.[76] *Jeune Afrique* reported on April 24 that the Wazalendo attack on Goma contributed to “heightened tensions” between the two sides in Doha and almost led the M23 delegation to return to the DRC.[77] FARDC has faced long-standing difficulties in constraining, demobilizing, or integrating militia fighters into its ranks.[78] Domestic and international efforts to demobilize and reintegrate Mai-Mai militias, which were the predecessor to the Wazalendo militias, failed and led to persistent violence in the eastern DRC in the decades after the Second Congo War.[79] The UN reported in December 2024 that FDLR fighters are embedded into pro-Congolese government militia units and that the DRC government “continued to systematically rely on and cooperate with [pro-Congolese government militias] and FDLR.”[80]

These militias have continued attacking M23 despite the recent negotiations and joint statement. The United Nations reported in April 2025 that FDLR “intensified its collaboration” with Wazalendo militia groups allied to the FARDC.[81] A Wazalendo militia leader said in mid-April that Wazalendo fighters “do not agree on the discussions taking place in Doha” and that the talks do not “concern us.”[82] A Congolese politician from the Walikale district attempted to declare a ceasefire on behalf of Wazalendo fighters as part of the Doha talks in mid-April, but the fighters said that they would keep fighting.[83] Wazalendo fighters reportedly rejected the DRC-M23 joint statement and said that they would keep fighting on April 24.[84] Wazalendo fighters reportedly clashed with their FARDC allies in Uvira town and the surrounding hills in South Kivu on April 24 and April 25 after Wazalendos rejected the DRC-M23 joint statement.[85]

Uganda

Author: Yale Ford and Liam Karr

[Read a one-page Executive Summary of the Report Here](#)

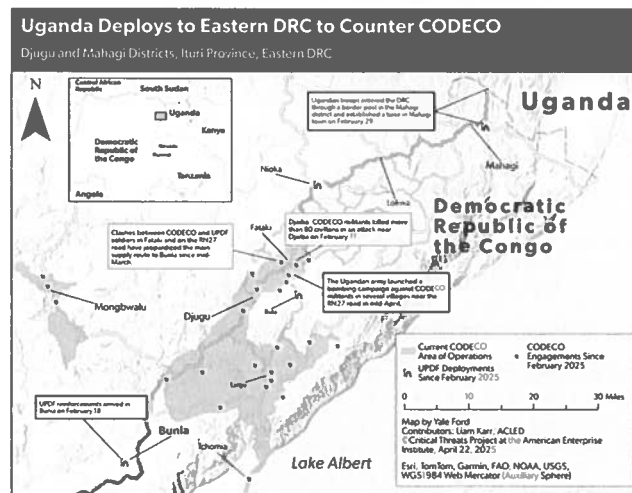
Uganda is using its partnership with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to target anti-Ugandan rebel groups and strengthen its sphere of influence in the eastern DRC. Uganda and the DRC have conducted combined operations against the Islamic State Central Africa Province, which was originally a Ugandan rebel group that is known locally as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), as part of Operation Shujaa since 2021.[86] Uganda increased its counterterrorism cooperation with the DRC in response to ADF attacks into Uganda that year.[87] The Ugandan army (UPDF) and Congolese army (FARDC) expanded their operations to new parts of North Kivu Province and neighboring Ituri province in 2024 and 2025, respectively.[88]

Uganda supported the expansion of Operation Shujaa to Ituri province in 2025, likely to fight Coopérative pour le développement du Congo (CODECO)—another rebel group—in addition to ADF. CODECO is a loose coalition of ethnic Lendu militias that operate primarily in the Djugu and Mahagi districts of Ituri province.[89] The UPDF and the FARDC agreed to target “all armed groups” in northeastern Ituri province when they agreed to expand Operation Shujaa in late March.[90] ADF and CODECO are the two most lethal armed groups for civilians in the eastern DRC.[91]

Uganda has signaled that it partially views CODECO as part of its fight against ADF, which continues to be Uganda’s main target, and is open to co-opting CODECO. The UPDF spokesperson claimed on March 21 that CODECO fighters “struck a pact” with ADF, but the spokesperson did not provide evidence.[92] UPDF Commander Muhoozi Kainerugaba (Muhoozi) and several senior UPDF officials met with a delegation of leaders from one CODECO faction in late April for negotiations.[93] The UPDF readout of the meeting claimed that the CODECO leaders said they had been “misled by some negative forces,” which could be a reference to ADF.[94] There is no independent evidence that ADF and CODECO are coordinating their activity, however. Muhoozi highlighted the historical cooperation between the UPDF and locals against Ugandan rebels, including ADF, and urged CODECO to ally with the UPDF during the meeting.[95] The French magazine *Jeune Afrique* cited a “military source” on April 23 who said that the UPDF is likely using developing relations with CODECO to signal to ADF rebels that Uganda is open to negotiations.[96]

Uganda co-opts its partnership with the DRC to advance its own interests in the eastern DRC. UPDF counterterrorism deployments allow Uganda to maintain a buffer zone on the DRC-Uganda border and limit the ability of ADF and other armed groups to conduct cross-border attacks into Uganda.[97] The UN and Armed Conflict Location and Event Data report that Operation Shujaa has degraded ADF and pushed the group from the border but has failed to decrease the intensity of ADF attacks on Congolese civilians.[98] Muhoozi said in February 2025 that the UPDF will continue to develop its own “sphere of influence” and “capture the entire DRC border with Uganda.”[99]

Figure 6. Uganda Deploys to Eastern DRC to Counter CODECO



Source: Yale Ford; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data.

Ugandan operations in the eastern DRC support Ugandan economic interests as well, some of which are mutually beneficial for the DRC. Uganda began repairing roadways on key cross-border trade routes in late 2021 in order to export more to the DRC, which is already Uganda’s second most important export market.[100] Improved road infrastructure also helps boost the local economy. UPDF soldiers have deployed under Operation Shujaa to protect the construction of these roadways as well as Ugandan oil sites on Lake Albert in western Uganda from CODECO and other rebel attacks.[101]

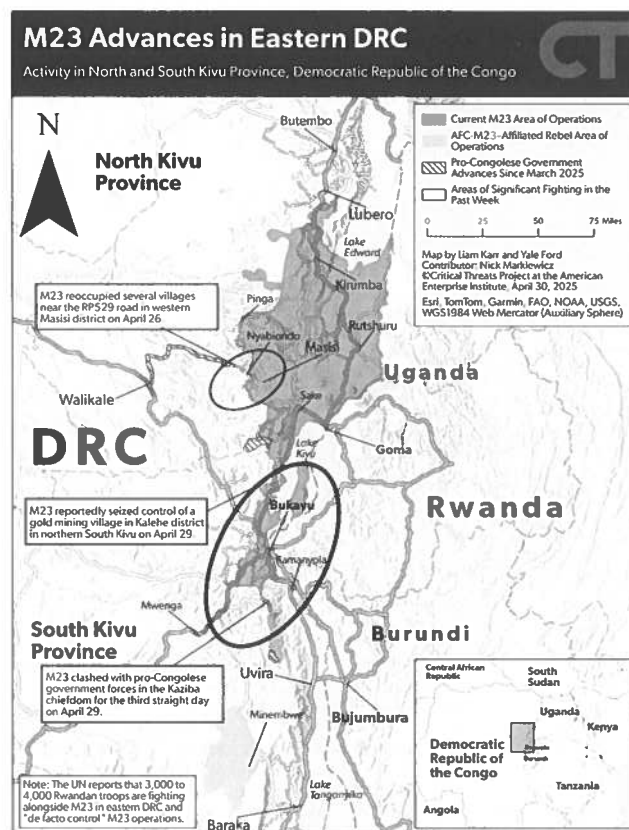
The UPDF likely increased its military involvement against CODECO in 2025 because CODECO attacks have significantly disrupted regional economic activity and affected the Hema people, with whom Uganda has ethnic kinship ties and has historically supported.[102] The UPDF had already escalated operations against CODECO in mid-March 2025 in response to CODECO attacks that killed

at least 80 civilians in Djugu district several weeks prior.[103] Uganda previously had up to 7,000 troops in the eastern DRC and began deploying at least 3,000-4,000 additional troops to Ituri province in late January.[104] UPDF officials, including Muhoozi, claim that CODECO has explicitly targeted Hema people in the eastern DRC.[105]

Uganda co-opts Operation Shujaa to gain access to Congolese resources, such as gold and timber. Gold is among Uganda's most lucrative exports and comprised almost 45 percent of Uganda's total export earnings in 2023.[106] Uganda acquires a significant portion of this gold from the DRC via smugglers, according to the United Nations.[107] Similarly, almost 80 percent of timber smuggled from the DRC goes to Uganda.[108] Operation Shujaa offers Uganda a pretext to operate around and secure the smuggling routes in order to ensure continued Ugandan access to Congolese resources. [109]

Uganda separately maintains ties to the Rwandan-backed M23 rebel movement, which has captured significant portions of the eastern DRC and threatens to topple the Congolese government. M23 is an armed rebellion that emerged in 2012 following the failed integration of predominantly Tutsi ex-Rwandan-backed rebels into FARDC.[110] The M23 rebels reemerged in November 2021—after several years of dormancy—when negotiations between M23 and the DRC collapsed.[111] Rwanda has deployed thousands of troops in the eastern DRC that “de facto control” M23 operations and provide M23 with advanced military hardware.[112] The group controls the North and South Kivu provincial capitals—Goma and Bukavu, respectively—plus half of the district capitals across the two provinces after a major offensive in early 2025.

Figure 7. M23 Advances in Eastern DRC



Source: Yale Ford and Liam Karr.

The United Nations has reported repeatedly on the close relationship that M23 also has with Uganda. [113] Uganda has allowed M23 to use Uganda's territory for multiple purposes since M23's resurgence in late 2021.[114] Comeille Nangaa—the head of Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC), which is M23's political branch—frequently travels to Uganda.[115] Uganda has denied its links with M23 and reiterated its commitment to its security partnership with the Congolese government.[116] The DRC has yet to openly criticize Uganda for its links to M23, likely because of the DRC's heavy reliance on the UPDF and Operation Shujaa to weaken ADF.[117] M23 has also reached out to several armed groups in Ituri, including the dominant faction of CODECO, to join the AFC coalition, which includes Ugandan-linked groups.[118]

Uganda has likely cultivated ties with M23 to counterbalance Rwandan domination of the group as part of its complex rivalry with Rwanda for influence in the DRC. Rwandan and Ugandan elites have deep personal ties dating back to their rebel origins.[119] Rwandan President Paul Kagame grew up in exile in Uganda and was part of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army rebel group during the Ugandan Bush War in the 1980s, which ended with Museveni becoming president and appointing Kagame as Uganda's head of military intelligence.[120] Museveni then allowed Kagame and his Rwandan Patriotic Front to use Uganda as a staging and training ground to

launch an insurgency against the Hutu-led Rwandan government in the early 1990s and end the Rwandan genocide in 1994.[121] The two partners then were the key backers of the victorious Congolese rebels in the First Congo War in the mid-1990s.[122]

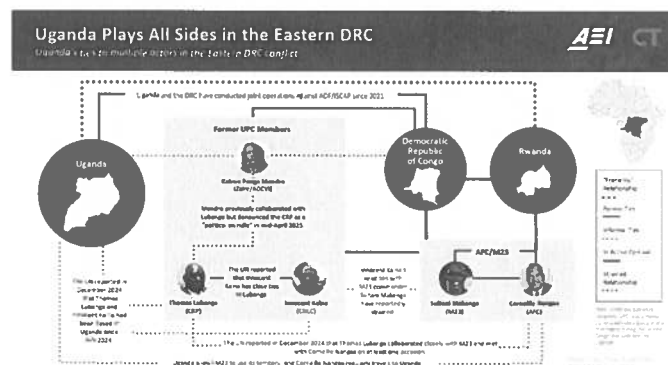
Rwanda and Uganda have developed a “frenemy” relationship since the First Congo War, as the ruling elites consolidated power domestically and became competitors for influence in the eastern DRC.[123] Rwanda’s and Uganda’s relationship reached a relative low point between 2019 and 2021 but has improved since 2022.[124] Belgium sought Uganda as an interlocutor to repair its relationship with Rwanda in April 2025, highlighting that Uganda continues to be a key Rwandan partner as well as rival.[125]

Ugandan support for M23 partly reflects divisions within the Ugandan ruling family concerning Rwanda. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, on one hand, has prioritized regional economic integration and refrained from openly aligning with M23. Museveni’s son, UPDF Commander Muhoozi, on the other hand, regularly touts Uganda’s military muscle in the eastern DRC and posts pro-M23 and pro-Rwandan statements on social media, such as calling Rwandan President Paul Kagame “uncle.”[126] Muhoozi’s social media posts have caused tension within the ruling presidential family on several occasions.[127] Muhoozi also posted positive comments about the DRC president on April 25 and April 26, however, highlighting Muhoozi’s often-erratic public diplomacy.[128]

Uganda has established proxy groups in the eastern DRC as well. Thomas Lubanga—a convicted war criminal and former leader of the Ugandan-linked Union des patriotes congolais (UPC) during the Second Congo War—formed a new rebel group known as the Convention pour la Révolution Populaire (CRP) in March 2025.[129] The United Nations reported in December 2024 that Lubanga had been based in Uganda since July 2024.[130] *Jeune Afrique* reported on April 3 that the rebel group had occupied several villages on Lake Albert and plans to operate across Ituri province.[131] Lubanga’s CRP has faced resistance from FARDC forces, however, which have conducted operations against CRP militants north of Tchomia—a military and cross-border trading hub with Uganda on Lake Albert about 35 miles southeast of Bunia, which is the Ituri provincial capital.[132]

Another former UPC figure—Innocent Kaina—formed a separate rebel group, called the Coalition Nationale pour la Libération du Congo (CNLC), in southeastern Ituri in March 2025.[133] Kaina is a sanctioned war criminal and has close ties to Uganda and Lubanga.[134] The CRP and CNLC join Zaïre/Auto-défense des communautés victimes de l’Ituri (ADCVI)—commonly called Zaïre—as Ugandan-linked armed groups operating in northeast Ituri. Zaïre has fought CODECO for years and has thousands of fighters and ties to former UPC members, Uganda, Rwanda, and ethnic Hema communities.[135]

Figure 8. Uganda Plays All Sides in the Eastern DRC



Source: Yale Ford; Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute.

Uganda likely uses these proxies as another counterweight to Rwandan influence in the eastern DRC, which embeds the Ugandan-Rwandan competition deeper into the eastern DRC. The UN reported that Ugandan officials played a key role in forming M23’s AFC coalition, which includes CNLC, CRP, and Zaïre.[136] Uganda likely supported the launch of AFC in December 2023 in response to M23’s territorial expansion in 2022 and 2023 in order to dilute Rwandan domination of the strengthening rebellion.[137] CRP leader Lubanga and CNLC leader Kaina have personal ties to M23 leaders and helped increase collaboration between M23 and Zaïre in recent years.[138]

Rwanda’s and Uganda’s proxy competition in the eastern DRC contributes to the perpetual violence in the eastern DRC. This rivalry has led to common conflict between Rwandan and Ugandan proxies since the Second Congo War and even between Rwandan and Ugandan forces in rare instances.[139] American and Congolese experts believe Rwanda relaunched M23 initially to protect its sphere of influence in the eastern DRC at least partially in response to tensions with Uganda.[140] Uganda’s countermobilization of its proxies is the latest iteration of this cycle. This proxy competition proliferates armed actors in the eastern DRC and adds regional interests to already complex local conflicts.

Uganda additionally likely aims to use its proxies to unilaterally advance Ugandan interests in Congolese affairs. This tactic further complicates conflicts and peace efforts in the eastern DRC. Uganda has historically advanced its interests in Ituri by simultaneously arming militia groups and supporting peace frameworks involving these proxies.[141] Uganda mediated peace talks in Kampala in 2012–13 between the DRC and M23 and frequently advocates direct dialogue.[142]

Uganda has been a key actor in an African Union-sponsored peace framework for the Great Lakes region since 2013.[143]

Uganda may use its proxy groups to promote Ugandan interests in inter-Congolese dialogues, which risks complicating these peace efforts. Lubanga met with a coalition of religious leaders on March 4, who have met with major actors in the DRC to negotiate restructured power-sharing arrangements. [144] Kahwa Panga Mandro—another sanctioned Congolese warlord in Ituri with links to Hema communities and historical ties to Lubanga—claimed in mid-April 2025 that Lubanga formed the CRP to “glean his share of the pie” in negotiations.[145]

Uganda may have mobilized its proxy networks to establish local military partners in the eastern DRC separate from FARDC. FARDC-UPDF collaboration has been turbulent at times because the UPDF has conducted unilateral operations in the eastern DRC, refused to share information and intelligence with FARDC, and failed to respect FARDC checkpoints.[146] The UN said in December 2024 that the FARDC “hesitated to expand” Operation Shujaa’s area of operations, “fearing a hidden agenda from Uganda tied to its historical interests in Ituri.”[147] The proliferation of Ugandan proxies and the expansion of Operation Shujaa have expanded the pro-Ugandan military presence in Ituri province. The CRP and Zaire both operate in areas of Djugu district that are outside of Operation Shujaa’s zone of operations.[148]

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