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Democratic Republic of Congo



People flee an attack by the M23 rebel group on Bambo, North Kivu, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, October 26, 2023.

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Ongoing armed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo continued to seriously affect civilians. The authorities [cracked down on opposition members](#) and [the media](#) amid heightened political tensions ahead of the December general election.

In eastern Congo, an offensive by the Rwanda-backed M23 armed group worsened the dire humanitarian situation in North Kivu, forcing more than half-a-million people to flee their homes and pushing [the number of displaced people across the country](#) to nearly 7 million—the highest number of internally displaced people in Africa—according to the United Nations. Martial law violated rights without curbing widespread violence and atrocities by armed groups against civilians in Ituri and North Kivu provinces. Government forces were also involved in serious abuses, including the [killing of dozens of civilians](#) during an operation to enforce an August 30 ban on demonstrations in Goma.

Repression against journalists, activists, government critics, and peaceful protesters continued. The authorities [also targeted](#) leaders of opposition political parties, restricting their fundamental liberties and arresting party officials.

President Félix Tshisekedi's administration made little progress on promised systemic reforms to break the cycles of violence, abuse, corruption, and impunity that have plagued the country for decades.

Freedoms of Expression, Media, and Peaceful Assembly

Police used excessive force to disrupt peaceful demonstrations, including [a protest](#) organized by a coalition of opposition political parties in Kinshasa on May 20, to denounce the high cost of living, the opacity of the electoral process, and the persistent insecurity in eastern Congo.

Authorities targeted artists, journalists, and opposition members online and on social media. On February 10 in Kinshasa, government security agents [arrested](#) Junior Nkole, a satirical comedian, because of a short comedy sketch video posted a year earlier that they considered insulting to the president. He was detained for one month before being released without charge.

On May 1, intelligence agents [arrested](#) Lens Omelonga, a member of the opposition political party Envol, whom they accused of retweeting a post criticizing the Congolese first lady's foundation. On October 30, Omelonga was sentenced to seven months in prison on a defamation charge. He was released on December 2.

On May 30, [military intelligence agents arrested](#) Salomon Kalonda, a top advisor of one of the main opposition leaders Moïse Katumbi, on the tarmac of Kinshasa's N'djili Airport. At time of writing, Kalonda remained in detention and his trial was ongoing on treason charges. He was accused of being in contact with the M23 armed group and its Rwandan backers.

On June 20, members of the [Republican Guard](#), a military unit that protects the president, arrested opposition member and presidential candidate [Franck Diongo](#) in Kinshasa, accusing him of illegal possession of a weapon. He was detained at the military intelligence headquarters and then transferred to Ndolo military prison on July 8 following a military hearing. He was [released](#) without charge on July 15.

The government crackdown also had an impact on media coverage of opposition parties as [journalists faced threats or physical attacks](#) while covering political events.

Chérubin Okende, a 61-year-old member of parliament and spokesman for Moïse Katumbi's political party, [was found dead](#) with gunshot wounds in his car in Kinshasa on July 13. The Congolese government made two arrests, [denounced](#) the "assassination," and set up a commission of inquiry. Forensic experts from the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), UN police officers, and South African and Belgian experts provided assistance to the commission. However, the circumstances of Okende's murder were still unknown at time of writing.

On September 8, [police arrested](#) prominent journalist Stanis Bujakera—deputy director of the Congolese online news outlet [Actualite.cd](#) and reporter for [Jeune Afrique](#) and the international news agency Reuters—while he was waiting to board a flight at Kinshasa's N'djili Airport. He remained in detention, and his trial was ongoing at time of writing; he is facing several charges, including "forgery and the use of forged documents" and "spreading false information." Authorities accused Bujakera of fabricating an intelligence note to inform a [Jeune Afrique](#) article, but the article did not bear his name. His arbitrary arrest and detention sparked an international outcry.

On August 30, government troops [shot and killed](#) at least 57 people, and injured scores more, in Goma in an operation to enforce a demonstration ban. A mystic religious sect called Natural Judaic and Messianic Faith Towards the Nations had planned a protest to call on the UN peacekeeping mission and the East African Community regional force to leave the country, but the authorities had banned the demonstration.

At the same gathering, the security forces also arrested several dozen people, and members of the sect [stoned](#) a police officer to death. A military court sentenced a colonel from the Republican Guard to death (converted to life imprisonment) and two lower-ranking army officers to 10 years in prison. The trial did not investigate responsibility for the shooting higher up the chain of command. Four civilians were also sentenced to death (converted to life imprisonment) and 59 others, including 8 women, were sentenced to between 10 and 20 years in prison for insurrection and murder of a police officer.

Attacks on Civilians by Armed Groups and Government Forces

[More than 100 armed groups](#) were still active in eastern Congo's Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, and Tanganyika provinces, including several groups with fighters from neighboring Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi. Many of their commanders have been implicated in war crimes, including massacres, sexual violence, recruiting children, and pillaging.

In North Kivu, the Rwanda-backed M23 armed group continued its offensive against government troops and controlled large swathes of territory. A coalition of militia [fought alongside Congolese soldiers](#) against the M23. Responsible for [widespread abuses](#) in 2012 and 2013, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, and [dozens of killings](#) in 2022, the M23 [committed more unlawful killings](#), rapes, and other apparent war crimes in areas under their control. Troops from the East African Community force did not intervene to stop the violence.

Various armed actors, some unidentified, killed at least 1,211 civilians in Ituri province between January and October, according to data collected by the [Kivu Security Tracker](#), which documents violence in eastern Congo. This includes at least 80 civilians killed by Congolese security forces. Militia fighters continued [to target camps for displaced people](#), killing dozens of civilians, including women and children.

[Intercommunal violence](#) continued in the western province of Mai-Ndombe between the predominantly Teke and Yaka communities over land and customary rights. Dozens of people were reportedly killed while more than 160,000 people [remained displaced](#). The government sent hundreds of surrendered members of Mobondo militia groups to military training centers without any kind of vetting to ensure that new army recruits were not previously involved in serious human rights abuses.

Accountability and Justice

Following [national consultations](#) on a new transitional justice initiative, the government reaffirmed its commitment to accountability for serious crimes committed across the country. However, the Tshisekedi administration has not taken any concrete steps to advance justice domestically.

Militia leader [Guidon Shimiray Mwissa](#), wanted by Congolese authorities for [serious crimes](#), including child recruitment and rape, remained active in North Kivu, commanding a faction of the Nduma Defense of Congo-Rénové. Guidon is one of the commanders of a coalition of armed groups, some of them rivals, that [fought alongside](#) Congolese forces against the M23.

Former head of police Gen. John Numbi, involved in serious abuses and [suspected](#) to be implicated in the 2010 assassination of prominent human rights defender Floribert Chebeya and his driver Fidèle Bazana, was still at large. He fled the country in 2021 after Congolese authorities [issued](#) a warrant for his arrest.

The High Military Court made little progress in the appellate trial of dozens of defendants who were sentenced in 2022 for the 2017 murders of two UN investigators, Zaida Catalán and Michael Sharp, and the fates of their Congolese interpreter, Betu Tshintela; motorbike driver, Isaac Kabuayi; and two other unidentified motorbike drivers. So far, judicial authorities have [failed](#) to uncover the full truth about the murders.

Little progress was made in a trial to establish culpability for the December 2018 [massacres](#) in Yumbi territory in the country's northwest in which at least 535 people were killed. The trial started in 2021.

[Gédéon Kyungu](#), a warlord responsible for atrocities in the southern region of Katanga who escaped from house arrest in Lubumbashi in March 2020, remained at large.

In June, the Congolese government [requested](#) that the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigate the upsurge of violence and abuses in North Kivu and signed a memorandum of understanding with the ICC prosecutor outlining their renewed mutual cooperation.

Key International Actors

The UN Joint Human Rights Office reported in August that “the pre-electoral environment in [Congo] is increasingly characterized by a narrowing of civic space and political and electoral violence, arbitrary arrests and detentions, abductions and threats targeting political opponents, excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators, and hate speech and incitement to violence.” The office warned that such abuses “risk damaging the credibility of the electoral process” and “increase the risk of violence.”

In late September, President Tshisekedi [requested](#) an “accelerated” withdrawal of MONUSCO by the end of 2023, rather than the end of 2024. Tshisekedi [said](#) “peacekeeping missions deployed for 25 years ... have failed to cope with the rebellions and armed conflicts.”

The United States and the European Union imposed targeted sanctions on several individuals—mostly militia commanders—for their roles in backing abusive armed groups in eastern Congo. The US government sanctioned a senior Rwandan commander while the EU sanctioned a Rwandan army officer, both of whom have been involved in Rwanda Defence Forces (RDF) operations supporting the M23 armed group in North Kivu. By sanctioning RDF commanders for the first time, the US and the EU sent a strong message to Rwanda that its support to the abusive M23 armed group has consequences. The EU and US both sanctioned Congolese officer Col. Tokolonga for his role in abusive militias in the fight against the M23. In July, the EU called for accountability and urged Rwanda to withdraw its troops from eastern Congo.

Troops from the East African Community regional force, which deployed in November 2022, [started withdrawing from eastern Congo](#) on December 3.