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DR Congo: M23 Drives Displaced People From Goma Camps

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Rwanda-Backed Armed Group Should Revoke Unlawful Displacement Order

(Nairobi) – The [Rwanda](#)-backed M23 armed group has unlawfully ordered tens of thousands of displaced people to leave the camps around Goma in eastern [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), Human Rights Watch said today.

Since the M23 took control of Goma on January 27, 2025, many displaced people have returned to their home villages or have fled to Goma, where they have faced dire conditions and been with limited or no humanitarian aid. On February 9, the M23 told camp leaders and residents west of Goma, North Kivu’s provincial capital, that they had 72 hours to leave. [International humanitarian law](#), applicable to the armed conflict in eastern Congo, prohibits the forced displacement of civilians except for their security or for imperative military reasons.

“The M23’s order to forcibly remove tens of thousands of displaced people from camps to areas with no support is both cruel and a possible war crime,” said [Clémentine de Montjoye](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Rwanda and other countries with influence over the M23 should press the armed group to immediately change course.”

In February, Human Rights Watch spoke with 22 former camp residents, camp leaders, and witnesses to abuse, and analyzed satellite imagery showing dismantled camps north of Goma.

Prior to the January offensive by the M23 and Rwandan forces on Goma, the city had over one million residents and over a half million displaced

people, most in displacement sites north and west of the city. During the fighting, nearly 3,000 combatants and civilians were killed and thousands more injured, according to the United Nations.

Two aid workers and several camp residents said that on February 9, the M23 had told people in Bulengo and Lushagala camps, west of Goma, which together were hosting over 100,000 people, to leave within 72 hours. Since the M23 gave the order, the Lushagala camp has been looted and humanitarian organizations have been unable to carry out their work there, an aid worker and a witness told Human Rights Watch.

“We tried to explain why we are still here,” said a camp resident who was at the meeting with the M23. “The majority of us no longer have homes, some have disabilities and need support to travel, others have large families. We don’t have food to sustain ourselves during the trip. But they [the M23] responded to all of our concerns by saying ‘What is said is said. By Thursday, everyone should be gone.’”

A man who fled the fighting in Goma in late January said: “We know when the M23 arrive somewhere, they force everyone out and close the camps. They do that everywhere they go.”

On February 12, a camp known as Lushagala extension was also dismantled. Human Rights Watch received photographs, videos, and a witness account on February 13 indicating the local population and camp residents had torn down shelters and medical infrastructure and some displaced people were leaving Goma. The witness said M23 officials and camp leaders were present and did not react as the camp was being dismantled.

In late January, a person in the South Kivu town of Minova, west of Goma, said that the M23 had dismantled displacement camps and forced out the camp residents. The M23 told the residents they should not expect further aid and should return home. An aid worker said that in January, the M23 told camp leaders in the towns of Minova and Masisi that the camps should be closed and that aid agencies could only help any remaining people in the camps under specific conditions.

Aid workers and displaced people said that none of the camps in Nyiragongo territory north of Goma exist anymore, and that the residents had either gone home or ended up in churches, schools, and host families nearby or in the city.

On February 3, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said that three displacement sites north of Goma, Don Bosco, Bushagara, and EP Mbogo, had been destroyed and abandoned and that over half of the displaced people were on the move toward their home areas, controlled by the M23. There were conflicting views on who

dismantled the camps, although it seems the local population may have been responsible.

Satellite imagery from January 31 analyzed by Human Rights Watch shows that people have abandoned virtually all the camps in Nyiragongo territory. Only debris is visible where shelters previously stood.

Aid workers said that as of February 11, tens of thousands of people remained in some of the camps west of Goma, including many who initially fled as the M23 approached but then returned. They said other camps in the area had been abandoned, emptied, or destroyed, with 80 percent of the residents now living with local residents or in overcrowded sites in Goma or nearby.

On February 10, the Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC), a political-military coalition that includes the M23 and other armed groups and political parties, said in a statement that "internally displaced persons are voluntarily returning to their now-secured homes in liberated areas. The AFC/M23 fully supports and encourages this process but does not compel anyone to return without firm security guarantees."

On February 13, Human Rights Watch wrote to AFC coordinator Corneille Nangaa Yobeluo to seek information about the M23's orders for people to leave the camps and whether they were facilitating aid for displaced people in Goma and in their hometowns, but had not received a response at time of publication.

The fighting in Goma involving the M23 and Rwandan forces against the Congolese military and allied militias and the subsequent looting of storage facilities have significantly [interrupted](#) activities by humanitarian groups, including those providing essential aid to displaced and vulnerable people across North and South Kivu provinces. Goma's airport has been closed since the M23 took control of the city, cutting off new supplies of critical aid.

Many displaced people said they could not return to their home areas without sustained support for weeks or months from humanitarian groups because their fields had not been prepared, there was no other food support there, and their homes and healthcare infrastructure had been destroyed. Some expressed concern about unexploded munitions and the presence of armed men in their hometowns, saying it was not safe to return.

The M23 and Rwandan forces controlling Goma should immediately ensure that civilians, including displaced people, are not unlawfully transferred from their displacement sites and are not denied access to items essential for their survival, including water, food, shelter, and medicine. The M23 and Rwandan forces should also facilitate safe

passage to areas under control of Congolese forces for civilians who choose to leave the city.

The UN, regional bodies, and donors should press the Rwandan government and the M23 to ensure the health and well-being of the population in territories they control, in accordance with international human rights and humanitarian law, Human Rights Watch said. They should urge all warring parties to facilitate access to humanitarian aid and ensure the free movement of humanitarian workers.

“Rwandan forces and the M23 should abide by international humanitarian law and cease the unlawful displacement of civilians,” de Montjoye said. “Concerned governments should press all the parties to uphold the rights of displaced people and ensure that access to humanitarian aid is fully restored and protected.”

Associated documents

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13 February 2025 | [HRW – Human Rights Watch](#) (Author)

Congo, Democratic Republic

Rwanda-backed armed group M23 orders tens of thousands of displaced people to leave camps around Goma

[RD Congo : Le M23 ordonne aux personnes déplacées de quitter des camps de Goma](#) (Appeal or News Release, French)

fr

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Congo, Democratic Republic

Rwanda-backed armed group M23 orders tens of thousands of displaced people to leave camps around Goma

[DR Kongo: M23 verjagt Vertriebene aus Lagern in Goma](#) (Appeal or News Release, German)

de

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