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DR Congo: Army-Backed Militias Abuse Civilians in South Kivu

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End Support to 'Wazalendo' Armed Groups; Ensure Disarmament, Accountability

(Nairobi) – A coalition of [Congolese](#) army-backed militias known as the “Wazalendo” have recently committed widespread abuses against civilians in South Kivu province, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Human Rights Watch said today.

The Congolese government has supported the Wazalendo (“patriots” in Swahili) to fight against the abusive M23, although the extent of the army’s command and control over the armed group is unclear. Wazalendo fighters have committed beatings, killings, and extortion against civilians, at times on an ethnic basis. Civil society groups in North Kivu have also [denounced](#) the Wazalendo’s “reign of terror.”

“The Congolese army risks being complicit in abuses by supporting the Wazalendo militias,” said [Clémentine de Montjoye](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Congolese

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authorities should end their support of and disarm the Wazalendo coalition and impartially investigate and prosecute all those responsible for abuses.”

The [Rwanda](#)-backed M23 armed group’s latest offensive, leading to the capture of Goma in North Kivu and Bukavu in South Kivu provinces in early 2025, resulted in the Congolese army’s retreat. Since then, the Wazalendo have taken control of several localities in South Kivu.

In March and April, Wazalendo fighters set up roadblocks on main roads connecting towns across South Kivu, where they harassed people and collected between 500 and 1,000 Congolese Francs (between US\$0.17 and US\$0.34). The interim governor of South Kivu, Jean-Jacques Elakano, told the [media](#) on April 23 that the province was unable to collect taxes because of the Wazalendo fighters, who should “not take the place of the state.” A [recent report](#) highlighted that although the Wazalendo receive military supplies from the government, the militia largely “lives off the back of the population,” leading to extortion.

In April, Human Rights Watch received credible reports of Wazalendo fighters beating and whipping men and women they accused of acting improperly. “Some of the Wazalendo act as if they are the police, and think they can resolve disputes between civilians,” said a resident of Uvira, South Kivu.

On March 3, in Sange, Uvira territory, a Wazalendo commander detained and whipped a 48-year-old man accused of stealing a television. A relative and a neighbor said the man died of his injuries. The commander, who was later implicated in the killing of a Congolese soldier, was removed from his post but has not faced prosecution for the killings. Military, humanitarian, and other sources expressed concern about the Congolese army’s lack of command and control over the Wazalendo, who in some instances have reportedly disarmed or attacked Congolese soldiers.

The warring parties in eastern Congo [have increasingly appealed to ethnic prejudices](#), triggering waves of [discrimination and abuses](#). Many Wazalendo abuses have targeted the Banyamulenge (plural for Munyamulenge, referring to mainly South Kivu-based Congolese Tutsis), who have long been accused of [being M23 supporters](#). The Rwandan government and M23 have increasingly played up anti-Banyamulenge and anti-Tutsi incidents to justify the M23’s resurgence and Rwanda’s support to the armed group.

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A Munyamulenge community leader in Uvira territory said that for years they have been accused of not being Congolese, making their situation difficult. “Since the M23 captured Bukavu, it’s worsened,” he said. “If you say that you are Munyamulenge, [the Wazalendo] say that [we] don’t exist.”

On February 14, Wazalendo fighters killed a 25-year-old Munyamulenge man in Mulongwe, Uvira, after accusing him of being Rwandan. They shot him twice in the hip, and he died from his injuries, according to two sources. Following the M23’s capture of Bukavu, Wazalendo fighters entered over 20 Banyamulenge households in Uvira, stealing goods and threatening residents. In one case, they shot a woman in the head and beat at least three people.

On March 3, Wazalendo fighters attacked several Banyamulenge villages within a 10-kilometer radius around Bibokoboko, Fizi territory, South Kivu. A military source and residents said there was no known presence of opposing armed groups near Bibokoboko at the time of the attack. “They [the Wazalendo] said we are not Congolese, that we are Rwandan. They said they came to Bibokoboko to ‘clean out’ the Banyamulenge,” a community leader said. “They killed seven people and destroyed houses, health centers, and schools.”

Human Rights Watch interviewed relatives of a 60-year-old man and a 25-year-old man who were killed during the attack. A military source confirmed that Wazalendo armed groups attacked nearby villages before heading toward Congolese army positions in Bibokoboko. Human Rights Watch used satellite imagery and verified and geolocated photographs to confirm that houses were burned in several villages, including Madjdja, Lulimba I, and Bibokoboko, on that day.

The Congolese army has nonetheless continued to provide weapons, ammunition, and financial support to the Wazalendo. On April 4, an armed group commander [wrote](#) to President Félix Tshisekedi complaining that Justin Bitakwira Bihona Hayi, a member of the National Assembly who coordinates support for the Wazalendo coalition in South Kivu, was not fully distributing government funding to all the Wazalendo armed groups.

The [United Nations Group of Experts](#) on Congo reported that Bitakwira has engaged in hate speech and encouraged discrimination and hostility towards the Tutsi community, including the Banyamulenge. In July 2023, Bitakwira was summoned by the public prosecutor’s office at the Cour de cassation and questioned on his usage of “tribal language” against the Tutsi community, but no

legal action was pursued. In 2024, Bitakwira [made promises](#) to South Kivu armed groups of integration into the Congolese army's reserve force.

Officials who knowingly provide weapons to abusive armed groups may be complicit in crimes they commit. Commanders may be liable for war crimes as a matter of command responsibility if they knew or should have known about abuses by forces under their control but did not stop or punish them.

The [long-running](#) conflict in the Hauts Plateaux—an area covering parts of Fizi, Mwenga, and Uvira territories in South Kivu—involves the Twirwaneho and Ngumino armed groups from the Banyamulenge community—now allied with the M23—and Mai Mai armed groups from the Babembe, Bafuliru, and Banyiundu communities, among others. Security incidents involving armed groups and the Congolese army in South Kivu [increased](#) after the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo, known by its French acronym MONUSCO, completely disengaged from the province on June 30, 2024, as part of an agreement between the UN and the government.

The resurgence of the M23 in late 2021 led these and other armed groups to form the Wazalendo to fight the M23. Most of these militias are organized along ethnic lines, and some were previously rivals. Military and other sources estimate there are currently about 20,000 Wazalendo fighters, although the exact figure is unknown.

In September 2023, some members of the Wazalendo coalition formed the Patriotic Defense Volunteers (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie, VDP), an “official” auxiliary force. The Congolese government also supports the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda, FDLR)—a largely Rwandan Hutu armed group, some of whose leaders took part in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda—to fight alongside Congolese forces.

Congolese authorities should act to prevent ethnically motivated harassment and attacks, including by investigating and appropriately prosecuting all those responsible for them; additionally, the authorities should [prohibit](#) discriminatory practices that may lead to further abuses.

President Tshisekedi's administration should overhaul the security sector and establish a [vetting mechanism](#) for the military and other security services. It should also prioritize addressing impunity

for serious crimes, including raising with relevant stakeholders the creation of an internationalized justice mechanism that would help tackle the lack of accountability while [strengthening domestic justice processes](#). Such systemic reform, as well as an effective demobilization program aimed at militia and armed group fighters, should be central to ongoing [peace discussions](#).

“Supporting the Wazalendo coalition has deadly consequences, and the Congolese government should address how its continued backing of this group impacts civilians,” de Montjoye said. “Ensuring that perpetrators of serious crimes are brought to justice is a necessary part of broader efforts to end years of abuses in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.”

Associated documents

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South Kivu province: Article on human rights violations against civilians by army-backed militias known as “Wazalendo”

[RD Congo : Des milices soutenues par l'armée commettent des abus contre des civils dans le Sud-Kivu](#) (Appeal or News Release, French)

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