

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

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# UN peacekeeper pullout brings mixed feelings in DR Congo's South Kivu province

‘We have no assurance that the army can protect us like MONUSCO.’



The UN peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, known by its acronym MONUSCO, has wound down from one of the country's most war-scarred areas, completing the first phase of its impending full withdrawal from the country.

Yet the pullout from South Kivu – where white armoured jeeps and blue-helmeted soldiers had become an unmistakable part of the everyday landscape – has received a mixed reception from locals and has taken place as security deteriorates in the province.

“We have been informed that MONUSCO is leaving, and we are sorry because we have no assurance that the [army] can protect us like MONUSCO,” said Philémon Chiza, a pastor and displaced person living in Mikenge, a village in the restive Hauts Plateaux region.

Chiza, who is from the marginalised Banyamulenge community, said he sought refuge in Mikenge in 2019 at a camp next to a peacekeeping base. He said the displaced have often had to conduct their visits to nearby markets under MONUSCO escort.

MONUSCO and its predecessor mission have been in DRC since 1999 in the longest and costliest deployment in UN history, [yet cycles of conflict have continued](#) and the number of armed groups has ballooned, leading to growing [public disaffection and protests](#).

The mission began developing an exit strategy several years ago, but was asked by the Congolese government to accelerate its withdrawal last year following new protests that saw peacekeepers shoot dead civilians in acts the UN [itself called](#) “unspeakable”.

The mission's disengagement from South Kivu – which has seen the repatriation of over 2,500 troops – highlights tensions around the withdrawal as well as areas of improvement for the next phases, which will see dicey drawdowns from North Kivu and Ituri provinces, where dozens of armed groups are active.

Several community leaders interviewed by The New Humanitarian in South Kivu said they were supportive of the process, believing the time has come for local security services to take responsibility for keeping civilians safe.

However, others described fearing a security vacuum that the army (FARDC) will struggle to fill, especially given that security is worsening in the province, as it is across eastern DRC, where a record 7.2 million people are now internally displaced.

Much of the insecurity is linked to a new rebellion by the M23 armed group, which is backed by some [4,000 Rwandan troops](#). The war has displaced 1.7 million people and raised the risk of a major regional conflagration.

Analysts have said a further drawdown from MONUSCO [would be “incongruent”](#) given the situation, which has seen M23 forces take over large chunks of the adjoining North Kivu province and move into parts of South Kivu earlier this year.

The port city of Minova, nestled in a northern corner of South Kivu, has been particularly affected in recent months, with tens of thousands of displaced people taking shelter there having escaped areas occupied by the M23.

The arrival of the displaced people has created “a psychosis” among locals, said Justin Kamanda, the administrative secretary of the Buzi area, where Minova is located.



Hugh Kinsella Cunningham/TNH

*A Pakistani armoured vehicle, deployed with the UN peacekeeping mission in DRC, guards a displacement camp in the village of Mikenge.*

## Army assurances

The New Humanitarian visited South Kivu in late April, just as MONUSCO was handing over duties to the Congolese army. Reporters spent several days in the Hauts Plateaux region, a mountainous part of the province.

The withdrawal from the Hauts Plateaux had been especially contentious as the area has suffered several years of [deadly violence linked to multi-faced struggles](#) over local authority, territory, and people’s access to land and other resources.



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Armed mobilisation has often led to ethnicised clashes between militias from the Banyamulenge group – Congolese Tutsi with Rwandan ancestors who are often treated as foreigners – and forces from the Babembe, Banyindu, and Bafuliru groups.

Yves Malipo, president of a Bafuliru youth group, said approval rates for MONUSCO vary from area to area in the Hauts Plateaux, though he said the mission was a “failure” overall in terms of protecting civilians.

“In some places, MONUSCO used to protect one community only and we believe attacks were launched [with their help],” Malipo told The New Humanitarian in an interview from Uvira, a large town and territory in the Hauts Plateaux.

Malipo was referring to a local perception that MONUSCO has helped protect Banyamulenge militias in places like Mikenge, [where fighters reportedly took shelter in the displacement camp](#) that was next to the UN base.

*A woman prays at Mikenge displacement camp, while a cattle-herder looks after livestock as a Congolese soldier practises weapon handling. (Hugh Kinsella Cunningham/TNH)*

Paul Bulombo, coordinator of the Peace Actions and Community Development association and a representative of the Banyindu community in Uvira, agreed that MONUSCO has failed in its mandate.

“In Bijombo, for example, local communities said insecurity persisted despite the presence of MONUSCO,” said Bulombo, describing the situation in a Hauts Plateaux village located close to Uvira.

“The protection of civilians is the responsibility of the government, and MONUSCO was only here to provide temporary support in this task,” said Bulombo, adding that the time had come for the Congolese army to protect civilians.

Jonas Baraka, commander of the Congolese unit occupying the newly vacated MONUSCO base in Mikenge, said the UN had trained its troops to protect civilians. “Even if armed groups are lurking, we are capable of intervening,” he said.

Major Jawad, the Pakistani commander of the former MONUSCO base, said Congolese soldiers “are well rooted in the local culture” and therefore in a good place to take over.

Jawad and Baraka both spoke on the day that peacekeepers were imparting a final training exercise to the army. Congolese soldiers tumbled and rolled around the village, imitating the sound of their Kalashnikovs, while civilian onlookers appeared perplexed.

*Congolese army troops parade and practise weapon handling under the instruction of UN peacekeepers who are withdrawing from the country. (Hugh Kinsella Cunningham/TNH)*

## Protection concerns

A contrasting view of MONUSCO’s withdrawal was expressed by Banyamulenge community leaders living among 3,000 displaced people camped in mud huts around the Mikenge base.

Perched on one of the many remote hills that make up the highland region, the camp is fortified by barbed wire and sandbags but easy to penetrate. On several [occasions](#), armed groups have [entered and killed](#) displaced people with guns and machetes.

Chiza, the Munyamulenge (singular of Banyamulenge) pastor, said he was sceptical that the army would be able to protect the group, and said it is rare for displaced families to stray more than a kilometre from Mikenge for fear of encountering militias.

The precarious situation facing Banyamulenge communities has increased in recent months amid rumours that a Banyamulenge militia called Twirwaneho is helping to open a new front in South Kivu for the M23, which is led by Congolese Tutsi rebels.

“Rumours of M23 infiltration on the Uvira, Fizi, and Mwanga plateaus [in South Kivu] have exacerbated tensions between local communities, which merit urgent attention from local authorities”, Keïta, the head of MONUSCO, [told the Security Council](#) recently.

Keïta has also recently questioned the capacity of the Congolese army to take over civilian protection from MONUSCO, including at the bases that the UN has transferred to the military and police in South Kivu.

In a report to the Security Council, Keïta, said the army has found it “challenging” to deploy troops to locations previously secured by peacekeepers, given its limited resources and conflicting security priorities.

Those challenges were evident when The New Humanitarian visited a military base in the South Kivu town of Kamanyola that had been handed over on 28 February by MONUSCO to Congolese police officers.

Six weeks after the ceremony, reporters found the base – first established in 2005 – in a state of disrepair, with empty guard towers and a rickety gate at the front entrance.

The New Humanitarian presented this information to a UN official working on the withdrawal process. The official, who asked not to be named, then called on loudspeaker a Congolese army officer who was supposed to be at the base.

“I left three weeks ago,” the army officer said down the line. “The men are still there, but they lack petrol, water, rations: They lack everything, and I don't know how much longer they will last.”

UN reports on human rights violations in DRC consistently find that national defence and security forces commit a [major chunk](#) of the human rights abuses carried out in conflict-affected areas, casting further doubt on their ability to protect civilians.



*An aerial view of South Kivu's Itombwe mountain range.*

## Lessons learnt

While supportive of the MONUSCO drawdown, Malipo, the president of the youth group said he acknowledges that the UN mission contributed to the development of South Kivu by funding youth projects and upgrading road infrastructure.

Malipo said he also worries about weaknesses within the army and police. “It is generally the lack of manpower that leads communities to re-establish their self-defence groups,” Malipo said.

Josaphat Musamba, a researcher at the University of Ghent and a specialist in conflict dynamics in DRC, said he expects to see a “reshaping of the security situation” in the coming months as threadbare security forces take over control of South Kivu.

“A large part of South Kivu is held by armed groups and self-defence groups, and the FARDC are subcontracting the monopoly of violence to these armed groups,” Musamba said.

The researcher added that while public opinion on MONUSCO is “highly divided”, the presence of peacekeepers in rural areas has had a “dissuasive” impact on armed groups that might cause harm to civilians.

In July, Keïta said the mission would be drawing “important lessons” on the South Kivu disengagement to help inform the next phases of the drawdown, which involves pulling out thousands more peacekeepers from North Kivu and Ituri.

The DRC government [had called](#) for those remaining troops to leave by the end of the year, [though officials now say](#) the next phases should only commence once the security crisis triggered by the M23 and Rwanda starts to improve.

*Edited by Philip Kleinfeld.*