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Soldier prosecutions underscore weakness of DR Congo's anti-M23 campaign

A military court in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has sentenced to death 25 soldiers accused of fleeing the front line while fighting against the Rwanda-back M23 rebel group.

Several Congolese soldiers and officers were also sentenced in May to death for “cowardice” and “fleeing the enemy” after a trial in Goma, the largest city in eastern DRC.

Human rights activists [said](#) soldiers are being scapegoated for what are broader systemic issues within the security forces, while army officers [told Reuters](#) the crackdown has spread fear and distrust in the military.

The M23 is led by Congolese Tutsis who say they are fighting because the Congolese government failed to implement a 2013 peace accord with the group, and because Tutsis are at risk from local militias.

Rwanda has provided massive assistance to the group, using it to advance its economic and security interests in eastern DRC, which it felt it was losing to regional rivals. According to UN estimates, Rwandan troops [now outnumber](#) M23 forces on the ground.

The conflict has displaced over 1.5 million people at the latest count, and [increasingly resembles a regional war](#), with Rwandan soldiers fighting alongside the M23, and southern African troops, as well as Burundian soldiers, fighting against them.

With the Congolese army in disarray, the rebels have taken over large chunks of territory, most recently [seizing Kanyabayonga](#), a strategic town that leads to the commercial hubs of Butembo and Beni, further north.

Weaknesses within the army have also led the government to contract the services of private security personnel and a grouping of ill-disciplined and abusive local militias known as Wazalendo, which means patriots in Swahili.

As well as fleeing conflict front lines, civil society leaders have accused Congolese army officers of facilitating passage to the M23 in certain areas, [according to recent reporting](#) by AFP.

Senior military officials were also accused of complicity with the M23 during its past insurgency a decade ago, and have repeatedly been accused by UN experts of selling weapons and munitions to rebel and militia groups.

For more in-depth reporting and analysis on the M23 conflict, [check out our DRC story homepage](#).