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RSF investigation: in the DRC, two journalists held hostage and tortured in shipping containers by the M23

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the armed group M23, which controls parts of eastern DRC, has used shipping containers — devoid of light and ventilation — to detain numerous people, including civilians and at least two journalists. Drawing on first-hand accounts, satellite photos and images found in the depths of social media, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has investigated this abuse and condemns this shockingly inhumane and degrading form of detention.

“This place is the valley of death.” One ex-prisoner of the March 23 Movement (M23) — the Rwanda-backed armed group active in eastern DRC — who was detained for several weeks described his experience as a living hell. Together with dozens of other people, he was crammed into a single container measuring barely ten square metres in size for several days. “Back there, you're somewhere between life and death. There are no visits, no treatment fit for a human being and you're tortured on a daily basis,” he told RSF.

RSF investigated this method of detention by drawing on the first-hand accounts of several detainees held in 2025. All remain anonymous for security reasons. According to RSF information, at least two journalists have been locked up in these containers, which are installed at sites controlled by the M23. Through exchanges with several sources and a review of satellite photos and social media posts, RSF was able to confirm the presence of these structures on the grounds of the North Kivu Provincial Assembly, the province's legislative assembly in Goma, which the M23 seized after capturing the eastern city in January 2025.

Containers turned into jail cells

Prisoners are packed into these metal boxes by the dozen — “up to 80,” according to one journalist. Detainees are allowed to go outside just once a day: at dawn to relieve themselves. They are fed once or twice a day, given a thin mixture of beans and corn known as “vungulé.” One of the victims interviewed by RSF also said he was whipped by M23 soldiers who took turns to deliver the blows.

The days are stiflingly hot and the damp nights are bitterly cold. According to several accounts, some detainees died in these conditions. Those who survive are sometimes locked up for several weeks before being transferred to other detention sites, such as Goma Central Prison in Munzenze, which reopened in July 2025 and is now under M23 control.

“The detention of journalists in containers is a dehumanising practice that echoes the violent repression perpetrated by M23, which has already been accused by the [United Nations](#) and several [human rights organisations](#) of committing [serious human rights violations](#). In breach of international standards on detention, these prisoners were deprived of their most basic rights. These abuses must end so that journalists can do their work without fear of reprisals.

Haïfa Mzalouat and Camille Montagu

RSF Investigative Journalist and RSF Sub-Saharan Africa Journalist

Secret detention sites

According to RSF information, several of these containers are located in the courtyard of the Provincial Assembly building in Goma, in the Himbi district of the city. Another site was identified near Mount Goma, close to the headquarters of the state radio and television broadcaster, *Radio Télévision Nationale Congolaise (RTNC)*. According to an investigation by the human rights organisation [Amnesty International](#) published in May 2025, these locations correspond to informal M23 detention sites where torture and summary executions are carried out.

In the buildings surrounding the Provincial Assembly’s courtyard, where the containers are located, offices have been emptied and also turned into cells. The number of detainees inside fluctuates. Up to 30 people are crammed into a single room, according to one former prisoner interviewed by RSF, and several detainees are believed to have died there. In a post later removed from social media, a nearby resident complained that the neighbourhood “reeked of death.”

Visual evidence obtained by RSF

RSF found images showing the Provincial Assembly’s courtyard in late 2025 on social media, which the NGO later verified. In one image of the compound, around 30 people — presumably prisoners — can be seen standing in single file and held at gunpoint by an armed man. Behind the presumed prisoners, two red and yellow containers are clearly visible, and a third blue one can also be made out.

By analysing a satellite image of the same site taken in November 2025 by the company Planet Labs, RSF identified several structures whose shape, layout and colours match both the first-hand accounts gathered by RSF and the containers visible in the verified images of the compound from social media. A comparison with another satellite image taken in 2023 shows that these structures were not present at that time, supporting the hypothesis that they were introduced after the M23 seized Goma in January 2025.

[SOURCE] [SOURCE] [IMG | SOURCE:

https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/styles/mobile_paragraphe_media_medium/public/medias/image/2026/03/DEUX_VUES_COTE_COTE_%20EN.png?itok=cxgMgp0h

Left: Google Earth satellite image from 17 July 2023. Right: satellite image © Planet Labs PBC taken on 13 November 2025, showing structures matching the description of the containers reported by both the witnesses interviewed by RSF and the images.

When contacted by RSF, Lawrence Kanyuka, spokesperson for the Alliance Fleuve Congo-Mouvement du 23 Mars (AFC/M23) coalition, maintained the claim that the accusation of journalists being detained in containers is “entirely unfounded” and forms part of “a propaganda campaign orchestrated by Kinshasa to tarnish our organisation’s image.” According to him, the M23 does not carry out “any arrests of journalists,” who are free to move around “every day in the liberated areas.”

A profession under pressure

Yet RSF has also documented how the takeover of Goma has gravely worsened working conditions for journalists, who faced frequent [attacks and threats](#) in eastern DRC before the city fell to the AFC/M23. The armed group has [extended its ideological grip](#) over the region’s media landscape, notably through tightening its control of the news via its communication department and training sessions that ban the use of the word “occupation” in areas under its control. In one year, between January 2024 and January 2025, around 100 journalists were forced to flee eastern DRC to escape reprisals.

Eastern DRC is the epicentre of the hardships facing journalists in the Great Lakes region. Against a backdrop of entrenched political and economic instability, journalists in the Great Lakes area face many forms of violence. Two have been [killed](#) while working, many others have been threatened and media outlets have been looted and occupied. To learn more, read the latest RSF report, “What It’s Like to be a Journalist in Africa’s Great Lakes Region,” available to read from 26 March 2026 on RSF.org.

The DRC ranks 133rd out of 180 countries and territories in the 2025 RSF [World Press Freedom Index](#).

