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DR Congo: Civilians at Risk as M23 Approaches Goma

Humanitarian Situation Rapidly Deteriorating



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Civilians flee from the Nzulo camp for internally displaced people to Goma, as fighting intensifies between the M23 armed group supported by the Rwandan army and Congolese military forces and allied militias in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, January 22, 2025. © 2025 REUTERS/Arlette Bashizi

(Nairobi) – Civilians in eastern [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) are at increasing risk as the abusive M23 armed group, supported by the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF), [approaches Goma](#), the capital of North Kivu province, Human Rights Watch said today. The M23 is opposed by Congolese military forces and a [coalition of abusive militias](#) known as “Wazalendo” (“patriots” in Swahili).

The fighting is having [catastrophic consequences](#) for the humanitarian situation around Goma. On January 21, 2025, the M23 and Rwandan forces [captured Minova](#), a town 40 kilometers from Goma, cutting off supply routes to the city’s one to two million people. The fighting has caused people in at least nine displacement sites around Goma to flee toward the city. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) [reported](#) that the increased fighting has displaced 400,000 people in the past three weeks, adding to the more than four million already displaced in dire conditions in eastern Congo.

“The situation facing Goma’s civilians is becoming increasingly perilous and the humanitarian needs are enormous,” said [Clémentine de Montjoye](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The horrific abuses by the M23, Wazalendo, and the Rwandan and Congolese armies should serve as a stark warning to concerned governments that they need to press the warring parties to protect civilians.”

All parties to the conflict should respect international humanitarian law, ensure the protection of civilians, and facilitate the delivery of aid.

Human Rights Watch spoke by telephone with military, diplomatic, and humanitarian sources in Goma on January 23-24 who described fighting near the towns of Sake to the west and Kibumba to the north, and the deployment of UN and Southern African forces to block the M23's advance. Human Rights Watch verified the location of a photograph timestamped January 23 showing at least five armed men wearing uniforms and carrying equipment consistent with the Rwandan army moving along the main road in Sake.

Humanitarian agencies have [reported](#) the shelling of towns near Goma since mid-January resulting in civilian injuries and deaths. The UNHCR said displacement sites around Goma and in South Kivu were also fired upon, killing at least two children and destroying shelters. "Currently around 30 to 40 percent of injured people seeking medical care in Goma are civilians," a humanitarian source told Human Rights Watch. On January 24, the International Committee for the Red Cross [said](#) its hospital in Goma is "saturated" following an influx of patients from Sake, including women and children.

North Kivu authorities issued a decree on January 23 prohibiting small-boat travel between North and South Kivu on Lake Kivu. Two people in Minova told Human Rights Watch that since the M23 occupied the town, which is also on the lake, travel by boat to Goma had been effectively banned.

Sources in Goma also expressed concern that Wazalendo fighters retreating toward Goma may attack civilians and [further loot and pillage](#) the city. The death of North Kivu's military governor, [Gen. Peter Cirimwami](#), during the fighting, [confirmed on January 24](#), has heightened concerns over the authorities' ability to control the Wazalendo militias.

The hostilities in eastern Congo have escalated since late 2024, with fighting reported in Rutshuru, Lubero, Masisi, and Walikale in North Kivu and Kalehe in South Kivu. On January 19, two Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders or MSF) workers were slightly [injured](#) when two rockets struck near the General Reference Hospital in Masisi. Gunshots also hit the hospital and the MSF staff base, MSF said.

Human Rights Watch is investigating reports that the M23, with the support of the Rwandan military, has carried out forced labor, forced recruitment, and other abusive practices. After it captured Masisi in January, the M23 ordered two displacement sites dismantled, a humanitarian source said.

Human Rights Watch has [reported](#) that throughout 2024, the Rwandan army and M23 indiscriminately shelled displacement camps and other densely populated areas near Goma. The Congolese armed forces and allied Wazalendo militias increased the risk facing displaced people in the camps by deploying artillery nearby. Forces on both sides have killed and raped camp residents, interfered with aid delivery, and committed other abuses.

Though Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi has asked the 14,000-member UN peacekeeping mission in Congo, known by its French acronym MONUSCO, to withdraw, it retains a presence in the North Kivu and Ituri provinces. The Southern African Development Community Mission in Congo (SAMIDRC), made up of Malawian, South African, and Tanzanian troops, was deployed in December 2023.

The Congolese and Rwandan leadership, as well as leaders of the M23 and armed groups belonging to the Wazalendo coalition, should issue clear orders not to target civilians and to minimize loss of civilian life and property, Human Rights Watch said.

International humanitarian law [recognizes](#) the ongoing fighting among Congolese and Rwandan armed forces, as well as other armed forces and non-state armed groups, as an armed conflict. Parties to a conflict must distinguish at all times between combatants and civilians and never deliberately target civilians or civilian objects. Warring parties are required to take all feasible

precautions to minimize harm to civilians and civilian objects. Attacks that target civilians or fail to discriminate between combatants and civilians, or that would cause disproportionate harm to the civilian population compared with the anticipated military gain, are prohibited.

Concerned governments should publicly support and urgently adopt sanctions against high-level commanders, including Rwandan officials backing the M23. The UN Security Council should impose travel bans and asset freezes on Congolese and Rwandan officials found to be providing military assistance to abusive armed groups. Angola, which has been leading the African Union-mandated mediation on the conflict, and concerned governments, including France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as the European Union, should jointly press Congo and Rwanda to end their support to abusive armed groups.

The EU and its member states should immediately review their military assistance to the Rwandan armed forces, including the European Peace Facility's [recent decision](#) to renew support for its deployment in Cabo Delgado in Mozambique, to ensure that they do not contribute directly or indirectly to abusive military operations in eastern Congo.

The African Union Peace and Security Council should urgently convene a session of heads of state and government to condemn ongoing human rights abuses, coordinate AU-led mediation, seek the disarming of abusive non-state armed groups, and coordinate investigations into serious violations.

In October 2024, the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor [announced](#) that his office would “renew ... investigative efforts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo” with a “priority focus ... [on] any alleged Rome Statute crimes occurring in North Kivu since January 2022.” The ICC has been investigating serious crimes in Congo since 2004, when the government first [asked](#) the court to step in. The court's investigation should include an inquiry into the Congolese military's role in crimes committed by militias as well as the Rwandan military's involvement in M23 atrocities, Human Rights Watch said.

“Rwandan forces and the M23 and the Congolese military and its allies have a legacy of atrocities including murder, rape, and looting,” de Montjoye said. “They have not faced consequences for these crimes, and it's more important than ever for concerned governments to signal that impunity will not prevail.”