



[Under the Radar. The World's Forgotten Crises](#)

Many Players and No Solution

On the Ongoing Conflict in Eastern Congo

Jakob Kerstan

War-like conditions have prevailed in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo¹ for more than 30 years. The ensuing humanitarian disaster has cost several million lives to date and led to a new record number of internally displaced persons in 2024.² But what is the background to the conflict? Which players shape it? And why is there still no end in sight?

Largely unnoticed by the German public, the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been characterised by a bloody conflict for decades. International observers now estimate that more than six million people have died in the past 30 years.³ This would make the conflict the deadliest since the Second World War. However, the figures are disputed as most of the victims are civilians and did not die as a result of direct war acts, but rather due to malnutrition, for example.⁴ Additionally, the Congo now has more than seven million internally displaced persons. Since 2022 alone, the number of people seeking protection has increased by a further 2.2 million. The refugee camps on the outskirts of the eastern Congolese provincial capital of Goma have long been overcrowded, chronically underfunded and, in some cases, a war zone themselves, which has led to catastrophic hygiene conditions and the spread of diseases such as cholera and typhoid.

Even if political stability prevails in the Congolese capital Kinshasa following the confident re-election of President Félix Tshisekedi at the end of 2023, the eastern provinces remain a hotbed of conflict and crisis in a country whose population is at least 100 million. For decades, the Congolese security forces have been unable to control their own territory in the east of the country and offer protection to the population. More than 100 rebel groups, some with years of support from neighbouring countries, are exploiting this vacuum. In particular, the March 23 Movement (M23), which is supported by Rwanda with up to 4,000 soldiers and now controls larger parts of eastern Congo than any other rebel group, has been responsible for the conflict's escalation in recent years.

History and Drivers of Conflict

The Congo is part of the ethnically mixed Great Lakes Region in Central Africa, which also includes Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and parts of Kenya and Tanzania. The first coordinated migration movements from today's Rwanda to the east of today's Congo were organised during the Belgian colonial period due to Rwandan overpopulation and simultaneous labour shortage in the Congo.

The current main conflict in eastern Congo is based on the genocide committed by members of the Hutu ethnic group against the Tutsi ethnic group in neighbouring Rwanda in 1994. Mobutu Sese Seko, the longstanding dictator ruling Kinshasa at the time, not only tried to fill his country's empty coffers with international donations by taking in at least one million Rwandan refugees, but also wanted to increase his international standing after he had lost his usefulness and relevance to the West with the fall of the Iron Curtain.

However, among those refugees were not only victims of the genocide but also many of its perpetrators: the notorious Interahamwe militias and large sections of the former Rwandan government, including the Hutu-dominated armed forces. These Hutu extremists soon took control of the Congolese refugee camps and created paramilitary structures that posed a threat to the new Rwandan government which, under the leadership of the militia leader and subsequent Rwandan President Paul Kagame, pursued the perpetrators of the genocide into the depths of the neighbouring country, which is 90 times

larger than Rwanda. In 1997, a military coalition supported by Rwanda and Uganda finally overthrew the long-term president Mobutu, partly because they accused him of harbouring rebels. Turbulent years of war followed, with numerous and serious human rights violations being committed on Congolese territory.⁵

The wars fuelled by Rwanda and Uganda under the guise of fighting Congolese rebel groups and lasting until 2003, involved numerous African states as parties to the conflict. The Second Congo War is therefore also known as the “African World War”.⁶ The densely populated Rwanda was not only concerned with securing its own borders, but also with expanding its political and economic influence in the Great Lakes region.⁷

Congo’s immense raw materials reserves are of outstanding importance not only for Rwanda, but also for the global economy and the global energy and mobility transition. Many raw materials that are primarily needed in the electronics industry can be found in the eastern part of, in terms of area, Africa’s second-largest country. The conflict is fuelled by the smuggling of minerals such as tin, tungsten, coltan (tantalum), gold and diamonds, which are often mined under inhumane conditions. Armed groups control mining areas and smuggling routes. Gold and coltan, in particular, are transported across the border to Rwanda (and Uganda) and from there sold on as “conflict-free” raw materials.⁸ The Congolese government estimates that it loses one billion US dollars a year in revenue from raw materials illegally taken out of the country. Recently, the country even sued the electronics company Apple for using “stolen” minerals from the Congo in its iPhones. In addition to profiteers on the Rwandan side, many Congolese from the security sector are also part of these complex interdependencies – a fact that is often ignored in the political argumentation on the Congolese side, as people here benefit from the status quo, too. This makes a solution to the conflict even more difficult.

Apart from security interests, Rwanda’s economic dependence on exports of raw materials

that actually come from the Congo therefore plays a decisive role, as these are only available to a very limited extent in Rwanda itself. Thus, gold now accounts for one third of all Rwandan exports.⁹ Furthermore, coltan exports have risen sharply in recent years, directly correlating with the territorial expansion of the M23 supported by Rwanda. The mine in Rubaya, captured by M23 rebels and the world’s largest coltan mine according to experts, plays an important role in this.¹⁰ Alongside security interests, these economic ties are Rwanda’s unacknowledged though main reason for being active in eastern Congo.

There are repeated reports of M23 crimes against the civilian population.

Key Players and Their Interests

The M23: Emergence, Resurgence and the Role of Rwanda

The rebel group M23 is a key player in the conflict in eastern Congo. It was founded in 2012 by officers of Tutsi origin from the Congolese army. They accused the Congolese state of violating an earlier army integration agreement of 23 March 2009, and rebelled. The name is derived from that date. Even then, international observers assumed that Rwanda had a direct influence on this group. From 2013, the M23 found temporary refuge in the Congo-Uganda-Rwanda border triangle, where it ceased its activities for several years. Even between the official end of the Second Congo War in 2003 and the founding of the M23 rebel movement nine years later, Rwanda had always supported various armed groups in eastern Congo in order to secure its sphere of influence. Accordingly, the fear of many Congolese citizens of foreign influence has grown historically and is deeply rooted in their mentality. For example, every year on 2 August, the government in Kinshasa celebrates the day of remembrance for the “Genocost” – a genocide due to economic interests.

The M23 describes itself as a multi-ethnic political movement that campaigns for the rights of Congolese Tutsis and good governance. Although several UN reports prove that the M23's command structures are controlled by Rwanda, Kigali continues to deny any direct involvement and describes the M23 as a purely Congolese phenomenon with "legitimate" concerns.

After a ceasefire that lasted several years, the M23 fighters took up arms again at the end of 2021 and have now displaced millions of people in eastern Congo and taken control of large parts of North Kivu, including the famous Virunga National Park. This eastern province of the Congo alone, where martial law has been in force since 2021 and the civilian government has been replaced by the military, is around twice the size of Rwanda. In addition to hundreds of thousands of refugees, there are repeated reports of M23 crimes against the civilian population, including the particularly

brutal massacre in Kishishe in November 2023, in which 171 civilians were executed.

The resurgence of the M23 from insignificance is probably linked to another rebel group, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). This terrorist group is opposed to Uganda's long-term president Yoweri Museveni, joined the so-called Islamic State in 2019 and is, among other things, responsible for attacks on schools and the deadly terrorist attacks in the Ugandan capital Kampala in November 2021.

One consequence of the attacks was military cooperation between Uganda and the Congo to combat terrorism. In addition to the presence of Ugandan soldiers on Congolese territory, the alliance also provided for the expansion of infrastructure in eastern Congo. Uganda too has long since been considered a buyer of gold smuggled from eastern Congo. A new trade route between the two largest cities in the eastern Congolese

Fig. 1: Area of Operation of the Rebel Movement M23 in Eastern Congo (as of August 2024)



Source: own illustration based on Human Rights Watch 2024 according to information provided by Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in: DR Congo: Rwandan Forces, M23 Rebels Shell Civilians, Human Rights Watch, 26 Sep 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/ki16> [22 Nov 2024], map: Natural Earth ©.

province of North Kivu, Beni and Goma, seemed possible. This meant Rwanda risked losing existing networks in its area of influence in the province.¹¹ To avoid this, at the end of 2021 Rwanda began providing renewed military support to the M23, which acts against the Congolese army and other rebel groups.

In the areas currently under its control, the M23 maintains a parallel administration. Among other things, it raises money by smuggling gold and coltan and by levying customs duties, for example in Bunagana, a town near the border with Uganda. The M23 has now also joined a new political grouping, the Congo River Alliance (AFC), which was founded in December 2023. The US-sanctioned group wants to overthrow the current Congolese government and is led by Corneille Nangaa, the former head of the Congolese Electoral Commission (CENI) of the controversial 2018 elections.

Since the 1994 genocide, Rwanda has seen itself as the protecting power of the Tutsi living in the Congo. According to Rwanda's argument, the Congolese government is responsible for a situation in which another, state-sponsored, genocide is looming in eastern Congo. Kigali refers to the (alleged) discrimination against Tutsi in the Congo since the 1994 genocide. Although there are indeed stereotypes, prejudices and occasionally ethnically motivated violence against Tutsis, this is by no means directly controlled from Kinshasa. Paradoxically, Rwandan support for the Tutsi rebel group M23 leads to a spiral of discredit and thus to the Congolese Tutsis being repeatedly equated with the rebel group, which is widely hated in the country, therefore fuelling prejudice against the ethnic group. At the same time, the Congolese government accuses Rwanda of committing genocide against the Congolese Hutu through the activities of the M23. Rwanda and the Congo instrumentalise that international legal concept and accuse each other of fuelling a so-called genocide.

A UN report published in June 2024 confirms the presence of up to 4,000 Rwandan soldiers in eastern Congo, which would account for more

than ten per cent of the Rwandan military.¹² According to international observers, the M23 itself only has around 2,000 to 3,000 fighters, so without Rwandan support, the group would scarcely have the quantitative relevance nor the qualitative structure and organisational strength it actually has. The Rwandan army, the most capable military in the region with surface-to-air missiles and guided mortar systems, probably enabled the M23 to shoot down a United Nations helicopter in March 2022. By providing military support to the M23, Rwanda is also violating a United Nations arms embargo on non-state troops in eastern Congo. The Congo is constantly trying to expand its military capacities in order to counter this technical superiority, but repeatedly encounters financial and structural hurdles.

From Rwanda's perspective, the Congolese government is incapable of providing security in the east of its own country.

The Unpredictable Congolese Armed Forces

The Armed Forces of the Congo (FARDC) have been riddled with mismanagement, disorganisation, corruption and demotivation for decades, while there is also a lack of clear command and communication structures. Several attempts at reform have been ineffective, which is why Kinshasa still does not have complete control over its own army in the east of the country. The FARDC, consisting of almost 100,000 men, is therefore one of the main drivers of the conflict.

From Rwanda's point of view, one of the Congo's main problems is the cooperation of parts of its military with rebel groups. Here, there is no dissent from Western governments, including Germany and the EU, which condemn the cooperation between the FARDC and various militias in every statement on Rwanda's responsibility. Poorly paid and inadequately trained

Congolese soldiers sell uniforms, weapons and information to rebel groups. The financial emergency situation plays just as much a role as dependency relationships that have grown over many years on a personal level.

Almost all armed militias in eastern Congo recruit child soldiers.

The most controversial is the cooperation between parts of the FARDC and the rebels of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR, see section below). Although the FDLR has fought on the side of the Congo several times in the past, whenever it was opportune in the respective political situation, the government in Kinshasa still published a declaration at the end of 2023 stating that all soldiers cooperating with the FDLR would be arrested. Nevertheless, contact has never been broken off: existing dependencies appear too entrenched. Since the FDLR and the Rwandan government are enemies, it is precisely this interdependence that provides Rwanda with the argumentation to become itself militarily active in eastern Congo. From Rwanda's perspective (and this is factually correct), the Congolese government is not militarily capable of providing full security in the east of its country. This is not only due to the great distances within the Congo and a lack of infrastructure, but also to the lack of motivation within the military, which weakens its monopoly on power.

Only better pay, more transparent financial flows and a change of mentality within the military could bring about an improvement here. Despite rising defence budgets, the pay of some Congolese soldiers is only just under 100 US dollars per month – that is if they are paid at all. They are remunerated via influential generals who often own large assets and only pass on the soldiers' wages sporadically. In addition to poor pay, inadequate equipment and logistical difficulties, the soldiers' widespread mistrust of their own hierarchy – the Congo has recently

reintroduced the death penalty for treason – is an additional destabilising factor.

The FDLR: A Danger for Rwanda?

The FDLR is a military movement organised after the Rwandan genocide by parts of the Hutu who fled the country and is still active today as a rebel force in eastern Congo. The main goal of the FDLR and the splinter groups that have emerged from it is to overthrow the Rwandan government. It is financed by the smuggling of





A coveted raw material: What is believed to be the world's largest coltan mine is located near Rubaya in eastern Congo. Photo: © Baz Ratner, Reuters, picture alliance.

raw materials, the charcoal trade and the levying of illegal customs duties and taxes. The FDLR is also accused of guerrilla attacks and assaults on civilians, such as the assassination of Italian ambassador Luca Attanasio in 2021. Even if their current clout is considered low and Rwandan territory is currently not under attack, the fighters are repeatedly seen by Kigali as a reason (or, depending on the point of view, a pretext) for pursuing military interests in the

Congo. Given that, according to Kigali's argument, the FDLR poses an existential threat to the Rwandan government and the Tutsi living in the Congo, Rwanda takes on the task of indirectly "ensuring order" in eastern Congo via the M23. However, a rebel group such as the FDLR, which according to unofficial estimates has no more than 2,000 fighters left, does not actually pose a serious threat to a highly armed country like Rwanda.

Countless Other Players

The M23 is the militarily strongest rebel group and the one that controls the most territory in eastern Congo. There are also at least 120 other armed militias active in the region, which are often smaller and regionally focused and often act as self-defence forces.¹³ Almost all of them recruit child soldiers. In a region without functioning state structures, they compete for power, resources and economic influence. Some conflicts also have an ethnic origin. For example, the Lendu militias, as arable farmers, primarily fight against the cattle-breeding Hema. Other players such as the ADF or RED-Tabara are in opposition to the governments of Uganda and Burundi, respectively. The Mai Mai militias are spread

across a wide geographical area and are less easy to define. Even if the M23 were to be defeated, the problem of the countless other rebel groups would remain unresolved. This is why an overall pacification of eastern Congo currently seems extremely unrealistic.

Despite mutual threats, a direct war between Rwanda and the Congo is unrealistic.

In addition to the Congolese army, Burundian and Ugandan troops are also active in eastern Congo as more institutionalised parties to the



Before the ice age: Rwandan president Paul Kagame (right) and his Congolese counterpart Félix Tshisekedi met in Kigali in 2021. Today they threaten each other with war. Photo: © Habimana Thierry, AA, picture alliance.

conflict within the framework of bilateral military agreements. Furthermore, the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and a Southern African Development Community (SADC) intervention force of up to 4,800 troops from South Africa, Malawi and Tanzania are present in the Congo, after the unsuccessful Kenyan-led East African Economic Community (EAC) mission withdrew last year.¹⁴

In addition, the private Romanian security company Asociația RALF and a few independently operating military trainers of French nationality have been active on the side of the Congolese government since the beginning of 2023.¹⁵ The presence of the Eastern European troops, numbering up to 1,000 men, in the city of Goma quickly led the civilian population to mistakenly designate them as Russians. The Congolese government continues to refer to the mercenaries as military advisors.

Moreover, the government in Kinshasa has been militarising youth gangs and thugs, thereby showing its desperation. The coalition of the Congolese armed forces with various armed groups, called Wazalendo (“patriots” in Swahili), is an incalculable risk over the long term and probably the starting point for new internal conflicts in the Congo. This is in stark contrast to the desirable implementation of demobilisation campaigns. The Wazalendo, who are accused of serious human rights violations and who are partly recruited from (former) militiamen, are not bound by any orders from the army.

What to Do?

From 2019, Congolese President Tshisekedi took numerous diplomatic steps towards his neighbouring countries at the beginning of his first term of office, when he held the chairmanship of the African Union (AU). He also led the Congo to membership of the EAC. In addition, Tshisekedi met his Rwandan counterpart Kagame in Kigali in 2019 and 2021. Since then, however, the bilateral relationship has gone downhill. Strong diplomatic actions, such as the

expulsion of the Rwandan ambassador and the ban on overflights by the state airline Rwandair, had no effect.

Rwanda is very self-assured in the conflict. Kagame was confirmed in office with an official result of 99 per cent in the mid-July 2024 elections that did, however, not meet democratic standards. He has already expressed his willingness to engage in a direct armed confrontation with the Congo. In a way, he was responding to Tshisekedi, who, during the election campaign at the end of 2023, predicted that he would take Kigali with the approval of the Congolese parliament if he won the election. However, a direct war is unrealistic, as Rwanda is satisfied with the status quo. In addition, the Congolese side is aware of its military inferiority.

It should be in Germany’s strategic interest to expand relations with the essentially pro-Western government of the Congo.

Several UN peacekeeping missions with different names and mandates have largely failed to fully protect the civilian population in eastern Congo, including MONUSCO, although its current annual budget is still just under one billion US dollars and it was the largest and most expensive UN mission in the world. Despite some small successes, such as the protection of the civilian population in the immediate vicinity of their military bases, the various UN missions have never been able to fulfil the high expectations for a variety of reasons. In December 2023, the UN Security Council decided to accelerate the withdrawal of MONUSCO, which has gradually begun. However, the Congolese security forces are already overwhelmed by the vacuum that has developed. Kinshasa is now saying that conditions, such as the withdrawal of Rwandan troops, must first be met before the UN mission can fully withdraw. Since this is unrealistic in

the short term, a hasty withdrawal of the UN mission in the Congo is not to be expected.

Although the current Congolese government is considered pro-Western, it likes to accuse Europe and the US of cynicism and hypocrisy in the conflict in eastern Congo. In particular, sanctions are being called for against Rwanda. Ukraine is also cited as an example, which from the Congolese perspective faces a “similar fate” of foreign aggression. Europe is perceived as biased, particularly due to the EU’s proximity to Rwanda, and many Congolese get the impression that Europeans only respect international law when it serves their own interests.

After three decades of conflict, however, the first signs are now emerging that Western countries are becoming increasingly critical of Rwanda’s role in eastern Congo. In addition to countless press releases calling on Rwanda to stop supporting the M23, the EU, mainly at the urging of the former colonial power Belgium, initially blocked payments of 20 million euros to the Rwandan anti-terrorist brigade in Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique.

Rwanda is skilled at selling itself on the diplomatic stage.

Russia has recently spread rumours about bilateral military agreements with the Congo. Although this is denied by the Congolese side, Moscow has long had its sights on Kinshasa as a potential target for political influence; for example, through the dissemination of fake news about Western players on social media. These attempts at rapprochement by Russia and other players (for example, Kinshasa recently acquired Chinese drones and Turkish police equipment) will intensify due to the Congo’s geostrategic importance. Western countries, on the other hand, have thus far offered comparatively few opportunities for collaboration beyond development cooperation. It should be in Germany’s strategic interest to expand

relations with difficult, but essentially pro-Western governments such as that of the Congo.

In the hyper-militarised environment of eastern Congo, even additional military alliances such as the SADC troops will not bring lasting peace to the conflict that has spanned decades. It is therefore not a long-term solution for Kinshasa to simply play the role of victim; rather, the domestic political debate should focus more on the Congo’s own responsibility. Any cooperation between state players and rebel groups such as the FDLR should be ended as a matter of urgency. But that alone would not bring about a complete solution. Although Rwanda describes the FDLR as an existential threat, this did not prompt Rwanda to provide direct military support to the M23 between 2013 and 2021. The rearmament of the M23 cannot therefore be explained by this problem alone. Instead, a regional and inclusive approach to solving the raw materials problem should be found, with transparency measures representing a step in the right direction.

The Luanda process initiated by the AU and led by Angola, which is also closely supported by the US, continues to push for direct peace negotiations between Tshisekedi and Kagame. This is still ruled out by Kinshasa. It is worth noting that Rwanda has repeatedly committed to ceasefire agreements at the negotiating table. Even if there are strong doubts about the sincerity of such statements, Rwanda thus indirectly acknowledges its influence on the M23.

Rwanda is skilled at selling itself on the diplomatic stage and can score points not only with political stability, but also with a good investment climate at international level. The country also spends a lot on its tourism branding on the football shirts of Bayern Munich or Arsenal London, thereby investing in visible and positively connoted ties to the West. Rwanda is also one of the largest troop contributors to UN peacekeeping missions worldwide. However, a large part of the state budget still depends on international donors. Therefore, future payments from international donors could be more closely linked to

Rwanda's role in eastern Congo. After the M23 briefly captured the megacity of Goma in 2012, Rwanda ended its support for the rebel force due to international pressure and a cut in development funding, including by Germany. This resulted in the M23 withdrawing from Goma and the rebel group has not since attempted to capture the city again. Germany should exploit its good reputation in both countries and mediate more actively in the conflict. The new Congolese Foreign Minister, Thérèse Kayikwamba Wagner, who was socialised and educated in Germany, could be particularly important in this respect. There are excellent contacts on the Rwandan side as well, not least owing to the more than 40-year partnership with the federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate. The events in eastern Congo should also be consistently addressed in current discussions about possible migration agreements with Rwanda.

Even if the M23 were to be defeated, there are still an immense number of non-state military groups in the region. A long-term alleviation of the humanitarian catastrophe in eastern Congo requires reform of the Congolese security sector, with a better organised Congolese army and administration, as well as regional negotiations involving the neighbouring countries. The AU or the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) could play a greater role here. The EU, with its special representative for the region, should also support (future) peace processes more closely, both in terms of content and funding. Increased international interest and associated diplomatic peace efforts are crucial to achieving sustainable progress on the long-term path to stabilisation in eastern Congo.

– translated from German –

Jakob Kerstan is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's office in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

- 1 For the sake of simplicity, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) will be referred to as the Congo.
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