

The Deployment of South African National Defence Force in the Democratic Republic of Congo Conflict: Challenges and Opportunities for a Mediation Process

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Abstract

The resurgence of the M23 rebel movement has perpetuated conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – resulting in millions of deaths and internal displacements. In response, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) deployed soldiers in the DRC. However, despite the SANDF's response, the conflict remains intractable. This paper aims to provide a holistic roadmap towards ensuring effective mediation process. It argues that sustainable and lasting peace in DRC will depend on deep conflict analysis. This paper uses various theories to critically examine the conflict, and to suggest a form of government that can strengthen institutions and ensure citizen wellbeing. The paper uses desktop research (primary and secondary sources) to advance its argument. The findings reveal that the conflict is complex and has heightened regional instability. The paper recommends thorough conflict analysis to determine the root causes. This paper expands debates regarding

violent conflicts in Africa, and how these conflicts have exacerbated human security challenges. Finally, the paper proposes possible options to respond to the conflict.

Keywords: DRC conflict, M23 rebel group, SANDF, Transitional Justice, Reparations, and Mediation

Introduction

The conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) remains intractable. Available research dissects the intractability of the conflict and attributes it to various reasons. On one end, studies attribute this to volatile history (Weisbord, 2003; Ngoma, 2004; and Dunn, 2003). The history of volatility is largely characterised by rapidly increasing numbers of deaths, refugees and internally displaced persons. For instance, there are roughly 5.4 million refugees and internally displaced persons in the DRC, and as a result, over 800 000 Congolese refugees decided to flee the country (UNHCR cited in Lugova, Samad, and Haque, 2020, p. 2938). On the other end, studies also attribute the DRC conflict to fierce contestations over mineral resources (Le Billion, 2001); rampant corruption (Nzongola and Edgerton, 2002; and Bongomin, 2010); and fierce ethnic/tribal rivalries (Dagne, 2009). The resurgence of the Movement of 23 March (M23) rebel group has resulted in the seizure of Goma and Bukavu in North and South Kivu, which heightened tensions and instability.

However, because the causes of the conflict remain diverse, it is impossible to effortlessly discern what constitutes the DRC conflict. Issues relating to the recognition and non-recognition of citizenship (bifurcated citizenship) for various ethnic groups, and fierce contestations over access to land, are a bone of contention. The M23 - largely backed by Rwandan forces - has launched several attacks in the DRC citing the non-recognition or exclusion of the Banyarwanda population who are not perceived as Congolese citizens. Imani (2023:3) notes that “Banyamulenge people’s collective status as Congolese citizens is hotly contested by most other ethnic groups in South Kivu, who consider themselves “native” Congolese.” Therefore, finding a sustainable peace under these prevailing circumstances remains a huge conundrum.

In response to the escalating violent conflict, the members of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) were deployed on a

peace support mission. The deployment sought to fulfil the mandate of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC). However, Handy (2025) asserts that since the start of the military deployment in December 2023, soldiers have not been effective in combating the hostilities of the M23. As a result, the mission had to be withdrawn prematurely due to unpreceded casualties, among other things.

Handy (2025) attributes SAMIDRC's failure to ill-conceived military, political and strategic decisions and directions. At a military level, the mission could not compete with the M23 and Rwanda in Sake and Goma. At a political level, certain states did not want to fund the mission that did not align with their national interests. At a strategic level, lack of shared vision and ambiguity led to poor performance. The blame for failures cannot be apportioned to the troops. This is because the civil-military relations theory emphasises that "armed forces are not involved in political decision-making" (Schiff, 1995:10). The onus is on the political principals to make decisions on behalf of the military. Therefore, in addition to resource constraints, the SAMIDRC mission was made ineffective by SADC's lack of cohesion and a single voice.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to examine the deployment of the SANDF in the DRC in an effort to provide a holistic roadmap towards ensuring an effective mediation process. The paper expands on debates about violent conflicts in Africa and sheds light on how they have exacerbated human security challenges. This paper is premised on the following research questions.

- What theoretical perspectives can be used to dissect the deployment of soldiers in a peace support mission in DRC?
- What are the historical dynamics that the SANDF should be familiar with when dealing with the conflict in DRC?
- Prior to deployment, what are some of the factors that soldiers should regard as fundamental in perpetuating the conflict in the DRC?
- How has the SANDF responded to the DRC conflict?
- What are possible solutions to resolve the DRC conflict?

In trying to answer these research questions, the paper is arranged as follows. Firstly, the paper outlines theoretical perspectives to explain the factors that perpetuate the conflict. Secondly, the paper examines the historical context in general and the emergence of the M23 in particular. Thirdly, the paper discusses the factors that perpetuate the conflict.

Fourthly, the role of the SANDF is analysed. Consequently, the paper explores possible solutions to quell the conflict.

Theoretical framework

This paper employs three theoretical perspectives, namely, relative deprivation theory, human needs theory, and concordance theory. Firstly, relative deprivation theory (RDT) is a social psychological concept that explains the feelings of discontentment and resentment that are because of what is perceived to be an unfair deprivation of resources among groups or individuals in a conflict; it can be applied to socio-political, economic and organisational problems (Flynn, 2011, p. 100-101). RDT examines the causes of conflict and political instability. Enns (2006, p. 14-17) encapsulates the tenets of RDT as:

- Social identification and comparison: relative deprivation is induced by factors such as group identification as well as comparing one's group to the other. Individuals categorise themselves into groups to feel deprived relative to other groups.
- Unfairness and illegitimacy: the theory highlights that the perceived inequality must be seen as unjust. Groups may feel unjustly treated because they are deprived of resources, rights or opportunities they are entitled to.
- Procedural and distributive justice: RDT is also about justice, such as fairness of outcomes and fairness of processes. It seeks to balance efficiency with fairness to create a just society. Perception of injustice fuels feelings of relative deprivation.

The DRC's context exemplifies RDT due to the open confrontation and hostilities between the natives (Congolese) and the non-natives (largely, Tutsis and Hutus originally from Rwanda). Furthermore, the DRC's mineral wealth is a site for contestation of power and control. The minerals which ought to benefit the entire Congolese nation are in the hands of the political elite, while illegal mining has left many nationals feeling relatively deprived. Moreover, state incapacity, state failure and widespread corruption have hindered access to services for many citizens. As a result, countless individuals are deprived of necessities such as clean drinking water, adequate sanitation facilities, quality education and other state services. The aftermath is characterised by violent conflicts, hostilities and millions of internally displaced people.

Secondly, human needs theory (HNT) rests on the foundation that conflicts often arise due to unmet human needs. When needs are not

met, individuals or groups may resort to conflict. Burton (1990, p. 284) argues that the satisfaction of basic needs enables the functioning of social and political institutions. The human needs include safety and security, identity and recognition, participation and independence, as well as physiological and emotional wellbeing. The HNT provides a framework for resolving conflicts by promoting mutual understanding, respect and cooperation. This in turn promotes empathy and leads to sustainable peace. Through the lens of HNT, lessons are to be learnt about what happens when these needs are not met. The displacement of Congolese has left many people without access to safety, shelter and food. The violent “ethnic” wars have left many Congolese with poor physical health and emotional outcomes. The World Bank (2024) notes that the DRC is among the five most impoverished nations, with an estimated 74.6% of the population subsisting on fewer than \$2.15 per day in 2024, and the nation experiences the highest rate of child stunting in Sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for 42% of children under the age of five.

Consequently, concordance theory is also particularly important to analyse the discernible cracks that were identified by Handy (2025) prior to and during the peace support mission in DRC. Indeed, the lack of shared vision and lack of cohesion within SADC states in terms of the funding and support of peacekeeping missions necessitates the application of concordance theory in trying to curb a violent conflict situation, like in the DRC in the future. The theory of concordance underscores the importance of dialogue, accommodation, and shared values or objectives among the military, the political elites, and society (Schiff, 1995:12). This is crucial to ensure common understanding and shared responsibility. These are all stakeholders who make pertinent decisions regarding the deployment and withdrawal of the troops. The theory also argues that if there is an agreement amongst these stakeholders, military intervention can either be prevented or promoted, thus paving the way for more successes and fewer failures as was witnessed in DRC. Therefore, lack of coordinated and collaborative efforts between these stakeholders may lead to unintended results. More importantly, the theory supports cooperation and involvement among the military, the political institutions, and the society (Schiff, 1995:12).

The meaningful understanding of conflict and deployment theories creates an enabling environment for the development of targeted interventions that can address human needs, human security challenges and poor governance challenges. It also creates space for implementing

inclusive strategies that foster peace, reconciliation, economic growth, anti-corruption efforts, and active civic participation, which can provide valuable insights for a conflict-ridden society like the DRC, whilst paving the way for long-term stability and development.

History of the conflict

Efforts to discern the conflict and to deploy soldiers on a peace support operation can be ineffective if the historical dynamics are misconstrued. Familiarity with history also helps soldiers adeptly scan their environment to identify key actors in a conflict. Thus, early studies indicate that inhumane periods of colonisation and post-colonisation have adversely affected the conflict. It is instructive to note that Congo's takeover dates to 1885, when Belgium, under King Leopold II's rule, seized control. Weisbord (2003, p. 10) contends that approximately over ten million Congolese were hanged, mutilated and starved to death. Yet, while this was considered a genocide, King Leopold II was never held criminally liable. As a result, an acrimonious and tumultuous situation existed in Congo until independence in 1960.

Rather than ushering in a new era marked by optimism, unity, and hope, the events following the extermination of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and the tragic plane crash that claimed the life of United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld during his 1960 peace mission to Congo (Ngoma, 2004, p. 3) instead ignited widespread violence. Shortly after Lumumba's death, General Mobutu Sese Seko took control of the government and renamed the nation as Zaire.

The Mobutu regime emerged because of the Cold War. His ascendance to power and prolonged rule were largely supported by the United States (US) and its allies, who viewed him as a crucial ally in safeguarding their interests. The US praised Mobutu as a barrier against global communism and African liberation movements (Collins, 1997). The US bolstered his government by channelling more than \$1.03 billion in development aid, while also allocating an additional \$227.4 billion in military assistance, underscoring a multifaceted approach to strengthening his regime (Dunn, 2003, p. 130).

However, despite the US's initiatives, the country's security system was plagued by nepotism under Mobutu's rule (Nzongola and Edgerton, 2002). Many of the president's security forces were recruited from his own *Ngbadi* tribe or had family or patronage connections with him. Many

officers were implicated in arms trafficking as well as the illicit mining of gold, copper, and diamonds. Meanwhile the 1994 conflict and genocide in Rwanda, which spilled over into the DRC, serves as a historical example. More than a million Rwandan refugees, along with Hutu militia forces, fled Rwanda following the rise of the Tutsi-led government and subsequently used refugee camps in eastern Congo as bases for launching attacks on Rwanda (Dagne, 2009, p. 5). Dagne (2009, p. 5) further explains that these refugee camps were largely controlled by Hutu militias, who were responsible for the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda, and their ongoing presence continues to instil fear among Tutsi residents.

In September 1996, Rwanda, together with an armed coalition led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila known as the *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaire* (AFDL), launched the First Congo War against Zaire (Nathan, 2006, p. 278; Whitaker, 2003, p. 215). With strategic backing from Uganda, the AFDL launched a comprehensive military campaign aimed at toppling Mobutu's regime. As a result, many refugees and non-combatant Congolese in North and South Kivu lost their lives, while former Hutu militants were brutally exterminated during the conflict.

In May 1997, after Mobutu was compelled to flee the country, Laurent Kabila proclaimed himself the new president, effectively assuming control of the nation with the backing from Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, Burundi, and Eritrea. He renamed the nation the DRC, signaling a new political era and gaining widespread support as a symbol of change and hope to end decades of misrule and poverty (Emizet, 1999, p. 201). However, his rule quickly became authoritarian. He banned political parties, centralised power within his family and ethnic group, and expelled ethnic Tutsis from government (Bongomin, 2010, p. 43). Kabila also cut military ties with Rwanda and ordered all foreign troops out of Congo, leading to political alienation of the Tutsi minority.

In response, Rwanda invaded the DRC in 1998 to establish a controlled zone near its border to counter Hutu militant threats. Despite this, the primary motivation behind the anti-Kabila movement was his desire to break free from the influence of Rwanda and Uganda, the very nations that had helped him rise to power (Emizet, 1999, p. 201). Consequently, insurgent movements emerging from Uganda and Rwanda were fuelled predominantly by pragmatic economic interests rather than by steadfast political ideologies, suggesting that material gain played a significant role in driving these rebellions.

Various tribal groups came together to rally behind Kabila, opposing the Ugandan and Rwandan regimes, which they believed were attempting to create a "Tutsi empire" in the Great Lakes region (Edgerton, 2002, p. 229). Bongomin (2010, p. 45) explains that Kabila's campaign stirred both nationalist and ethnic sentiments, leading to widespread conflict across the country. Congolese forces, with the support of Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, engaged in combat against the armies of Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi, along with militia groups backed by Kigali and Kampala.

The leaders who helped bring Laurent Kabila to power later became discontented and conspired to remove him (Carayannis, 2003, p. 241). In 2001, Laurent Kabila was assassinated by his personal bodyguard, Col. Eddy Kapend, who was allegedly acting as a Rwandan agent (SA History, 2020). After his father's assassination, Joseph Kabila took leadership and committed to overturning his father's contentious legacy by enforcing the 1999 Lusaka Peace Agreement, which was facilitated by the United Nations. Between 2002 and 2003, Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC pulled back their troops. Joseph Kabila took substantial steps to curb the violence by negotiating with neighbouring countries (Dagne, 2009, p. 5). Under his leadership, the nation also adopted a new Constitution through a 2005 referendum, and his significant accomplishment was securing the presidency in the nation's first democratic elections in more than four decades.

Howe (2001, p. 23) argues that a state's political stability is strongly linked to the professionalism of its military, encompassing its operational competence, political accountability, and dedication to protect both political and economic development. Since gaining independence, the DRC has struggled with weak civil-military relations. Instead of protecting the state, soldiers in the DRC became power brokers, leading to a civil service riddled with corruption and state manipulation. This military interference laid the groundwork for conflict and challenges to the existing order.

While Fisher (1993, p. 247) suggests that prolonged social conflicts often stem from unmet fundamental needs, such as lack of recognition, participation, or fair distribution of resources, the International Transitional Justice Framework emphasises the duty of states to investigate human rights violations (Wenthold, 2016, p. 3). In Africa, transitional justice is crucial for addressing peacebuilding challenges and advocating for marginalised groups and victims of human rights abuses. Fisher (1993, p. 248) explains that when two opposing sides become

entrenched in unresolved and seemingly irreconcilable issues, conflict resolution becomes increasingly difficult. The DRC epitomises this situation because unresolved tensions promote the rise of insurgent forces involved in the conflict.

The rise of the March 23 Movement (M23), a predominantly Tutsi rebel group, became a significant insurgent force in eastern DRC. Shepherd (2018, p. 3) maintains that M23 is part of a broader history of rebel movements supported by Rwanda, which have acted as proxies to advance Rwanda's economic and security objectives. This assertion rejects the notion that M23 represented the legitimate grievances of Congolese individuals of Rwandan descent, Tutsi populations in North Kivu. These concerns were often centered on the repatriation of Congolese Tutsi refugees from camps in Rwanda and the protection of these communities from ongoing violence. Furthermore, the question of Congolese citizenship for Rwandan-speaking descendants has remained unresolved since the Mobutu's rule era, adding another layer of complexity to the issue.

M23's objectives were complex and varied. While some of its leaders and fighters were genuinely concerned about the welfare of the Congolese Tutsi community, others appeared to pursue personal gains by exploiting the Congolese government's weakness. They sought to expand control over mining sites, land, and trade routes, often acting in the interests of local and regional supporters, particularly Rwanda.

Factors perpetuating the conflict

Deploying soldiers requires a deep and comprehensive understanding of the factors that perpetuate the conflict. To begin with, the abundance of minerals in the DRC has generally precipitated military confrontation in the post-Cold War era (Le Billion, 2001). These minerals have been plundered and exploited to finance ongoing conflicts. A United Nations expert panel report revealed that traders in Rwanda have profited from the smuggling of tin, tungsten, and tantalum from mines in eastern DRC, using these proceeds to support rebellions in the resource-rich country. Additionally, reports from various media outlets indicate that the Rwandan government returned over 80 tonnes of smuggled minerals to Congo in a formal ceremony held in Gisenyi, Rubavu district (BBC, 2011; Reuters, 2012).

The role of the neighbouring states in fuelling the conflict remains salient and visible in DRC. For example, the leaders of Rwanda, Uganda

and Burundi orchestrated the removal of Congolese President Laurent-Désiré Kabila, whom they themselves had brought to power one year earlier in the First Congo War (Tamm, 2016:147). However, it is also instructive to point out that Rwanda-Uganda relations have not been consistent since 1994. Relations have either been tumultuous or stable (Bareebe and Khisa, 2023:153). Soi (2020:30) sarcastically notes that “relations between Uganda and Rwanda have run hot and cold over the years”. Since these countries are actively involved in DRC, these unstable and unpredictable relations continue to translate into inconsistent and strained relations in DRC. It is therefore not surprising that Rwanda and Uganda have propelled the conflict. As far back as 1999, Tamm (2018) asserted that Ugandan and Rwandan troops first fought in the northern DRC (Kisangani), further planting the seed for the conflict. The fight was typically about diamonds since Kisangani is rich in diamonds. Fuelled by economic interests, Rwanda perpetuates the conflict by seeking to maintain influence and control over the eastern DRC (Bokeriya, Mahamba, and Kiamba, 2024). This control serves to protect the economic and security interests of a Rwandan-linked, predominantly Tutsi elite, who oversee trade routes, mining sites, and grazing lands. Lezhnev and Prendergast (2013, p. 2) argue that Rwanda positions itself as a strategic gateway between East and Central Africa, making it likely that mineral wealth and other resources contribute significantly to its economy.

Le Billion (2001) explains that valuable minerals often leads to heavy taxation, which benefits elites and their competitors. The scarcity of these resources intensifies competition, as economic principles suggest that rarer commodities hold greater value. The scarcity of resources is also directly linked to the unparalleled resource looting and extreme violence (Bokeriya, Mahamba, and Kiamba, 2024). The United Nations Panel of Experts concluded that Rwanda fiercely supported the M23 rebel group, regardless of Rwanda’s repeated denials (United Nations Security Council, 2022; Bokeriya et al., 2024). The long-lasting ties between Kigali and the former National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), which later evolved into M23, suggest that Rwandan backing was inevitable. Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that advanced military aid to the group was facilitated by Rwanda and certain Western nations.

Personal interests and economic motives remain central to the current conflict. Competition over mineral wealth, trade routes, and land access has fuelled resource-based conflicts (Shepherd, 2018, p. 7).

Rwanda's economy, heavily reliant on mineral exports due to its persistent trade deficit, has further heightened tensions (Trading Economics, 2024). The country's primary exports, such as coffee and tea, are subject to international market fluctuations and fail to cover import demands (Republic of Rwanda, 2020; Trading Economics, 2024). Therefore, mineral exports have become Rwanda's leading source of foreign exchange.

Violent conflicts frequently occur in mineral-rich regions near international borders, particularly in the eastern DRC, which is geographically distant from the capital, Kinshasa. This suggests that the battle for land and resource control is a key factor in the prolonged instability. Additionally, Uganda's growing reliance on gold exports has contributed to the region's volatility. Since 2016, gold has been Uganda's most valuable export (Bank of Uganda, 2024). However, Uganda exports significantly more gold than it produces. For example, in 2021, the country mined only 2.9 tonnes but exported 30.2 tonnes (The Economist, 2019).

Apart from the influence from Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi, multinational corporations (MNCs) have also been instrumental in fuelling the conflict in the DRC. The unabated conflict in the DRC is catalysed by what are otherwise extraordinary African powers that fuel the impasse in the mineral-rich region. Its motive is characterised by a collusion of various state and non-state actors, lobbyists and MNCs. In this regard, Berman et al. (2017:1594) demonstrate the extent of the MNCs' tremendous influence in fuelling the conflict. MNCs have always posed a serious threat in terms of resource extraction. For example, Gilpin (1987:231) purports that "Since the end of the Second World War no aspect of international political economy has generated more controversy than the global expansion of multinational corporations". As a result, DRC, as a resource-rich country, continues to be subjected to this controversy.

The MNCs and armed groups exhibit somewhat quid pro quo character. This character manifests in various ways. Whetho (2014:vii), for instance, aptly notes that MNCs shape the conflicts in terms of intensity, technological sophistication, longevity and the prospects for their attenuation. By and large, the DRC has been hardest hit by the influence of foreign companies, largely from the West and the People's Republic of China, who continue to extract cobalt unhindered (Anderson, 2023). DRC is prone to the MNCs' power, manipulation and influence partly because it produces seventy per cent of the world's

cobalt (Garside in Anderson, 2023), a scarce commodity. Rapanyane and Shai (2019:1) concur that “Nearly half of the global reserves of cobalt are found in DRC”. Rapanyane and Shai (2019) unequivocally confirm that the availability of cobalt has motivated China to form ties with DRC. This is because, increasingly, cobalt remains a fundamentally important commodity, as it acts as a conductor for cellphones and batteries. The foreign companies create controversy because they often collude with militia groups or artisanal miners – leading to unprecedented and extreme forms of corruption and bribery.

Meanwhile, Ninyisega (2023: 30) cautions that a Chinese mining company extracted gold from South Kivu between 2013 and 2015, courtesy of the armed groups and the corrupt locale in the facilitation process. In return, the company provided militia support in the form of guns and otherwise, enabling further collusion. In addition, China oversees over 60% of the DRC’s cobalt production and owns 85% of the global processing capacity of minerals as of 2024. Therefore, this positions the DRC as a central figure of China’s global supply chain for electric vehicle batteries and electronics (CPA, 2025).

Some of the West’s largest tech companies were also reported to be complicit in the mineral conflict in the DRC. This was revealed in the lawsuit brought before Washington DC by Congolese families (Forbes, 2020). The United States (US) has also had its involvement in “easing the tensions” in the region. It was reported in March 2025 that Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi had a tradeoff proposal with his US counterpart to end the M23 rebellion by providing military aid in exchange for US access to cobalt, tantalum, and lithium (The Guardian, 2025). This approach is understood to be beneficial to both countries, as the US has an appetite for transactional relationships and could possibly become a leader of cutting-edge technology on the world stage, to the detriment of China. Despite lauded international regulations on ‘conflict-free minerals’, the success of the DRC remains in the doldrums. It is fair to conclude the peace in the DRC is bad for business.

Land availability is another critical driver of conflict. Since the era of King Leopold II, migration has shaped Congolese society, with millions of people permanently displaced from their indigenous agricultural lands. Many were neither integrated into industrial or urban sectors nor granted legal claims to their land. In Ituri territory, disputes over the purchase and expansion of agricultural land have intensified conflicts. The return of Tutsi refugees from Rwanda to Masisi and Kalehe has further complicated land ownership claims, which has exacerbated tensions

between local communities. Additionally, political representation is often tied to “ethnic territories,” further fuelling disputes over land rights and governance. Bokeriya et al. (2024) illuminate that ethnic conflicts constitute the biggest threat to security. This is mainly because ethnicity is weaponised or there is an ethnicisation of politics.

SANDF's response to the conflict

The military has always played a pertinent role in preventing, fighting and ending war and conflict. Quite frequently, it has also played an instrumental role on various occasions in fostering peacebuilding processes (Wilén, 2016). Historically, within the context of the Great Lakes Region, the national armies of Burundi, Rwanda and Congo have collectively and separately played a significant role in states' developments after colonial powers (Wilén, 2016). Despite this historical consciousness, the question that remains is why the South African military is so pertinent within the context of the DRC? South Africa's transition to democracy symbolises an inclusive and democratic society. As a constitutional democracy, the country's foreign policy encourages global governance reforms, human rights advocacy, rule of law, democratic principles, and conflict resolution. In this context, Neethling (2024) asserts that the SANDF has been an instrument of South Africa's foreign policy since 1994. Ozkan (2013) purports that post-apartheid South Africa sought to address African conflicts through both diplomatic and military efforts. However, these efforts necessitated the deployment of SANDF in peace support missions across the continent. Since 1998, the SANDF has contributed troops substantially to peace support operations (PSOs) (Visagie, Du Toit, Joubert, Schoeman, and Zungu, 2022). To be specific, the SANDF has been involved in peace support operations in countries such as Burundi, Rwanda, Sudan, and the DRC (Neethling, 2009). The SANDF has deployed in extremely difficult and totally different environments, considering the rapidly changing security threats.

South Africa's decision to send troops aligns with its foreign policy objectives of promoting peace and stability in the region. The decision also aligns with the Southern African Development Community Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan, the African Union's “Silencing the Guns” initiative, and Aspiration 4 of Agenda 2063, which envisions a peaceful and secure Africa. Furthermore, it also supports the objectives of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), established in 2013 following a

United Nations (UN) peace and security review by then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan (South African Government, 2024).

Historically, SANDF's deployment in DRC saw mandates gradually shifting from Operation Mistral, which was a precursor to MONUC, and subsequently to the UN Organisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, MONUSCO (Visagie et al., 2022). To begin with, it is essential to accentuate that two Defence Reviews (1998 and 2014) that were passed enabled the SANDF to assist in African countries facing insecurities and complex emergencies (Ferreira, 2014:15). After the end of August 2013, SANDF members who were serving under the tutelage of MONUSCO were subsequently transferred to the UN Force Intervention Brigade (FIB). This significant shift in mandate and responsibilities meant that they had to conduct peace enforcement, considering the rise in hostilities and tensions on the ground. This shift sought to annihilate or eliminate M23, an ethnic Tutsi rebel group (Ferreira, 2014:16).

More importantly, South Africa's recent deployment in the DRC was a direct response to the 2023 Extraordinary SADC Summit in Windhoek, which authorised the SADC Mission in the DRC to restore stability. The UN emphasised the necessity of using force alongside traditional peacekeeping measures, especially in situations where there is no peace to maintain. Although the FIB was initially discontinued after the M23 rebel group was neutralized, the mission resumed under a Chapter VII mandate with renewed UN resolutions (Tull, 2017). South Africa contributed 2,900 troops to the 5,000-strong force, alongside Malawi and Tanzania (defenceWeb, 2024).

However, warring factions in conflicts do not always resolve their disputes through diplomatic means; they resort to violence instead (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2017). The SANDF operates under the principles of international and human rights law, serving as a key force within the MONUSCO peacekeeping mission. The SANDF receives its orders from MONUSCO's Force Headquarters in Goma, North Kivu, based on tactical requirements, such as troop deployments during the 2017–2018 election period (Pieterse, 2022, p. 45).

There are opportunities that propel South African government to continuously deploy soldiers regardless of resource constraints. Beyond peacekeeping, South Africa's involvement in the DRC is also driven by economic interests and historical ties. The DRC played a role in supporting South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle, and in return, South Africa has invested significantly in the Congolese economy. Muller

(1997) describes South Africa's foreign policy as a balance between realists, who prioritise economic investments, and radicals, who advocate for a values-based approach. In 2023, the DRC exported goods worth \$115 million to South Africa, primarily refined copper (\$103 million) and cobalt oxides and hydroxides (\$3.37 million) (OEC, 2024). Meanwhile, South African exports to the DRC amounted to R26.6 billion in 2023, up from R23.6 billion in 2022. These exports mainly included machinery (R11.1 billion), iron and steel products (R3 billion), chemicals (R2.6 billion), plastic and rubber (R1.8 billion), and vehicles, aircraft, and vessels (R1.2 billion) (defenceWeb, 2024).

Additionally, South Africa has established a strong business presence in the DRC. President Cyril Ramaphosa has highlighted growing investments by South African companies, which include Engen, Stanbic, PPC, DStv, ABSA, Guma, Vodacom, Into Africa Mining, and Kibali Gold (SA-DRC Chamber of Commerce, 2024). South Africa ranks as the DRC's third-largest export destination and its 69th-largest import source (defenceWeb, 2024).

However, there are serious challenges that are confronting the SANDF during deployments. Despite these partnerships, the long-term effectiveness of SANDF's deployment remains questionable. Since the neutralisation of M23 in 2013, there has been little progress in improving security conditions. High operational demands and limited resources have hindered the military's effectiveness, with critics frequently describing South Africa's defense sector as overstretched (Neethling, 2024). The country's defense budget has declined from approximately 1% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over the past decade to just 0.7% in 2024 significantly lower than the global military spending average of 2.2% of GDP (SIPRI, 2022, p. 23). Esterhuyse (2019) and Ferreira (2014) highlight an important observation where on the one hand there are shrinking budgets, and capabilities and growing operational schedule confronting militaries on the other hand. Ferreira (2014:18) aptly notes that the Department of Defence (DoD) is overstretched due to a lack of funding, deteriorating training quality, and insurmountable operational and logistical challenges. This paradox is clearly not sustainable, and it partly explains why the South African government subsequently withdrew soldiers from the DRC.

Additionally, Neethling (2024) highlights the impossible balancing act wherein the SANDF is required on the one hand to assist the South African Police Service (SAPS) to deal with crime, while it is also expected to perform its duties with limited budget on the other hand. This state of

affairs raises concerns about whether continued troop deployments in the DRC are sustainable or beneficial in the long term. Apart from resource constraints, the SANDF also fails to execute its mandate due to skills mismatch. Visagie et al., (2022:128) argue that although SANDF members were mostly trained in conventional warfare, they often find themselves conducting PSOs. This then puts more demand on soldiers to deepen their knowledge of negotiation, diplomatic skills, observation and strategies in order to avoid conflict (Visagie et al., 2022). As previously indicated in the introduction, soldiers do not always get clear instructions from their political principals and as a result, it negatively affect the performance on the ground. Lack of clear instructions also goes against the propositions of the concordance theory.

Ultimately, military intervention alone is unlikely to achieve lasting peace. Instead, it serves only to temporarily contain the situation. Addressing the economic, political and geopolitical factors is crucial for establishing a sustainable resolution to the crisis.

Possible responses to the conflict

The reality is that SANDF's deployment is not a panacea. Alternative approaches remain essential. South Africa has a mandate to pursue the African Renaissance. The late Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister, Aziz Pahad, emphasised that South Africa must contribute to Africa's Renaissance (Radebe, 2009, p. 23). Therefore, this paper proposes various responses, namely, targeted sanctions, transitional justice, reparations, and mediation.

▪ *Targeted Sanctions*

Mkhize (2008, p. 34) highlights that "smart" sanctions pressure states into compliance while minimising harm to civilians. A UN Security Council report found that Uganda and Rwanda are directly involved in the M23 operations, making them accountable for the group's actions. According to DRC's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Terese Kayikwamba Wagner, the inflow of Rwandan soldiers has contributed to the displacement crisis in eastern DRC. This paper urges the UN and its member states to consider imposing targeted sanctions on Rwandan President Paul Kagame and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni for their alleged roles in supporting M23.

Multinational corporations can pressurise suppliers to ensure that minerals are sourced responsibly. Transparency in supply chains is essential, as demonstrated by the 2010 Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, which requires U.S.-registered companies to disclose whether their products contain conflict minerals from the DRC or neighbouring states (Dodd-Frank, 2010, p. 838-843). This legislation should be complemented by alternative income-generating initiatives to offset economic losses.

■ *Transitional Justice*

The implementation of transitional justice is a critical component for ensuring stability and enhanced state capacity. This process involves the integration of various armed forces into a unified, post-conflict national military, equipped to effectively address sovereignty threats. South Africa serves as a precedent in this regard, having successfully integrated statutory and non-statutory forces in 1994 to establish the post-Apartheid SANDF. Similarly, policies regarding disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration, and transitional justice can guide the restructuring of forces.

The Congolese government can enforce a lustration process, removing public officials and judges implicated in serious crimes, human rights violations, and corrupt regimes. Lustration entails the removal of public officials and judges associated with corrupt regimes and human rights violations. This process may involve the dismissal or reassignment of individuals appointed based on political affiliations. The imposition of term limits for judges and presidents represents an additional method of implementing lustration. Historical precedents, such as post-World War II Germany, illustrate the effectiveness of this approach, where public officials, prosecutors, and judges with ties to the Nazi regime were dismissed (Paczekowzi, 2023, p. 2).

DRC's transition from military rule to functional state requires the establishment of a National Commission to address human rights violations, political assassinations, and the recovery of misappropriated assets (Tunamsifu, 2016, p. 36). However, the initial Commission was disbanded under Mobutu's regime following revelations of widespread corruption, including the mismanagement of state assets, tax evasion, and fraudulent project expenditures. Restoring state authority involves implementing reforms such as declaration of financial assets before assuming office. Additionally, the restitution and reallocation of illicitly

acquired properties, backed by the United Nations and key political stakeholders, would significantly contribute to strengthening governance and fostering long-term stability.

■ ***Reparations***

The International Criminal Court (2015, p. 2) defines reparations as including restitution, compensation, and rehabilitation. The UN Basic Principles and Guidelines emphasise that non-repetition and satisfaction are essential elements of transitional justice (Liwanga, 2009, p. 34). Kowalski (1998, p. 89) notes that reparations include repatriation of stolen art. Reparations serve as an acknowledgement of past atrocities and a means to dismantle exploitative power structures. UN Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet notes that the failure to address historical injustices such as colonialism and slavery contributes to present-day conflicts (United Nations, 2020).

The Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (ARSIWA) provide a legal basis for reparations to the DRC from both Belgium and certain African states relevant to the conflict. Reparations can be effective. In 2015, the German government acknowledged its historical responsibility for the first genocide perpetrated against the Herero, Nama, and Damara tribes in Namibia, culminating in the signing of a Joint Declaration in May 2021. Henceforth, Germany pledged to invest 1.1 billion euros over 30 years in developmental projects to improve Namibia's infrastructure and economic growth. Of this amount, 50 million euros are designated for initiatives related to reconciliation, remembrance, research and education (Melber, 2024). The Federal Republic of Germany also provided reparations to the State of Israel as compensation for the material losses suffered due to the atrocities committed against the Jewish people during the Third Reich (De Greiff, 2006, p. 886). Armstrong and Colomos (2006, p. 395) argue that the reparations process contributed to the economic growth of Israel and the well-being of its citizens. Today, Germany is one of Israel's most significant partners within the European Union, with bilateral trade valued at \$8.94 billion in 2022 (OEC, 2024). Similarly, in 2008, Italy invested \$5 billion in Libyan infrastructure over 20 years as compensation for colonial abuses.

■ ***Mediation***

Mediation serves as a catalyst for broader societal progress to ensure that peacebuilding efforts lead to tangible improvements in the lives of

affected communities. Whilst there is a plethora of methods for ensuring mediation, DRC's situation requires transformative mediation. Bush and Folger (2005, p. 264) describe transformative mediation as a process that strengthens the ability of conflicting parties to assert themselves to acknowledge and understand each other's perspectives. This approach focuses on empowering individuals involved in the conflict, enabling them to make informed decisions and engage constructively. This approach fosters mutual recognition, helping each party appreciate the experiences, emotions, and viewpoints of the other, which ultimately leads to a more meaningful and sustainable resolution.

In the case of the DRC, despite the implementation of multiple peace treaties such as the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement of 1999, the Sun City Agreement of 2002, and the Luanda Roadmap of 2022, the violent conflict persists. These peace treaties, intended to establish stability and foster reconciliation, have yet to fully resolve the deep-seated political, ethnic, and economic tensions that fuel ongoing hostilities in the region. A key argument is that previous mediation efforts have fallen short in accurately diagnosing the root causes of conflict.

Smith and Smock (2008, p. 10) assert that for a mediator to effectively engage with disputing parties and facilitate meaningful dialogue, it is essential for all parties involved to have a clear and comprehensive grasping of the historical background and fundamental causes of the conflict. One major limitation of past mediation attempts has been the failure to grasp the complexities of the various rebel groups and factions, each of which operates with distinct, and often competing, interests.

Another crucial element in the mediation process is the thorough evaluation of the conflicting parties, including their level of influence, power dynamics, and vested interests. Gaining a deep understanding of these factors enables mediators to implement multi-track diplomacy strategies effectively, ensuring that peace efforts are inclusive and comprehensive. This approach acknowledges that conflicts often involve multiple actors beyond the primary disputants, including regional stakeholders whose actions can significantly affect the peace process.

For example, Ahere (2012, p. 3) aptly notes that the failure of the 2002 peace process was partly attributed to the direct intervention of neighbouring states, including Burundi, Uganda, and Rwanda. These external actors, driven by their own strategic and economic interests, exacerbated tensions and complicated mediation efforts. Without properly accounting for the influence of such regional players, peace

negotiations may be undermined, as external interventions can fuel further instability. Therefore, a comprehensive assessment of all parties, both direct and indirect stakeholders, is essential for a successful mediation process that fosters long-term stability.

Congolese civil society organisations have a long and well-established history of advocating for citizens' interests, dating back to the regime of Mobutu Sese Seko. These organisations have played a significant part in mobilising communities, fostering political awareness, and pushing for democratic reforms. Although there was significant backing from various civil society organisations in the DRC, only a limited number of civil society representatives, particularly those aligned with political parties, were involved in signing the landmark agreement that resulted in the creation of a transitional coalition government. This agreement allowed President Kabila to retain his position, while the opposition was allocated the role of Prime Minister, marking a significant but imperfect step toward political compromise and power-sharing. Despite the broad support from civil society, the agreement's implementation highlighted the limited involvement of grassroots organisations in the decision-making process that shaped DRC's political transition.

However, this process was widely perceived as illegitimate because it failed to genuinely represent the aspirations and concerns of the majority of the Congolese population. As a result, divisions emerged within the broader opposition movement, including civil society actors who felt sidelined from the decision-making process (Africa Centre, 2016). It is crucial to acknowledge that civil society played a central role in driving the negotiations that ultimately brought an end to the wars between 1997 and 2003. Their efforts were instrumental in fostering dialogue, bridging divides, and creating the conditions for peace during a turbulent period in the country's history. Because of weak government institutions, civil society organisations have filled critical gaps in governance, acting as a stabilising force that promotes reforms, fosters social cohesion, and facilitates peaceful transitions.

Furthermore, a significant portion of those who have participated in past peace negotiations and transitional governance structures come from military backgrounds. This reality has reinforced the perception that civilian rule remains unattainable in the DRC, further complicating efforts toward democratisation. For a peace process to be truly effective, it must be inclusive of all stakeholders, with a strong and active civil society playing a critical role in crafting the country's path toward renewal. A peace process that embraces broad-based representation,

particularly from civil society, will help legitimise governance reforms, enhance public trust, and create a foundation for a sustainable and peaceful transition.

Unlike traditional mediation, which primarily seeks to settle disputes, transformative mediation focuses on empowering conflicting parties to actively participate in resolving their differences while fostering mutual recognition of each other's needs and interests. This approach is especially relevant to the DRC, where persistent conflict has been exacerbated by a lack of locally driven solutions and sustainable peacebuilding initiatives. By emphasising empowerment and mutual understanding, transformative mediation enables the people of the DRC to take ownership of their peace process, ensuring that solutions are not only externally imposed but also internally embraced.

This perspective aligns with former South African President Thabo Mbeki's call for Congolese-led solutions, as he stated, "The Congolese people must take charge of their own liberation" (News24, 2024). His statement underscores the importance of local agency in conflict resolution, reinforcing the idea that sustainable peace can only be achieved when those directly affected by conflict are actively involved in shaping their future. Thus, transformative mediation serves as a key tool in guiding the DRC toward long-term stability by fostering self-reliance, cooperation, and a deeper commitment to reconciliation among its people.

Several scholars argue that regional hegemony is crucial for peace and stability. Evans and Newman (1990) explain that hegemony is a concept that refers to leadership, while Spence (2004, p. 35) characterises South Africa as a hegemony within the SADC. South Africa should leverage this position to advocate for transitional justice and sustainable peace. Radebe (2009, p. 13) notes that the international community looks to South Africa for leadership in advocating for human rights, democracy, and economic development. As an African leader, South Africa can promote reconciliation through diplomacy. Van Nieuwkerk (2024) suggests that regional powers like Tanzania, Kenya and Angola should wield more power and influence to encourage Congolese and Rwandan leaders to prioritise peace. This concept is well captured in the seTswana proverb "*matsogo dinku a thebana*," which highlights the importance of mutual support and cooperation in overcoming challenges, reinforcing the idea that people are meant to help one another.

Conclusion and policy implications

For mediation efforts in the DRC to be effective in fostering lasting peace and development, a fresh and more strategic approach is required. The pursuit of peace is an ongoing process that demands continuous effort and adaptation. Mediation strategies that fail to be inclusive or lack a thorough understanding of the root causes of conflict are unlikely to yield results. The DRC conflict requires mediators to utilise diverse tools and frameworks to analyse it accurately. It is difficult to comprehend the DRC conflict because it is complex in nature. For example, different militia groups feel that they are relatively deprived, while others feel that their human needs are not met. Beyond its immediate challenges, the conflict also foregrounds an enabling environment for Africa to reinforce its fragile judicial and governance institutions. Addressing such conflicts effectively requires bold leadership. However, such leadership remains a persistent issue within the continent and from the broader international community.

A critical lesson drawn from the SANDF's deployment in the DRC is that a prolonged peace support mission, combined with budgetary constraints and limited resources, can undermine both the morale of troops and the overall mission objectives. These factors pose significant operational and logistical challenges, especially as the conflict continues to escalate. This experience underscores the need for improved strategic planning, adequate resources, training and better preparation for future military interventions. This also bodes well with concordance theory, which underscores the importance of cooperation and cohesion between the military, political elites and the society. This is critically important because South Africa cannot sustain indefinite troop deployments while its own defence capabilities face internal challenges. Instead, the country should leverage its regional influence and diplomatic strength to facilitate a resolution through multi-track diplomacy, engaging various stakeholders at political, economic, and civil society levels to promote a comprehensive and lasting peace agreement.

The plight of the Congolese requires Responsible, Accountable, Relevant and Ethical (RARE) leadership. Considering the multifaceted nature of the conflict, the paper proposes several possible options (smart/targeted sanctions, transitional justice, reparations, and mediation) that can be considered to respond to the DRC conflict. The concordance theory also remains fundamentally important, as it foregrounds the framework for proper cooperation and collaboration

between the political elites, the military and the society at large. This is particularly crucial because the society meaningfully understands the historical and local dynamics that are pertinent in addressing ensuing hostilities and tensions on the ground.

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Disclaimer

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