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The M23 Rebels and the Dynamics of Protracted Armed Conflicts in the Eastern Democratic Republic Of Congo

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Abstract

This paper analyses the M23 rebels and the broader dynamics of protracted armed conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Drawing on qualitative methodologies and extensive field-based empirical data, including interviews with local communities, government officials, former and current warlords, and civil society actors, this paper challenges dominant academic narratives that often conflate the M23 rebels with Congolese Rwandophones, particularly the Banyamulenge and Banyarwanda. It critiques the widespread but inaccurate tendency among some scholars to label M23 fighters as part of the Congolese Rwandophone population, despite substantial evidence, including repeated United Nations findings, indicating that the current M23 combatants are largely composed of more than 5,000 members of the Rwandan Defence Forces (RDF) operating on Congolese soil, who are not Congolese Rwandophones. Assessed through the lens of the economic theory of conflict and grounded in both field research and the author's lived experience as a native of eastern DRC, the study examines how the M23 operates as a strategic proxy advancing Rwanda's covert geopolitical and economic interests under the pretext of protecting Rwandophone populations. The paper reveals that Rwanda's support for armed rebellion in eastern DRC seeks to entrench Kigali's political and military influence by positioning Congolese Rwandophone elites, expanding access to mineral wealth, and advancing a long-term agenda of territorial and political control in North and South Kivu. It further contends that Rwanda promotes sustained destabilisation through proxy forces such as the M23 to enable continued illicit exploitation of resources, while also invoking pre-colonial territorial narratives to legitimise potential annexation claims. The paper further critiques the DRC government's flawed peace strategies, which often reinforce cycles of violence by legitimising

armed groups through power-sharing arrangements. This study supports the discourse on sustainable peacebuilding and conflict transformation in the eastern DRC through the provision of evidence-based analysis and specific policy recommendations.

Keywords: *Armed conflict, M23 rebellion, Non-state armed groups, Rwandophone, Peacebuilding, Resource exploitation.*

Introduction

The resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) rebellion in November 2021 has once again cast a sharp spotlight on the persistent volatility of the security situation in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This region has served as the epicentre of Africa's most persistent and destructive conflicts for almost thirty years, a period defined by systemic insecurity, cyclical violence, and immense humanitarian distress. This prolonged instability has produced one of the largest internal displacement crises globally (International Alert, 2023 & Perera, 2018), a condition recently exacerbated by the offensive of the M23 rebels and their affiliates, including the Alliance Fleuve Congo (Congo River Alliance---AFC) and Rwandan Defence Force (RDF). Since January 2025, these insurgent coalitions have seized control of Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira, three strategic urban centres in North and South Kivu, triggering a renewed wave of mass atrocities, large-scale civilian casualties, and further socio-political destabilization (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

According to credible estimates, the cumulative human cost of these conflicts has surpassed 7 million deaths since 1996 (International Alert, 2023), with over 7.3 million people currently displaced, rendering the DRC one of the world's most acute humanitarian crises (UN Group of Experts Report S/2024/482). Approximately 90 percent of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) are clustered within the eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri, which remain the primary zones of conflict. This complex crisis is further compounded by the destruction of essential infrastructure and the proliferation of more than 120 local and foreign non-state armed groups operating within the Kivu region alone (Huon, 2025 & Human Rights Watch, 2024). In response, the Congolese government has forged tactical alliances with local militia groups, collectively known as the Wazalendo, and alleged Burundian forces to combat the M23 insurgency. Notably, UN Security

Council Resolution 2773(2025) confirms the direct military and logistical support provided to the M23 rebels by the Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF), reinforcing widespread perceptions among Congolese communities that the M23 rebellion constitutes a broader manifestation of Rwandan state aggression.

Other reports by the UN Group of Experts indicate that the RDF conducts direct operations with or without the presence of the M23 combatants (S/2025/88; S/2024/620 & Human Rights Watch, 2025). Over the past three decades, a plethora of peacebuilding efforts have sought to resolve the DRC's recurrent cycles of violence. These include major political agreements, such as the Lusaka Peace Agreement (1999) and the Sun City Accord (2002), alongside disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes and bilateral accords like the March 23, 2009, agreement between the DRC government and the Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP) rebels. These initiatives have been complemented by the deployment of United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), the United Nations' largest, most expensive, and longest-standing peacekeeping operation, and regional security mechanisms such as the Southern African Development Community Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC) force and the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF). Furthermore, these efforts were recently followed by major diplomatic developments, notably the accords signed in Washington, D.C., on 27 June and 4 December 2025 between the DRC and Rwanda, known as the "Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity," concluded under the auspices of the President of the United States, Donald Trump. They were also complemented by the Doha Framework for Peace, signed in Doha on 15 November 2025 between the DRC government and the Congo River Alliance / M23, under the auspices of the State of Qatar (United Nations Group of Experts report S/2025/858).

Despite the extensive scale of these interventions, the eastern DRC continues to face profound instability, highlighting the systemic failures and inherent weaknesses of peace frameworks mediated by external actors. Against this backdrop, this paper offers a more nuanced, contextually grounded, and evidence-based analysis of the underlying factors sustaining the M23 rebellion and the broader protracted armed conflict in the DRC. Employing a qualitative research design, the study draws on extensive fieldwork conducted between March 2022 and July 2023, supplemented by the author's multiple visits to eastern DRC

throughout 2024 and early 2025. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews in Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Bukavu, and Goma, along with four focus group discussions in Goma comprising diverse participants (n = 48) from various provinces, ethnicities, and genders.

A purposive and snowball sampling strategy identified 102 participants, including government officials, electoral commission members, political actors, civil society leaders, academics, religious figures, former combatants, women's groups, and representatives of international peacebuilding bodies such as the United Nations, European Union, African Union, and SADC. Data were analysed using qualitative thematic content analysis, a method that provides a descriptive interpretation of qualitative datasets by identifying and developing recurring themes from the narratives of participants' lived experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006 & Yin, 2016). The paper is structured into four sections: (i) Theoretical Framework: Economic Theory of Conflict; (ii) The M23 and Internal Drivers of Armed Conflict in the DRC; (iii) Rwanda: The Principal External Aggressor through the M23 Rebels; and (iv) Conclusion and Policy Recommendations for Sustainable Peace. Through this structure, the study advances a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict ecosystem in the DRC and proposes realistic, transformative strategies for achieving durable peace in the region.

The theoretical framework: Economic theory of conflict

While multiple theoretical frameworks may elucidate the complexity of armed violence in the eastern DRC, this paper employs the economic theory of conflict, which posits that conflict endures where actors derive material gains from its perpetuation (Charles & Osah, 2018). Charles and Osah add that conflicts become protracted when belligerents are incentivized by economic rents, particularly those extracted from natural resources. Similarly, Collier and Hoeffler (2000) contend that the propensity for civil war increases when combatants are presented with opportunities for economic gain, especially through the exploitation of high-value natural resources such as diamonds, gold, and timber. The persistence of armed conflicts in eastern DRC is predominantly driven by economic incentives, which have played a central role in sustaining violence over time (UN Reports S/2025/403 & S/2025/176; UN Group of Experts Report S/2024/482 & Human Rights Watch, 2023; 2024; 2025).

This paper identifies various drivers of conflict, such as rural instability, Rwandan-backed proxies like the M23, and competition for minerals, yet it maintains that the primary reason for the persistence of these wars is the institutionalisation of violence as a source of profit, as suggested by the economic theory of conflict. Armed factions continue to engage in hostilities largely due to the substantial material benefits derived from controlling resource-rich territories and illicit trade networks in the region (Verweijen et al., 2021 & Melvin and De Koning, 2011). Alusala (2015) reinforces this view, asserting that "many wars in Africa are intrinsically linked to the exploitation of natural resources." When applied to the DRC, this assertion becomes particularly salient. Drawing from Collier and Hoeffler's framework and juxtaposing it with the limited success of various peace initiatives in the DRC, this study posits that both local and foreign armed groups systematically maintain control over resource-rich territories, where they generate significant illicit revenue. These profits disincentivize any genuine engagement in peace processes, as disarmament would entail relinquishing economic leverage.

The case of the M23 rebels serves as a paradigmatic example. Having captured key strategic territories in North and South Kivu, areas endowed with immense mineral wealth, they have reportedly amassed substantial profits from the illicit exploitation of these resources, which are estimated to make more than $800,000 per month since the capture of Rubaya mining in North Kivu (Kasujja, 2025; Aljazeera News, 2025 & UN Group of Experts Report S/2024/482). During peace negotiations, the group has put forward ridiculous demands, including a proposal to govern these provinces autonomously for a period of eight years. Such demands reveal a deliberate strategy to institutionalise their de facto control over resource flows, thus illustrating an unwillingness to pursue any peace settlement that would threaten their economic base. To deepen the understanding of the economic theory of conflict in eastern DRC, insights from a focus group interview with Master's students at the University of Goma identified three economic dynamics driving the motivations of various rebel groups (Focus group interview, Goma, January 2025). First, one category consists of disenfranchised youth who, lacking viable income-generating opportunities, resort to armed violence as a means of survival. These actors, often numerically dominant, engage in armed activities primarily to extort illicit taxes from civilians in territories under their control. This pattern reflects Chappelow's (2019)

argument that resource scarcity compels marginalised individuals to adopt coercive strategies to secure economic advantage.

Second, another category includes former warlords integrated into government and military structures through peace agreements that granted political offices and military ranks. Despite formal integration, many maintain clandestine links with their former rebel networks to safeguard illicit economic interests, pursuing political power largely to sustain personal economic benefits (focus group interview, Goma, January 2025). As a prime example of this dynamic, the M23 movement employs strategic violence to reclaim political leverage and enable the illegal extraction of minerals, frequently backed by the Rwandan government. Third, and most significantly, neighbouring states, particularly Rwanda and, to a lesser extent, Uganda, are involved through geostrategic interests aimed at accessing and controlling the DRC's mineral wealth. Unable or unwilling to secure these resources through legal channels, they have supported proxy armed groups to advance their economic interests (Muraya & Ahere, 2014). This external dimension reinforces the argument that both internal and cross-border economic incentives are central to the persistence of violence in eastern DRC.

As a result, armed conflict among various non-state actors in eastern DRC can largely be interpreted as competition for resource control. Many groups, including M23, have systematically expelled rival militias such as the Mai Mai and local mining stakeholders to monopolise resource extraction (Burnley, 2011). The accessibility of mineral resources has thus transformed armed group membership into a lucrative enterprise. This commodification of violence appeals to those in economic distress, who then adopt roles within armed factions as a primary source of income, typically generated through the illicit taxation and extortion of civilians. These dynamics reinforce the economic theory of conflict, suggesting that conflicts embedded in illicit economies tend to persist because actors are unwilling to relinquish substantial financial gains for political stability. Consequently, the persistence of the M23 rebellion and the broader crisis of armed violence in the eastern DRC are best understood through the lens of economic predation. Competition for mineral resources among transnational networks, local warlords, and community-based militias has become a structural feature of the conflict. Peace processes frequently fail because the economic incentives for violence outweigh the benefits of disarmament and reintegration, transforming warfare into a means of wealth accumulation and entrenching a political economy of conflict resistant to conventional

peacebuilding strategies. With this theoretical framework established, the following section examines the multifaceted dimensions of armed conflict in eastern DRC.

The M23 and the Internal Dynamics of Armed Conflict in the DRC

The persistent armed conflict in the eastern DRC cannot be fully understood without analysing the nexus between the emergence of the M23 rebels and the country's deeply entrenched internal political and economic pathologies. The origin of the M23 rebel group, officially established in April 2012 by former members of the CNDP, can be historically situated within a broader continuum of Rwanda-backed insurgencies in the DRC. Its roots trace back to the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL), a rebel coalition that, with substantial military and logistical support from Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi (during the Tutsi-led presidency of Pierre Buyoya), facilitated the 1997 overthrow of the Mobutu regime and installed Laurent-Désiré Kabila as president. This coalition was predominantly composed of Tutsi forces from the aforementioned states (Nzobakenga, 2024).

Although formed as a coalition of convenience, the alliance between Kabila and his foreign partners fractured within a year, leading to his 1998 mandate for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign military forces. However, in defiance of this directive, the foreign contingents, especially Rwandan and Ugandan armed forces, did not withdraw. Instead, they regrouped, camouflaging as Congolese Rwandophones, and jointly established the Congolese Rally for Democracy–Goma (RCD-Goma), a proxy force designed to wage the Second Congo War against Kabila's regime. The RCD-Goma was predominantly composed of Rwandan and Ugandan troops with limited Congolese representation (Ekyamba, 2022)---an early indication of the pattern of foreign-led insurgencies camouflaged as internal dissent. During the peace negotiations in 2002, the RCD factions were eventually integrated into the transitional government and national army under the auspices of the 2002 Sun City Agreement (Alusala, 2015). This accord, conceived as a political settlement aimed at accommodating all warring parties to achieve a ceasefire and foster stability, indiscriminately incorporated armed actors, irrespective of their nationality, into state institutions. This integration occurred without sufficient vetting or accountability frameworks, thereby enabling the absorption of foreign combatants and warlords into the Congolese army and political apparatus. Such an approach critically

undermined state sovereignty and the integrity of national institutions, ultimately laying the foundation for future governance and security crises (Human Rights Activist, Interview, Goma, July 2023).

Consequently, this flawed peace architecture allowed for the infiltration of Rwandan and Ugandan operatives into national institutions, providing a platform for both nations to maintain their sway over the DRC's political and economic landscape, especially in the resource-rich East. Following the 2006 general elections, most former leaders of the RCD factions (many of whom were foreign nationals) were defeated at the polls and subsequently excluded from Joseph Kabila's newly formed post-election government. They also lost key positions previously held during the transitional period, including those who had been integrated into the national army, seeing their ranks revoked as part of a broader military reshuffle initiated by the Kabila administration. In response, these foreign Rwandans, who had been operating under the guise of Congolese Rwandophones, regrouped and launched a renewed armed rebellion in 2007 under the banner of the CNDP, led by Laurent Nkunda, a figure later indicted for war crimes (Stearns, 2013).

The CNDP, again heavily supported by Rwanda, claimed to protect the rights of Congolese Tutsis allegedly marginalised by the central government. This narrative provided ideological cover for a rebellion that wreaked havoc in North Kivu, resulting in mass displacement and death. In 2009, the DRC government, under pressure to stabilise the situation, signed the 23 March Agreement with the CNDP, once again reintegrating rebel forces into the national army and granting them political positions (Nzobakenga, 2024). Yet, as in the case of the Sun City Agreement, this reintegration occurred without due diligence or considerations of long-term consequences. Former CNDP commanders, many of whom were not Congolese nationals, infiltrated the state apparatus, further weakening national cohesion and facilitating continued external interference. The cycle repeated itself in the aftermath of the 2011 elections, when CNDP affiliates who had been sidelined during the government reshuffle withdrew once again and formed the March 23 Movement (M23) in 2012, citing the government's failure to implement the 2009 Accord with the CNDP. In November 2012, the M23 rebellion reached its peak with a ten-day occupation of Goma; the group eventually retreated following intense pressure from both regional and international actors. The movement was subsequently defeated in 2013 through a joint military offensive led by the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) in collaboration with the

MONUSCO (Stearns, 2013). Concurrently, the Kabila administration appointed several individuals from the Tutsi ethnic group, such as Azarias Ruberwa and Moïse Nyarugabo, and leaders of various Tutsi-led non-state armed groups to cabinet positions and senior ranks within the national army. This practice further institutionalised the politicisation of ethnicity and the strategic use of armed rebellion as a pathway to political power.

Following its defeat in 2013, the M23 remained largely dormant until 2018 but began remobilising in 2019 in the aftermath of the general elections. Anticipating exclusion from President Félix Tshisekedi's incoming administration, and fearing the loss of political influence, the group strategically resorted once again to the threat of armed conflict as a means of exerting pressure on the central government in Kinshasa (Ekyamba, 2022). Tshisekedi's party, lacking a parliamentary majority, was compelled to form a coalition government with other parties that had won seats, excluding the CNDP, which performed poorly in the elections. The political marginalisation of former CNDP/M23 affiliates and their exclusion from government and military appointments under Tshisekedi's administration reignited armed mobilisation in 2021. Accompanying this resurgence were persistent complaints regarding the perceived marginalisation of the Tutsi population and the Congolese government's inability to honour and execute previous peace accords (Makonye, 2023).

According to reports by the UN (S/2025/403, S/2025/176 & S/2024/482) and Human Rights Watch (2023; 2024; 2025), the recent M23 insurgency, which led to the capture of the cities of Goma and Bukavu in February 2025 in the eastern DRC, is composed of over 4,000 Rwandan armed forces. This renewed rebellion appears to transcend conventional political power-sharing motivations, instead advancing a more radical agenda aimed at either the balkanisation of eastern DRC or the annexation of strategic territories into Rwandan control. Such objectives pose a grave and immediate threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Congolese state (Focus Group Interview, Goma, July 2023). At the same time, the recurrent cycles of armed conflict involving M23 rebels and local non-state armed groups are deeply intertwined with two interdependent internal dynamics: the entrenchment of an authoritarian political culture and the perpetuation of a colonial-era extractive economic system. These structural conditions continue to fuel instability by reinforcing exclusionary governance practices and economic exploitation, thereby sustaining the conditions

conducive to rebellion and violence. For instance, politically, the DRC's post-independence governance model has been characterised by centralised and autocratic rule, a legacy inherited from the Belgian colonial state, which prioritised administrative control over participatory governance. From Mobutu's dictatorial reign under le Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution (MPR) to the regimes of Laurent and Joseph Kabila and now Félix Tshisekedi, governance has been dominated by elite consolidation of power, repression of dissent, and systemic impunity (Kabemba, 2011 & Legal Expert Interview, Kinshasa, 2022).

This political culture has impeded the development of accountable institutions, fostered exclusion, and driven disenfranchised groups, particularly in the eastern regions, to seek redress through armed resistance (Ekyamba, 2022 & Human Rights Watch, 2019). Ethnic and regional divisions, exacerbated by colonial "divide and rule" tactics, continue to fracture national identity and impede cohesive governance (Barrera, 2015 & Irenge, 2017). Political actors often manipulate ethnic identities for electoral and military gain, perpetuating cycles of violence and deepening mistrust among communities. Economically, the Congolese state remains tethered to an extractive model of governance that prioritises elite accumulation over national development. Post-independence leaders, rather than dismantling this structure, have entrenched it, diverting revenues from mineral wealth to patronage networks and personal enrichment (Larmer et al., 2013 & United Nations Economic Commission for Africa-UN ECA, 2015). The state's failure to provide public services, employment, and infrastructure has led to widespread disillusionment and the normalisation of informal survival strategies. This "fend-for-yourself" ethos, rooted in institutional decay, has fuelled corruption, criminality, and reliance on violent economies.

Where the Congolese state fails to project authority, various armed groups occupy the power vacuum by institutionalising shadow economies driven by mineral trafficking, illicit taxation regimes, and cross-border smuggling (UN Group of Experts Report S/2017/672). Ex-combatants and youth, left without viable livelihood options, are easily recruited into these groups (Alusala, 2015). Complicating matters further, political elites with historical ties to armed networks often maintain parallel structures of control, sustaining conflict for strategic economic and political leverage, exemplified by the continued operations of M23 and its transnational backers (Chappelow, 2019 & Civil Society Interview, Bukavu, 2022). The M23 rebellion, both in its historical and contemporary manifestations, is emblematic of the DRC's broader crisis

of statehood, which has allowed foreign interests to penetrate and destabilise Congolese institutions.

Rwanda: The Principal External Aggressor through M23 Rebels

Building on the historical context presented above regarding the origins and evolution of the M23 rebel movement, this paper contends that the M23 does not authentically represent any Congolese ethnic group, contrary to prevalent narratives that associate the movement with Congolese of Rwandan origin (Rwandophones), also known as the Banyamulenge and Banyarwanda communities (Focus Group Interview with Congolese Rwandophones, Bukavu, January 2025). By demonstrating that the M23 is a mixed force of limited native Congolese combatants and a predominant contingent of Rwandan operatives, this study refutes claims that the rebellion is a purely internal Congolese movement. It contends that these operatives strategically camouflage themselves as Congolese Rwandophones to legitimise their presence and advance Rwanda's geopolitical interests in the DRC (Focus Group Interview with former warlords, Goma, January 2025). Most leaders and combatants involved in Rwanda-backed rebellions, including those of the M23, originate from Rwanda and are not Congolese nationals. Their involvement can be traced to earlier armed movements such as the AFDL, RCD-Goma, and CNDP---formations largely composed of Rwandan defense forces who entered the DRC under the pretext of supporting Congolese Rwandophone rebellions while ultimately advancing Rwanda's strategic interests.

Over time, these Rwandan actors began claiming a Congolese Rwandophone identity to legitimise their presence and objectives in the DRC. A notable example is James Kabarebe, who, after serving as a major general in the Congolese army, returned to Rwanda following a fallout with President Laurent Kabila and was subsequently appointed Rwanda's minister of defense. Other examples include Bosco Ntaganda, Laurent Nkunda, and Sultani Makenga, all of whom reflect the pattern of Rwandan nationals operating under the guise of Congolese identity (Ekyamba, 2020; 2022). Although the M23 justifies its insurgency through the rhetoric of protecting the Tutsi community and combating marginalisation, this claim becomes increasingly dubious when examined against Rwanda's overt involvement in the group's recent offensives, particularly the February 2025 capture of Goma and Bukavu---two strategic urban and economic hubs in North and South Kivu. These events have exposed the hidden geopolitical and economic agendas

underpinning Rwanda's sustained support for M23. The occupation of mineral-rich sites such as Rubaya, one of North Kivu's most prolific coltan-producing zones has highlighted the paradox wherein Rwanda and Uganda dominate international exports of these minerals without possessing such resources domestically (Former warlord, Interview, Goma, January 2025). This exploitation pattern underscores how Rwanda has instrumentalised the M23 as a vehicle to access and control Congolese mineral wealth under the guise of ethnic solidarity and regional security. While Rwanda keeps denying its involvement, evidence indicates that M23's combatants are predominantly Rwandan Tutsi nationals falsely presented as Congolese of Rwandan origin (UN Report S/2025/403 & S/2025/176). Congolese Rwandophones, represented by figures such as Cabinet Minister Alexis Gisaro Muvunyi, have publicly rejected this deception and stated that the community does not support the M23 rebels or their claims of representing ethnic interests (Interview, Kinshasa, December 2024).

The M23, therefore, functions as a de facto extension of Rwandan statecraft, strategically advancing Kigali's political and economic interests within Congolese territory (Former Minister of Rural Development, Interview, Kinshasa, December 2024). To recap, during the First and Second Congo Wars, Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda initially justified their military interventions in the DRC on grounds of national security, citing the presence of hostile rebel groups such as the FDLR (Rwanda); the ADF and LRA (Uganda); and the FNL-FDD (Burundi) operating from eastern DRC (Alusala, 2015; Burnley, 2011). However, as these conflicts ushered in mineral interests, their objectives shifted decisively from regime change and border security to the systematic exploitation of the DRC's natural resources (Focus Group Interview with Former Warlords, Goma, July 2023 corroborate this evolution of intent). Both Rwandan and Ugandan forces were implicated in the plundering of gold, coltan, cassiterite, and timber during these wars (Muraya & Ahere, 2014).

This economic motivation became particularly transparent during the Second Congo War (1998–2003), when Rwandan and Ugandan forces clashed repeatedly in the Kivu provinces over control of lucrative mining zones, each backing rival factions --- Rwanda supporting Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie - Goma (RCD-Goma) and Uganda backing Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie - Kisangani (RCD-K) and Mouvement de Libération du Congo (MLC). These intra-allied confrontations laid bare the commercial undercurrents driving regional militarism. Unlike Uganda, which tends to conceal its illicit

mineral trafficking, Rwanda has pursued multiple parallel agendas. These include territorial ambitions, political engineering within the DRC, and regional hegemony. The ongoing Rwandan support for M23 includes financial assistance, military logistics, diplomatic shielding, and direct engagement by elements of the Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF), estimated to have deployed more than 5,000 fighters alongside M23 insurgents in the current occupation of Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira (UN Experts Reports, S/2025/858; S/2024/482 & Human Rights Watch, 2025; 2023). Both the United States and the United Nations have issued formal condemnations of Rwanda's actions; notably, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called on Kigali in 2023 to end its backing of the M23 and pull back its troops to support regional peace efforts (UN Security Council Resolution 2773; the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Resolution 627; Mutambo, 2023). Nevertheless, Rwanda has shown little willingness to disengage, despite peace initiatives, including Luanda and Nairobi processes; the Washington "Accord of Principle" brokered under the Trump administration in December 2025; the Doha agreement facilitated by Qatar; and other regional actors (Beloff, 2025).

The renewed M23 offensive has not only resulted in the occupation of significant mining sites but has also triggered a humanitarian catastrophe: over 15,000 civilian deaths, mass displacement, and rising ethnic tensions, particularly between indigenous Congolese communities and Rwandophone populations (UN Group of Experts Report S/2024/482 & Human Rights Watch, 2023; 2024; 2025). This situation has revived the traumatic memories of the Congo Wars and undermined social cohesion, complicating efforts at national reconciliation and peacebuilding (CIPESA, 2023 & the United Nations, 2022). While Rwanda continues to deny any involvement in the DRC, the paper concludes by highlighting three core objectives that underpin Rwanda's sustained interference in eastern DRC. These objectives help explain the persistent reluctance of Rwanda-backed rebel movements to genuinely engage in, or faithfully uphold, peace initiatives and negotiated settlements.

First, Rwanda seeks to position Congolese Rwandophones in high-ranking political roles in the DRC, thereby facilitating Kigali's influence over the Congolese state and easing access to its mineral wealth (Political Science Professor, Interview, Bukavu, January 2025). This is part of a broader ethno-political strategy aimed at Tutsi dominance in the Great Lakes region (Nzobakenga, 2024). However, given the resistance of

native Congolese communities to such external domination, this objective has proven difficult to achieve. Second, Rwanda appears to be advancing a plan for the balkanisation of the DRC, seeking to create a separate state composed of North and South Kivu under the political control of Tutsi elites. Such a development would afford Rwanda direct access to eastern Congo's vast natural resources while weakening the DRC's territorial integrity (focus group interview, Goma, January 2025). Third, in line with irredentist rhetoric, Rwanda has periodically asserted historical claims to parts of North Kivu, implying an intention to annex sections of eastern DRC on the basis of pre-colonial territorial configurations. President Paul Kagame has publicly suggested that these areas were arbitrarily assigned to the DRC during colonial demarcation and therefore should be reclaimed (focus group interview, Bukavu, January 2025). Thus, Rwanda intends to maintain a strategy of permanent destabilisation in the DRC through proxy militias such as M23. This ongoing instability allows Rwanda to exploit Congolese mineral resources while asserting its hegemonic influence in Central Africa and the Great Lakes Region, a status it has aggressively pursued since the decline of Zaire's regional dominance under Mobutu. Rwanda's history of sabotaging peace initiatives suggests that it only supports regional frameworks when they align with its underlying strategic goals.

From AFDL through RCD-Goma and CNDP to the current M23 movement, Rwanda-backed groups have repeatedly rejected or undermined peace agreements. Even when integrated into the DRC's military and political structures, these actors often relapse into violence, demonstrating that their end goals are incompatible with the principles of national sovereignty and peaceful coexistence (Focus group interview with Okapi journalists, Kinshasa, December 2024). In light of these realities, it is increasingly evident that diplomatic negotiations alone will not suffice to bring an end to M23's rebellion or Rwanda's aggression; instead, the DRC must consider mobilising comprehensive national defense strategies to safeguard its territorial integrity by force or military means. Given its disregard for regional and international peace initiatives, this may be the only language Kigali is willing to accept

Conclusion and Recommendations

A comprehensive understanding of the protracted armed conflicts in the eastern DRC, particularly in relation to the M23 rebellion, reveals a deeply entrenched and multifaceted crisis shaped by the intersection of

internal vulnerabilities and external geopolitical manipulations. Internally, the persistence of armed conflict is driven by structural governance failures, socio-economic marginalisation, and a legacy of misguided peace strategies that have normalised the militarisation of politics. Many local groups, particularly marginalised youth, resort to violence as a means of livelihood, self-protection, or as a bargaining tool to gain access to state resources and recognition. The state's inability to assert authority, uphold the rule of law, or offer meaningful disarmament and reintegration incentives has perpetuated a security vacuum wherein armed groups flourish. Moreover, the central government's flawed conflict resolution strategies, rewarding warlords with military ranks or political appointments, have inadvertently legitimised violence as a viable path to power. These practices have institutionalised a cycle of violence, as leaders who lose access to state privileges frequently return to armed struggle to renegotiate their positions within the political and military apparatus. This dynamic is clearly exemplified by the M23 rebellion, whose resurgence is not merely the outcome of local grievances but is symptomatic of deeper systemic failings in governance, resource management, and security provision.

Compounding these internal weaknesses is the destabilising role of external actors, notably Rwanda and, to a lesser extent, Uganda. These states have repeatedly supported rebel proxies such as M23 rebels as a strategic means to access and control the DRC's vast mineral wealth, thereby exacerbating violence and impeding long-term stabilisation. The M23 rebellion, supported militarily and logistically by Rwanda, serves as a critical case study of how foreign interests exploit internal fractures for geopolitical and economic gains. By failing to effectively challenge or diplomatically isolate these aggressors, the Congolese state has allowed their actions to persist, resulting in increased forced displacement, mass atrocities, and a significant loss of state legitimacy. In light of these challenges, addressing the protracted nature of armed conflict in eastern DRC requires a two-pronged approach that integrates both domestic reforms and international repositioning.

Recommendations:

At the local level, the DRC government should address the root causes and drivers of armed conflicts internally by considering the following:

1. Strengthen Governance and Rule of Law:
- Combat Corruption: Implement robust anti-corruption measures and ensure transparency in government operations.
- Decentralisation: Empower local governments to manage resources and address local issues, thereby reducing the centralisation of power.
- Judicial Reforms: Strengthen the judicial system to ensure accountability and justice, particularly for crimes related to the conflict.

2. Economic Diversification and Development:
- Resource Management: Regulate the mining sector to prevent illegal exploitation and ensure that resource wealth benefits local communities.
- Infrastructure Development: Invest in infrastructure projects that promote economic development and connect isolated regions.
- Job Creation: Develop programmes to create employment opportunities, particularly for youth, to reduce the allure of joining armed groups.

3. Political Inclusion and Stability:
- Inclusive Dialogue: Facilitate inclusive political dialogues that involve all stakeholders, including marginalised groups and opposition parties.
- Electoral Reforms: Ensure free, fair, and transparent elections to build trust in the political process.
- Conflict Resolution Mechanisms: Establish mechanisms for peacefully resolving disputes at both local and national levels.
- Reform the army and rebuild a republican military capable of protecting the nation's territorial integrity against external aggressors such as Rwanda and Uganda. Regarding the ongoing Rwanda-backed M23 aggression, the DRC government must use all necessary measures to halt the aggression, restore order, and ensure the nation's territorial integrity.

4. At the international level, the DRC government should review its international partners and rebuild diplomatic relations with nations that promote its national interests while removing Rwanda and Uganda from its list.

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