

Atrocities Risk Assessment: Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Prevention & Protection Working Group

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Atrocities Risk Assessment: Democratic Republic of Congo

Goal of Assessment

The assessment seeks to identify the dynamics that underpin ongoing or potential atrocities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), plausible atrocity scenarios, and key indicators to monitor, as well as recommend prevention and response options for the U.S. Government.¹

Key Actors

State Actors

The Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo

The [Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo](#) (FARDC) is the state military. The FARDC works to combat militia-styled rebel groups in the country, including with the United Nations peacekeeping mission in DRC (MONUSCO), but has been implicated in [widespread violations](#) of international law, [sexual violence](#), and crimes against civilians, including [torture](#) and [arbitrary killings](#). The FARDC regularly set up [checkpoints](#) to extort civilians and inhibit humanitarian access. In May 2021, President Tshisekedi enforced a “[state of siege](#)” throughout the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri and appointed army and police officers to replace civilian government officials, directed military courts to prosecute civilians, and restricted human rights. The state of siege [persists to the present day](#), allowing the FARDC to limit political freedoms in the eastern provinces.² In its fight against the March 23 Movement (M23), a Tutsi-led armed group that opposes the DRC Government, the FARDC has also been [accused of supporting](#) armed groups that violate human rights. The FARDC has clashed with [local self-defense movements](#) and is working to prevent them from joining M23.

Rwanda and the Rwanda Defense Forces

Rwanda and its Rwanda Defense Forces (RDF) have a [strained relationship](#) with the DRC and FARDC dating back to the 1990s. Rwanda is motivated by [perceived security threats from the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda](#) (FDLR), a Hutu armed group, and alleges that the DRC [sheltered the ethnic Hutus who perpetrated the 1994 Rwandan genocide](#). Rwanda also has [financial interests](#) in eastern Congo around extractives, such as [gold and coltan](#). The DRC has [accused](#) Rwanda of meddling in its domestic affairs and supporting M23. In 1997, Rwandan forces [helped overthrow](#) the DRC’s longtime dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko. The DRC perceived M23’s predecessor, the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), as a [Rwandan proxy](#), as many of CNDP’s members fought in the Rwandan-backed group Congolese Rally for Democracy during the second Congolese War between 1998 and 2003. In [December 2022](#) and again in [June 2023](#), the UN Group of Experts confirmed the RDF is conducting armed operations within the DRC in support of M23 and against the FARDC, the

¹ The views expressed herein reflect the combined input of Prevention and Protection Working Group (PPWG) members gleaned through internal consultations and written feedback, and do not necessarily represent the official positions of any individual persons or organizations. The PPWG, coordinated by the Alliance for Peacebuilding, consists of over 275 civil society organizations and experts dedicated to atrocity prevention. For more information on the PPWG, please visit: <https://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/prevention-and-protection-working-group>.

² The eastern provinces in DRC primarily impacted by violent conflict are [North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri](#). The state of siege [applies to North Kivu and Ituri provinces](#).

FDLR, and local armed groups, which deteriorated relations between Rwanda and the DRC. The UN found Rwanda provided troop [reinforcements](#) to help M23 capture significant towns, assisted with the [recruitment](#) of new fighters, and provided [weapons](#). Rwanda continues to [deny](#) these allegations. In the summer of 2022, the African Union [appointed Angolan President João Lourenço to mediate talks between the DRC and Rwanda](#)—an ongoing process that has since become known as the Luanda Process.

Alleged Rwandan interference has been a central issue for DRC presidential candidates, with many accusing the others of “[being soft on Rwanda](#).” During a campaign event in early December, DRC President Felix Tshisekedi [compared President of Rwanda Paul Kagame to Hitler](#) and threatened he would “end up like Hitler.” Martin Fayulu, the runner-up in the 2018 elections, [advocated for the creation of additional military camps](#) to deter Rwandan interference in the DRC. Given the rhetoric from diverse candidates against Rwanda and M23, tensions are unlikely to abate. However, Rwandan intervention may temporarily cool in the lead-up to the elections, as a [72-hour ceasefire](#) between DRC and armed groups in the east was reached on December 11th with the support of the Rwandan Government. On December 14th, the U.S. [announced](#) that the ceasefire had been extended for two weeks.

Uganda and the Uganda People’s Defense Forces

The Uganda People’s Defense Forces (UPDF) fought [against the DRC and supported Rwanda](#) during the first and second Congolese wars, and [illegally invaded the DRC](#) during the latter.³ In 1999, the DRC [brought a case to the International Court of Justice](#) (ICJ) seeking reparations for “acts of intentional destruction and looting” of national property and resources. In 2005, the ICJ [ruled](#) that Uganda had violated international law by occupying regions of DRC between 1998 and 2003 and, in February 2022, [ordered Uganda](#) to pay the DRC \$325 million in reparations. Uganda [paid its first installment](#) (\$65 million) in September 2022.

In late 2021, Uganda and the DRC agreed to conduct a [joint military operation](#), [Operation Shujaa](#), in northeastern DRC against the [Allied Defense Forces](#), an ISIS affiliate with roots in Uganda. The joint operation has been [renewed](#) numerous times and the [territory of its focus expanded](#). Uganda is also part of the [East African Community Regional Force](#) (EACRF)—made up of troops from Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan, and Tanzania—which [deployed to the DRC in November 2022](#) to combat armed groups in the east. However, DRC officials and civil society [accuse](#) Uganda of supporting M23.

Uganda has additional economic, geopolitical, and security interests related to the DRC, including protecting its [oil deposits and infrastructure](#) around Lake Albert and constructing [roads linking the two countries](#). The DRC’s vast mineral wealth makes it attractive to meddling by its neighbors, with its [mining belt running along the border with Uganda and Rwanda](#). Uganda is one of the primary countries where [DRC gold](#) is smuggled for global exportation. As the election nears and potentially catalyzes violence or instability in the DRC, especially in regions bordering Uganda, Uganda may seek to exert additional control over these interests as security threats or vacuums emerge.

³ In 2002, at the end of the Second Congo War, the DRC and Uganda signed a [peace agreement](#) in which Uganda pledged to withdraw its troops.

Non-State Actors⁴

The March 23 Movement

[The March 23 Movement](#) (M23) is a Tutsi-led armed group—originally consisting of [members of the CNDP](#), a former Rwanda-backed rebel group—that operates in eastern DRC, primarily in North Kivu, in opposition to the DRC Government. In March 2009, the CNDP signed a peace agreement with the DRC Government, which included provisions to [integrate CNDP forces into the state military](#). However, [integration failed](#), resulting in the emergence of M23 in April 2012. M23 was particularly active in 2012 and 2013 in eastern DRC, at one point [taking control of Goma](#), the capital of North Kivu. In 2013, the U.S. [sanctioned Rwanda](#) for backing the M23, and the UN Security Council [authorized an offensive force](#) as part of MONUSCO to disarm and neutralize M23. These actions largely inhibited M23 [activities](#) between 2013 and November 2021. In the subsequent months, M23 reemerged with lightning strikes in North Kivu villages and seized large swaths of territory. UN and civil society investigations [linked M23’s resurgence](#) to increased capacity driven by Rwandan support.

While M23 fights against state forces in the DRC, many [other rebel groups](#), such as Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR) and Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain (APCLS), have joined the Government’s efforts in eliminating M23. In April 2022, M23 [declared a unilateral ceasefire](#), which [did not hold](#). In March 2023, M23 [pledged to the African Union mediator in Luanda that it would cease hostilities](#); during the months following this pledge, the UN [reported](#) a “fragile ceasefire” with “days pass[ing] without major clashes.” However, violence between M23, FARDC, and other militia groups [spiked in October 2023](#) after this six-month lull. As of November 2023, more than [one million](#) people in eastern DRC have been displaced because of M23.

M23 is receiving significant attention within the context of the upcoming elections. The destabilization, violence, and displacement brought on by the group’s activity in eastern DRC will [make it exceedingly challenging for many people to vote in the region](#). President Tshisekedi has [vowed](#) to “rid [the] country of the M23 terrorists” should he win re-election. Despite the announced 72-hour ceasefire on December 11th (and two-week extension), M23 [stated](#) that the ceasefire did not concern the group because M23 “had always respected” previous ceasefires and that the current one is only between the DRC and Rwanda. If the ceasefire falters and political unrest arises around the election, M23 may seek to capitalize on the instability and seize new territory or carry out additional offensives in the DRC.

Allied Democratic Forces

The Allied Defense Forces (ADF), also known as ISIS-DRC, is an [Islamist](#) militia group with [established ties to ISIS](#), which the U.S. [designated](#) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity. While initially established in 1995 as an [opposition group](#) to the Ugandan Government, the ADF now [primarily operates in eastern DRC](#) after becoming more active in the country starting in the early 2010s. Since 2021, the group significantly [increased its operations](#), and is known for carrying out [large-scale, systemic violence against civilians](#) with an [increasing focus on killing non-Muslims](#), as well as for [attacking](#) state security forces and [UN peacekeepers](#). In 2022, the ADF’s

⁴ At least [120 militias and armed groups](#) operate in the DRC’s Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, and Tanganyika provinces. This section highlights a non-exhaustive list of key armed entities that could contribute to, exacerbate, or perpetrate atrocities in the run-up to or following the December elections.

intentional targeting of civilians accounted for nearly [40% of the total estimated civilian fatalities](#) in DRC. The ADF has [taken advantage of the security vacuum resulting from clashes between M23 and the FARDC](#) to expand from North Kivu to [South Kivu and Ituri](#) and begin recruiting and planning attacks in Haut-Uélé, bolstered by financial support from ISIS. The ADF is the target of [Operation Shujaa](#), a joint military activity between Uganda and the DRC. The most recent [figures](#) on the operation from the UN Security Council, released in July 2023, noted that it had killed 424 fighters, captured 81, and rescued 115 abductees, as well as dispersed the ADF into smaller units.

Given the ADF is one of the most active armed groups in the DRC, its operations have many implications for the upcoming elections. The ADF has intensified its attacks in recent weeks as political tensions escalate. Over two days in November, the ADF carried out attacks in North Kivu and Ituri provinces that [killed 44 people](#). The group then [killed 14](#) in an additional operation in North Kivu.

Cooperative for the Development of the Congo

The Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (CODECO) is a militia group based in the Ituri province. It [began as an agricultural cooperative in the 1970s](#), but transformed into an armed coalition in 2003 and claims to represent the Lendu community in opposition to the [Hema community](#) and the [Congolesse Government](#). CODECO is known for [attacking](#) displacement camps and peacekeepers. In 2020, the larger group [fractured](#) into several factions after the death of its leader. However, it remains active in Ituri province as a broad association of Lendu militia groups, and [expanded operations in December 2022](#) by attacking civilians and the FARDC and increasing tax-collection efforts in areas it controls. CODECO has grown increasingly violent across Ituri province in recent months, killing [45 civilians](#) in a June 2023 attack on the Lala displacement camp, [15 people](#) in an August attack on a fishing camp, and [10 people](#) in Kwero village in early December. CODECO's escalating operations [pose significant risks to the ability of citizens](#) to safely and freely vote in the upcoming elections, and any widespread instability from the elections may be an opportunity for the group to increase its reach.

The Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda

The [Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda](#) (FDLR), a largely Rwandan Hutu armed group formed in 2000, remains active in the eastern provinces of the DRC. The group seeks to [overthrow the Rwandan Government](#) and often [attacks civilians](#), perpetrating murder, rape, sexual violence, recruitment of children, and extortion. Rwanda [accuses](#) the DRC of backing the FDLR, some of whose leaders [took part in the 1994 Rwandan genocide](#). The Hutu FDLR opposes the Tutsi M23, and the UN Group of Experts [confirmed](#) that the FARDC has worked with FDLR to target M23. The FDLR may seek to exploit tensions between the DRC and Rwanda amid the upcoming elections.

The Patriotic Alliance for a Free and Independent Congo

The Patriotic Alliance for a Free and Independent Congo (APCLS) is an ethnic Hunde militia group operating in northeast DRC. The group [formed in 2008](#) due to its perceived [marginalization](#) in the [Goma peace agreement](#) between the Congolese government and CNDP. APCLS [opposes M23](#) and has [fought M23s](#) alongside the FDLR and Nyatura factions. The group has [perpetrated human rights abuses](#) and [carried out ethnic violence](#) in the DRC, including the killing of Tutsi civilians. In October 2023, the group recaptured the towns of [Burungu](#) and [Kitshanga](#) in North Kivu from M23.

Private Security Companies

Private security companies within the DRC pose severe threats to the safety of citizens through the use of violence and arbitrary detention against civilians, and often operate with impunity. Today, about [100 private security firms operate in the DRC](#)—mainly to provide security for diplomatic missions, mining quarries, telecommunication companies, and businesses that safeguard valuable resources, such as banks, gas stations, and supermarkets. Between 2017 and 2020, private security guards assigned to secure mining sites operated by companies such as Boss Mining and KCC [committed](#) murder, torture, and abuse of citizens in the provinces of Haut-Katanga, Luala Haut-Katanga, and Lualaba provinces. These private security companies typically operate [without regulation or oversight](#), especially around the mining and oil industries, leading to human rights abuses in the communities in which they work. Around [1,000 Western soldiers](#) employed by two private military companies—Agemira and Congo Protection—support the Congolese army in North Kivu. Potential election-related unrest that threatens their protection orders could give rise to increased violence against civilians with little accountability.

Political Actors

President Felix Tshisekedi

President Felix Tshisekedi, [elected in December 2018](#), replaced President Joseph Kabila, who had governed for 18 years. However, questions abound regarding the [accuracy and validity](#) of the election [due to technical issues, irregularities, and delays](#) that affected over a million people. Claims that Tshisekedi won by making a deal with Kabila further [undermined the legitimacy](#) of the election. DRC’s Constitutional Court [confirmed](#) the 2018 election results and dismissed the challenge from the runner-up, Martin Fayulu. Fayulu denounced the Court’s decision as “[an electoral coup](#).” The Catholic Church, which deployed over 40,000 observers, [rejected](#) Tshisekedi’s victory, finding its results did not match the official results. However, the U.S. [accepted](#) the Court’s findings and recognized Tshisekedi as the winner.

Tshisekedi is seeking re-election in the December 2023 elections and [is the favorite due to a divided opposition](#). He has led a [crackdown on opposition opponents](#) by [arresting](#) presidential candidates and party leaders and blocking opposition political rallies and campaign efforts. In June, President Tshisekedi [rejected criticisms](#) that he is violating human rights and depriving citizens of freedoms and committed to tackling all armed threats to the stability of the country.

Thus far, President Tshisekedi has maintained that the elections will take place on December 20th, a [positive sign that he is not repeating former President Kabila’s attempts to delay elections](#). He continues to campaign across the DRC and recently led a rally in Goma where he claimed he would rid the DRC “[of the M23 terrorists, led by their leader Paul Kagame](#).”

National Independent Electoral Commission

The National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) is the purported independent electoral commission of the DRC, on which [many believe](#) that President Tshisekedi exerts undue influence, including its leader, Denis Kadima. Kadima’s appointment [did not follow the standard process](#)—a unanimous nomination by the country’s religious groups—and was pushed through parliament, which Catholic and Protestant leaders [criticized](#) as contrary to the rule of law.

CENI has faced significant backlash in the run-up to the December elections. In November 2023, U.S. Senator Chris Coons and U.S. Representative Michael McCaul sent a [letter](#) to President Tshisekedi criticizing CENI for “opacity surrounding the electoral process,” specifically the “voter registration process and budget,” and called for CENI to “publish voter registration lists as soon as possible.” The letter echoes statements from the U.S. Embassy in DRC, which, in [September](#) and [November](#), called for transparency, accountability, and “printed and online versions of the final voter registration lists [to be] accessible without delay so that all voters know where to vote on Election Day.” Opposition candidates have been vocal in their belief that [CENI is biased in favor of Tshisekedi](#), as Tshisekedi and Kadima are from the same political party, hometown, and ethnic group. The leading opposition candidates released a [joint statement](#) promising to work together to prevent manipulation and calling on CENI to take urgent action to stem fraud.

On December 5th, Kadima [wrote](#) to President Tshisekedi urgently requesting planes and helicopters to distribute voting materials to difficult-to-reach areas, signaling that CENI may not be prepared to administer the election. The same day, the Carter Center’s electoral monitoring effort published an [interim report](#) that found CENI has prioritized holding the elections within constitutional deadlines, but cited concerns such as poor transparency around voter registration and delayed replacement of unreadable voter cards. CENI also recently reported a [fire](#) that destroyed voting machines at one of its warehouses. CENI [published the voter registration list](#) in early December, but [thousands of citizens reported their names were missing](#). Actual or perceived disenfranchisement has the potential to drive election-related violence.

Moïse Katumbi

[Moïse Katumbi](#) is running in the 2023 presidential election representing the Together for the Republic party and is [seen as the main challenger to Tshisekedi](#). Katumbi is a millionaire businessman and former governor of the Katanga region. He has been accused of [real estate fraud and hiring mercenaries](#) to kill former President Kabila—Katumbi denies these allegations and claims they are politically motivated. Four opposition candidates who have dropped out of the election thus far [have endorsed him](#), and he is [considered the leading opposition candidate](#).

Dennis Mukwege

[Dennis Mukwege](#), a Nobel Peace Prize-winning gynecologist, is running in the upcoming presidential election. He is known for helping thousands of rape victims and being a strong advocate against sexual violence. Mukwege took part in the coalition pact in mid-November. He held his [first campaign rally](#) in his hometown of Bukabu on November 25th. Mukwege’s [platform](#) focuses on reducing corruption, ending famine and violence, and improving the security situation so foreign armies leave the DRC.

Martin Fayulu

[Martin Fayulu](#), a former oil executive, is President of the Engagement for Citizenship and Development Party and was the runner-up in the 2018 Presidential election, [representing a coalition of opposition groups](#). [Some](#) deem him the legitimate winner of the election. Fayulu is running again in the 2023 presidential election and is [calling for](#) greater transparency and scrutiny of the electoral process to ensure a free and fair election. Fayulu has so far [declined to join the recently created opposition coalition](#), Congo Ya Makasi. Thus far, his candidacy has [railed against the 2018 election](#), claiming it was stolen from him and urging citizens not to re-elect a “thief.”

Congo Ya Makasi

[Four of the five major opposition political parties created a coalition](#), Congo Ya Makasi (A Strong Congo), in mid-November in an effort to stop Tshisekedi from winning a second term. Opposition candidates that signed the [coalition pact](#) include Moïse Katumbi, Denis Mukwege, Matata Ponyo, and Delly Sesanga. Party leaders identified a [common platform](#) focused on security, tackling corruption, reducing the cost of living, economic growth, social issues, and environmental protection. Opposition candidates that have since dropped out, including former Prime Minister Augustin Matata Ponyo, have [coalesced in support of Moïse Katumbi](#).

Protective/Peacebuilding Processes and Actors

Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework Agreement for the DRC and the Region

In February 2013, 11 countries, including the DRC, Angola, Republic of Congo, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Central African Republic (CAR), Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Zambia, signed the [Peace, Security, and Cooperation \(PSC\) Framework Agreement for the DRC and the Region](#). Kenya and Sudan later [signed on in early 2014](#). The PSC Framework [outlines](#) national, regional, and international actions⁵ to end violence surrounding conflict in the DRC, and led to a series of summits to review progress and challenges in implementation.⁶ In October 2023, the UN Secretary-General submitted his [most recent report](#) to the Security Council on the implementation of the PSC Framework, which notes positive developments, such as establishing a peace and reconciliation commission in Mai-Ndombe Province and ongoing gatherings of the Congolese Government, UN, and civil society. While the PSC Framework has yet to achieve its goals and requires revitalized attention and coordination with related peacebuilding initiatives, it represents a crucial effort to coordinate interested stakeholders to monitor and assess the state of violence and atrocity risks in the DRC.

Nairobi and Luanda Peace Processes

Several peacebuilding processes are underway seeking to address the violence in eastern DRC. The [Nairobi Process](#), led by the East African Community (EAC), facilitates discussion on ending intra-DRC hostilities, through various means, including a ceasefire, [disarmament, rehabilitation, and reintegration of armed groups](#), and [repatriation of foreign armed fighters](#). The third and most recent round of the Nairobi Process talks [ended in December 2022](#) without a clear path forward to bring peace to the eastern region. M23 [has not participated](#) in the process due to its designation as a terrorist group by the Congolese Government. Despite Kenyatta's [April 2023 announcement](#) that the Nairobi Process would continue, [a fourth round of talks has yet to occur](#).

⁵ The PSC Framework seeks to further development and security reform in the DRC; promote respect for sovereignty; strengthen regional cooperation; and engage the UN Security Council and a UN Special Envoy for the region. The Framework established the [Regional Oversight Mechanism \(ROM\)](#) as its main oversight body, co-chaired by the UN and the AU. In March 2013, the Security Council passed [Resolution 2098](#), which welcomed the PSC Framework and called on the newly established Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region to “lead, coordinate and assess the implementation of national and regional commitments.”

⁶ In May 2023, the ROM held its [11th \(and most recent\) summit in Burundi](#) to review progress and challenges to PSC Framework implementation. [During the summit](#), leaders noted concern over DRC-Rwanda tensions, urged restraint and de-escalation, and reiterated commitment to the Luanda and Nairobi processes, emphasizing the need to include women and youth in both processes. Among other provisions, the [communiqué](#) from the summit condemned the occupation of territories in eastern DRC by foreign and armed groups, called on MONUSCO and the EACRF to better coordinate with the FARDC to pressure armed groups to disarm, and requested a technical assessment of the PSC Framework's implementation.

The [Luanda Process](#), led by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), seeks to address tensions between the DRC and Rwanda. In July 2022, the heads of state from Angola, DRC, and Rwanda [met in Luanda](#) and adopted the [Roadmap of the ICGLR on the Pacification Process in the Eastern Region of DRC](#). The agreement aims to normalize diplomatic relations between the DRC and Rwanda, cease hostilities in eastern DRC, and create the conditions for refugee return. Subsequent [convenings](#) have called for a [ceasefire](#) between M23 and FARDC and a withdrawal of armed groups from DRC territory. After [violence resurged in mid-October in violation of the ceasefire](#), numerous delegates at a December UN Security Council session [urged recommitment to the Luanda Process](#).

At the end of June 2023, the African Union [convened](#) the EAC, the Economic Community of Central African States, the ICGLR, and the Southern African Development Community. The summit adopted a [joint framework](#) to “promote coherence of the existing peace initiatives.” Despite significant challenges, these processes have the existing infrastructure to facilitate critical dialogue to anticipate, prevent, and respond to instability and atrocities in the DRC.

MONUSCO

[MONUSCO](#), the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC created from UN Security Council Resolution [1279](#) (1999), is scheduled to withdraw by December 2024, but maintains a critical protective role. In fall 2023, President Tshisekedi called for an [accelerated withdrawal](#) by the end of this year, to which MONUSCO [agreed](#) in November. The withdrawal will [begin before the end of 2023](#) and occur from South Kivu by April 30th, the central sector in North Kivu in the second half of 2024, and Ituri and the rest of North Kivu under a yet-to-be-specified timeline. Each phase would [last about four or five months](#). Although there is [significant anti-UN sentiment among citizens](#), who have criticized the mission for [failing](#) to protect them from attacks, MONUSCO is [mandated to protect civilians](#) and has set up valuable [community alert networks and local protection committees in conflict-affected areas](#). These networks could be critical in the event of increased unrest or violence leading up to and following the December elections. Despite early phases of the withdrawal coinciding with the elections, MONUSCO has a vital role in ensuring civilian safety and monitoring atrocity risks before and after ballots are cast.

The East African Community

The [East African Community](#) (EAC) is an intergovernmental organization, composed of the DRC, Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Uganda, and Tanzania, with an important protective and peacebuilding role. In 2022, EAC deployed a [Kenya-led regional security force](#) (EACRF) to help stop conflict in eastern DRC with M23. The force’s mandate expired on December 8th, after which military chiefs from member countries [agreed to a month-long withdrawal](#), aiming to leave the DRC entirely by January 8th, 2024. The force’s results have been mixed. The EACRF has engaged in military confrontation only as a [last resort](#), with [more than half of its 61 engagements](#) resulting in successful nonviolent transfer of territory from rebel groups to EACRF. However, the Congolese Government has [refused to grant permission for EACRF](#) to stay longer, as the mission has not successfully eradicated militant groups in eastern DRC, especially M23. The [many civilian protests](#) against the EACRF indicate the force’s unpopularity with the DRC populace. Political actors in the DRC, such as presidential candidate Denis Mukwege and Congolese members of parliament, have also [criticized the force as a vehicle for interference in the DRC by Rwanda and Uganda](#).

However, the EAC continues to facilitate important diplomatic and peacebuilding initiatives towards ending the conflict in eastern DRC, both independently and as the convenor of the Nairobi process.⁷ Unfortunately, the ongoing drawdown of the EACRF presents serious concerns to the security situation as armed groups position themselves to take advantage of the vacuum. After EACRF announced its departure, M23 [stated](#) it would “recover and occupy all its areas that it handed over to [the] EACRF.” This offensive would pose risks to civilians and significantly undermine the ability of citizens to vote freely and fairly in the election.

The Southern African Development Community

The [Southern African Development Community](#) (SADC)—a regional economic community of 16 member states in central and southern Africa—[announced in May 2023](#) that it would send troops to help [fight M23](#) in eastern DRC, with the goal of “restor[ing] peace and security.” The Congolese Government [turned to the SADC after frustration with EACRF](#). The SADC [convened in Luanda in early November 2023](#) to assess the mandate of the force amid the evolving security situation in the DRC. On November 17th, the SADC [signed a deal](#) with the Congolese Government to officially send troops to the region. The EACRF [stated](#) it would “be handing over security responsibilities in eastern DRC to SADC forces,” but SADC troops [have yet to enter the DRC and an arrival date remains unclear](#). The SADC mission [could potentially condone violence against M23](#) or contribute to stability if properly monitored and resourced.

The European Union

In November, the EU [deployed](#) an Election Observer Mission (EOM) for the DRC’s December 2023 elections—the [third](#) EOM mission since 2006. The EOM sought to [comprehensive analyze](#) the electoral process by meeting with election administration officials, political parties, candidates, and civil society, focusing on helping the DRC hold transparent, free elections [rather than validating election results](#). The mission was composed of [13 election experts based in Kinshasa](#) and 54 long-term and short-term observers deployed to 17 provinces. However, at the end of November 2023, the EU [canceled the mission](#) and withdrew staff in the DRC. The EU stated the [decision to cancel the mission](#) was due to “technical problems” and the inability to send personnel to certain provincial posts due to “security concerns.” However, anonymous EU officials told the media that the DRC Government [refused to authorize permits for satellite equipment](#) that the EOM needed over concerns the equipment would be used to manipulate the vote. In early December, the EU [announced](#) it would send a reduced mission of eight experts to the DRC that would work from the capital to “carry out a technical analysis of the electoral process and formally submit a report with their findings.” This reduced capacity will undermine the EOM’s efforts to build public trust in the electoral process and ensure the results are free, fair, and [devoid of violence](#).

The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church is a prominent [political and social force](#) within the DRC, with [55%](#) of the native-born population affiliating as Catholic. The Catholic Church is seen as the [strongest institution](#)

⁷ In February 2023, the EAC held a [Mini-Summit on Peace and Security in the Eastern Region of the DRC](#) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in which senior officials from the DRC, Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania, as well as AU and ICGLR representatives, reaffirmed the Luanda Roadmap and urged humanitarian assistance for those impacted by the conflict. The May 2023 21st Extra-Ordinary Summit of the EAC Heads of State concluded with a [communiqué](#) that “took progress” of the EAC-led Nairobi process, condemned ceasefire violations in eastern DRC, directed the EACRF to take measures to stop such violations, and called on all parties to de-escalate tensions. The [22nd Extra-Ordinary Summit in September 2023](#) similarly gathered updates on the Nairobi process and directed a special fund be established to implement the process.

[within DRC after the federal government](#). The Church [actively promotes democracy](#) and often serves as a [mediator](#), including during the 2016 Saint-Silvestre Peace Accord. The Church also organized an election monitoring team of [40,000 monitors](#) for the 2018 elections. The official results [did not match](#) those [observed](#) by the Church.⁸ The Catholic Church is again [organizing a monitoring mission for the upcoming elections](#)—stationing at least [600 observers around the DRC](#)—and has successfully [advocated for CENI to publish the voter registration list](#) and [revisions to CENI’s inaccurate mapping of polling stations](#). In early December, Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, Archbishop of Kinshasa, [stated](#) he had “no certainty that the elections will be free, inclusive, transparent and peaceful.” The Church continues to have the ability to convene and mobilize a large portion of the DRC’s population, evidenced by its organization of [nationwide peace rallies](#) at the end of 2022.

Targeted Groups

Civilians

Various armed groups and FARDC [regularly commit](#) widespread abuses against civilians, with some violations potentially amounting to crimes against humanity and war crimes. In 2022, over [1,800 civilians](#) were killed in eastern DRC. The violence against civilians often takes place via ethnically motivated and [inter-communal attacks](#).⁹ The country [contains](#) 6.9 million internally displaced people, 5.6 million of whom are from the war-torn provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri, and Tanganyika. The overall displaced population has likely increased significantly in recent months as violence escalated in eastern DRC; in the six weeks between the middle of October and the end of November, violent conflict between armed groups and the FARDC forcibly displaced [more than 450,000 people](#) in the Rutshuru and Masisi territories in North Kivu province alone.

Women and Girls

The DRC is [one of the most dangerous places for women and children in the world](#) due to poor maternal and child health and high rates of sexual and gender-based violence. It ranks a staggering [174 out of the 177 countries](#) in terms of women’s inclusion, justice, and security in the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Index, produced by the Georgetown Institute for WPS, due to high levels of sexual and gender-based violence, political violence targeting women, and high levels of maternal mortality. More than half of women in DRC are [survivors of domestic violence](#). Reported cases of gender-based violence doubled between 2021 and 2022 [from 40,000 to more than 80,000](#), with [more than 31,000 incidents recorded in the first quarter of 2023](#). Women and girls have long been the target of [conflict-related sexual violence \(CRSV\) by all groups](#), including the [FARDC](#). Of the 10,000 people who accessed gender-based violence services in North Kivu in the first quarter of 2023, for instance, [66% were rape cases](#)—most perpetrated by armed forces. In 2021 and 2022, the DRC had the [highest number in the world](#) of verified cases of sexual violence against children committed by armed forces and armed groups. As of September 2023, verified rapes and other forms of sexual violence against children increased by [40%](#) compared to the previous year. Sexual violence often intersects with ethnic divisions, such as [sexual violence against Hema women in Ituri](#) and rape as a result of [clashes between ethnically motivated groups](#) like M23 and

⁸ The [Carter Center](#) worked with the National Episcopal Conference of the Congo of the Catholic Church (CENCO) as an in-house advisory group during the 2018 election. Their analysis of the election results that [eventually went public](#) were crucial in bringing international attention to discrepancies between the results analyzed by outside observers and by CENI.

⁹ For more information on inter-communal violence in the DRC, see “social fragmentation” under risk factors.

FDLR. Women and girls often make up a majority of residents at displacement camps, where the camp environment leaves them [vulnerable to assault and abuse](#). Displaced women and girls have also [been forced to turn to survival sex work](#) to feed themselves and their families.

Risk and Resilience Factors

Risk Factors

Governance

Good governance in the DRC is undermined by [widespread corruption and weak political systems](#). The Government struggles to deliver basic services such as [education](#), [healthcare](#), and [infrastructure](#), especially in [rural regions](#). Furthermore, the DRC ranks [138th of the 142 countries](#) assessed in the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index due to a [dysfunctional criminal justice system](#),¹⁰ [poor accountability and nepotism](#), [lack of government transparency](#), [unlawful behavior by security forces](#), and [poor regulatory enforcement](#). Armed groups are [exploiting the absence or weakness of state authority](#) in eastern DRC to perpetrate attacks against civilians. The DRC suffers from [widespread impunity](#) regarding violence towards civilians by armed groups. Despite government [claims](#) it has “taken actions to protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms,” [continued obstruction of the right to peaceful assembly](#) and threats against [opposition leaders](#), [journalists](#), and [human rights defenders](#) persist.

The [mineral extraction industry](#) further exacerbates the DRC’s governance problem. Armed groups have proliferated by [profiting](#) from the mining and trade of conflict minerals such as tin, gold, and cobalt, which often requires miners to operate in “[slave-like conditions](#).” At the same time, the [fight for control of these profitable resources](#) is fueling conflict and corruption. In June 2022, Congolese Government auditors found that the national treasury [could not locate \\$400 million](#) that mining company Gécamine had supposedly paid in tax advances and loans. Israeli businessman Dan Gertler, [who had multiple deals with Gécamine](#), [embezzled \\$3.7 billion of state funds](#) via contracts approved by former DRC President Joseph Kabila. Gertler’s company agreed to return billions of the funding to the DRC Government in a [February 2022 settlement](#), which civil society [criticized](#) for its lack of transparency and partiality to Gertler. [Suggested sanctions relief](#) for Gertler from the U.S. Government would further undermine accountability in the DRC.

Governance has become a central issue in the current presidential campaign, with Martin Fayulu [promising to root out Tshisekedi’s corruption](#) and Moise Katumbi [vowing](#) to “consolidate democracy” and “fight corruption.” Tshisekedi [dismisses these criticisms](#), claiming [successes in anti-corruption](#), such as by fighting embezzlement and mismanagement through appointment of a General Inspectorate of Finance.

Conflict History and Impunity

The First Congo War (1996—1997): Nearly [two million Hutu refugees](#) crossed the Congolese border along South Kivu and North Kivu provinces following the Rwandan genocide, including some Hutu extremists who formed militias. In late 1996, Paul Kagame and the Rwandan Patriotic Front

¹⁰ Military courts have [more jurisdiction over serious crimes than civilian courts](#), although the August 2023 conviction by a civil court in Kasai-Central of a militiaman for crimes against humanity, which used a mobile court to allow justice in a rural area, shows some positive developments.

(RPF)-backed Tutsi militias [invaded the DRC](#) (then Zaire), which was ruled by dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Zaire's then-opposition leader Laurent Kabila coordinated the invasion. Mobutu [fled in 1997](#), and Kabila [became president](#) and changed the country's name back to the DRC.

The Second Congo War (1998-2002): Relations between Kagame and Kabila quickly [deteriorated](#). Kabila [ordered all foreign troops out of the DRC](#) and allowed Hutu armed groups to organize along the border, leading to DRC's [invasion by Rwanda and Uganda](#) in August 1998. After Laurent Kabila was [assassinated](#) in 2001, his son, Joseph Kabila, [took power](#). In July 2002, Joseph Kabila and Kagame signed the [Pretoria Agreement](#), brokered by South Africa and the UN, in which Rwanda committed to withdrawing its troops from eastern DRC and Kabila promised to disarm and repatriate Rwandan Hutu fighters to Rwanda so they could stand trial. In September 2002, the DRC and Uganda signed a [separate peace agreement](#) wherein Uganda agreed to remove its troops from the DRC and the DRC agreed to take part in a Pacification Commission alongside Uganda. Finally, in December 2002, the DRC and major domestic rebel groups signed a [comprehensive power-sharing agreement](#).

The agreement also led to the creation of the [2003 - 2007 Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) (TRC). The TRC sought to establish "[national unity through true reconciliation between the Congolese people](#)." Civil society [lobbied for the TRC](#), but later criticized its lack of independence and failure to coordinate a public awareness campaign, resulting in limited participation of victims, witnesses, and perpetrators. International observers also [condemned](#) the lack of political will, accountability mechanisms, and resources for the commission. Ultimately, the TRC [failed](#) to provide adequate redress for victims or recommendations on rehabilitation, needed reforms, or amnesty efforts.

Conflict with M23: The early 2000s saw the [emergence](#) of M23, which exacerbated diplomatic tensions between the DRC and Rwanda. A series of peace agreements were reached in 2013, including the [February 2013 PSC Framework](#) between 11 countries in the region and a [December 2013 joint communique](#) between the Congolese Government and M23, mediated by Uganda. Unfortunately, the DRC Government and UN [prioritized the military provisions of these agreements](#), such as demobilization and security sector reform, ignoring the justice, accountability, and reconciliation components.

The lack of political will and scale of abuses stemming from the first and second Congo wars and ongoing conflict with M23 continue to hinder justice and accountability efforts. The resulting impunity and lack of reconciliation have done little to provide redress to victims and restore inter-communal relations.

Economic Conditions

DRC is [one of the five poorest countries in the world](#), with nearly 62% of Congolese living on less than \$2.15 a day in 2022. Security challenges posed by numerous armed groups' activities in eastern DRC are exacerbating a [dire humanitarian crisis](#). [6.9 million people](#) are currently displaced in the country, and the UN estimates [more than 26 million people required humanitarian assistance](#). M23 [controls key transport roads in the DRC](#), often causing supply disruptions, price increases, and adverse economic impacts.

The [DRC has some of the largest reserves of rare earth metals](#) commonly used in electronics, including cobalt, copper, and zinc. In 2020, the [DRC was the world's largest cobalt miner](#). In 2022, the DRC was the [fourth largest producer of diamonds](#), totaling 12% of global production. The U.S. imports roughly [four](#)

[million dollars](#) of precious metals and stones from the DRC annually and China imports [seven billion dollars](#) in Congolese metals alone. Critical minerals are an ongoing driver of conflict between various armed groups, the DRC Government, and competing outside interests. While some actors in the DRC clash [over control of such minerals](#), these resources also [provide economic opportunities that finance the armed groups](#). Finally, weak governance and corruption undermine the implementation of mining regulations and protocols, and [contribute to insecurity and violence in mining zones](#).

Social Fragmentation

Unaddressed [inter-communal tensions and rivalries](#), [disinformation](#), and the [politicization of identity](#) continue to undermine social cohesion within the DRC and foment violence. A long-standing [contentious relationship](#) exists between Hutus and Tutsis (and other “Rwandophone” ethnicities of Rwandan origin). Groups on both sides have long instigated violence based on ethnic grounds, such as [Tutsi M23](#) and the [Hutu FDLR](#).

Western DRC has seen an increase in inter-communal violence since June 2022 between [“native” and “non-native” communities](#). The “non-native” group consists mainly of Yaka, while the “native” are Teke. Violence between the Yaka and Teke has resulted in at least [3,000 civilians](#) killed [between June 2022 and June 2023](#). In July 2023, confrontations over customary taxes on agricultural land use between the Teke and Yaka communities in western DRC [killed more than 142 people and displaced an additional 27,000](#). A persistent [lack of accountability for perpetrators and an absence of durable solutions](#) regarding disagreements over customary taxes continues to deepen mistrust and risks of further atrocities.

In the Ituri Province of northeast DRC, frequent conflict between the [Lendu farmers and Hema herders](#), which [fought against each other](#) during the Second Congolese War, persists over control of the land.¹¹ [Armed conflict between the two communities has resurged in recent years](#), displacing [1.7 million people](#) across Ituri province. CODECO, which claims to represent the Lendu community, has [perpetrated targeted attacks](#) on civilians looking for refuge at displacement sites/camps in eastern DRC.

In the Bas-Uélé and Haut-Uélé provinces in northeastern DRC, community-based early warning systems documented [86 incidents](#) of violence between ethnic Peuhl pastoralists and non-Peuhl Congolese, largely driven by agro-pastoral conflict, from January 2018 to December 2021. Between November 2022 and November 2023, [34 civilian abductions and two civilian fatalities](#) occurred between the groups. Continued [structural exclusion and marginalization of groups based on ethnicity](#) will lead to power imbalances that exacerbate conflict and put certain civilians at disproportionate risk of violence.

Resilience Factors

Current Ceasefire

On December 11th, the U.S. [welcomed](#) a 72-hour ceasefire between the Congolese Government and armed groups, supported by the Rwandan Government. On December 14th, the U.S. [announced](#) that the ceasefire had been extended for two weeks and was “broadly” adhered to during the initial phase.

¹¹ The region saw relative peace after 2003 upon the establishment of the [Ituri Pacification Committee](#), which convened Lendu and Hema militias, the DRC Government, Uganda, and Angola to reach a ceasefire. The ceasefire laid the foundation for the [Ituri Interim Administration](#), which achieved peace for nearly 15 years through local councils that managed disputes and arbitrated land claims. Violence [returned in December 2017](#) with a series of confrontations between Hema and Lendu youths.

However, M23 [asserted](#) that the ceasefire only applies to Rwanda and the DRC. However, the ceasefire—should it continue to hold—represents a positive development in preventing and reducing violence amid voting and ballot tabulation for the upcoming elections and may increase the ability of Congolese citizens to vote safely.

Civil Society

Today, an estimated [4,000 civil society organizations](#) (CSOs) operate in DRC. CSOs create space for dialogue between communities and the government and promote transparency and accountability in participatory processes, such as elections. For instance, CSOs in Ituri province [promote grassroots peacebuilding approaches](#) by: organizing local *Baranzas* wherein communities debate issues of common concern; providing support to victims of gender-based violence; and promoting interethnic understanding and dialogue. [In North and South Kivu](#), women and youth-led civil society groups advance women's and youth rights and societal participation, support community development, build communities' capacity in conflict transformation, and advocate for the protection of civilians during armed conflict. Civil society has been crucial in advocating for [electoral fairness and transparency](#).

Furthermore, fact-checkers and journalists in the DRC play an vital role in ensuring credible information reaches a wide variety of people to counter the [widespread online disinformation and hate speech](#) that often [drives conflict in the DRC](#). Social media sites like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) serve as spaces for rampant online abuse. Given the vast size of the DRC, which can delay fact-checking, [some local actors](#) combine fact-checking with media campaigns to broadcast the correct information at greater scale. The [information resilience](#) of fact-checkers helps counter disinformation and hate speech that continues to polarize ethnic communities across the country.

The [March 2022 declaration](#) in which DRC civil society pledged to serve as “guardians” that monitored the legitimacy of the upcoming elections suggests that civil society will repeat its pivotal role in demanding democratic accountability and transparency, [as it did during the 2018 election](#). The Coalition Support Project for the National Observation of Elections in Congo (PACONEC), funded by the EU and the Foreign Ministry of Germany, is [supporting four local CSOs'](#) electoral observation efforts. Overall, civil society will remain a crucial agent and entry point for de-escalating violence in the DRC and achieving political transparency and accountability.

Exhaustion with Cycles of Violence

Civilians regularly express that they are “[tired of this war](#),” as they face continued displacement and violence. This desire for change by the population can be channeled toward interventions that anticipate, prevent, and respond to violence and further atrocities in the DRC. Civilians in eastern DRC have [engaged with early warning alert and response systems](#) to share information on possible attacks and evidence of gender-based violence and other abuses with civil protection units and authorities. Despite facing significant obstacles, CSOs remain active and are often best [positioned to contribute to violence prevention, including the protection of civilians](#), due to their presence within affected communities.

Relationship with the International Criminal Court

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has been [investigating alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity](#) since the DRC Government referred the situation to the Court in 2004 (with jurisdiction back to

2002). Since then, the ICC has convicted three former militia leaders (and acquitted one individual) for their role in atrocities. In early June 2023, the Prosecutor of the ICC signed a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MoU) with the DRC Minister of Justice to build the capacity of national accountability institutions, jointly map cases the DRC Government or ICC may prosecute, deploy forensic experts to help collect evidence, and share best practices on evidence collection and preservation. Later that month, the [DRC Government submitted a new referral to the ICC requesting the Court investigate alleged crimes](#) committed in North Kivu since January 2022. In July 2023, the ICC [delivered a \\$31.3 million reparations order](#) in its case against former rebel leader Bosco Ntaganda. In November 2023, the ICC Deputy Prosecutor visited the DRC to discuss implementation of the MoU and noted “[the opening of a significant number of cases and convictions](#).” These commitments and initiatives are likely to provide the DRC Government and affected communities with increased capacity, resources, and international legitimacy in efforts to both hold perpetrators of violence accountable and deter future atrocities and abuses.

Relationship with the International Court of Justice

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled [Uganda violated international norms as an occupying force in DRC](#) between 1998 and 2003. The Court found Uganda responsible for the deaths of 10,000-15,000 people in eastern Ituri. Ugandan troops were also found to have looted gold, diamonds, and timber. While the DRC [requested](#) \$13 billion dollars in reparations, Uganda was ordered to pay \$325 million. In September 2023, the DRC Government [received the first of five payment installments](#). Significantly, the ruling may act as a deterrent for future interference and violence by Uganda in the DRC, which will be particularly relevant given Uganda’s involvement in the EAC.

Mobile Gender Courts

Since 2008, temporary, [mobile courts](#) have been conducting military and civilian trials for sexual and gender-based violence in remote areas.¹² These mobile courts represent a unique [effort to address impunity for sexual violence](#), which remains under-investigated and prosecuted. The mobile courts are [efficient, relatively inexpensive, and offer a local alternative to international justice mechanisms](#), and empower women to seek services from hospitals and the police. In addition to bringing justice and accountability for everyday sexual and gender-based violence, the mobile courts also [complement](#) the higher-level court proceedings of the ICC and have advanced the [legal recognition](#) of certain gender-based crimes and forms of harm.

Impact of Gender¹³

Women and girls are facing exploitation, violence, and sexual abuse, with [35,000 cases of sexual violence reported between January and June 2023](#), including undesired pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases,

¹² The American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative has been working with MONUSCO and Congolese and international non-governmental organizations to conduct proceedings through the mobile courts.

¹³ In 2018, DRC adopted a [National Action Plan](#) (NAP) for 2019-2022 to advance the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda. The NAP outlined 11 objectives to increase women’s inclusion in decision-making, protect and prevent violations of the rights of women and girls during and after armed conflict, and empower women in post-conflict recovery. Among other activities, the NAP [aims](#) to promote gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping operations and security sector reforms, build the capacity of female leaders in peace processes, and support women’s participation in post-conflict humanitarian settings, all in partnership with local actors. While the NAP has achieved some successes for the status of women and girls in the DRC, such as [bringing women into community early warning mechanisms and establishing provincial WPS secretariats](#), it lacked comprehensive impact due to [weak budgetary commitments](#).

as well as gender-based and domestic violence. From June to August 2023, the number of [documented cases of CRSV affected at least 199 women](#). The actual number is likely much higher, as cases are underreported due to access issues, fear of reprisals, and stigma among victims. Child marriage also remains widespread, [exacerbated by extreme poverty and forced displacement](#). In the DRC, [29% of girls](#) are married before their 18th birthday, and 8% are married before the age of 15. In June 2023, the [United Kingdom imposed sanctions on two militia leaders](#) for carrying out acts of sexual violence, including authorizing the systematic rape of civilians. In December 2023, the U.S., referencing the U.S. [Memorandum on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#), [announced sanctions](#) against three senior leaders of armed groups in the DRC for “contributing to ongoing stability” in the DRC, including through sexual and gender-based violence. Towards domestic accountability, the DRC Government adopted a draft decree earlier this year requiring [11 percent of mining royalties to be paid into a national fund for reparations](#) for victims of CRSV and other crimes.

As CRSV escalated over the last year, civil society advocates [briefed](#) the UN Security Council, urging women’s participation in the Luanda and Nairobi processes, prevention programming, and resourcing of national reparations for victims. Although the [DRC Constitution](#) enshrines gender equality and recent [electoral legal reform](#) created incentives to encourage women's political participation, [women only occupy 7.2% of positions](#) at the highest levels of parliament and government.

LGBTQ+ individuals are often [marginalized and forced to hide their sexual orientation](#). There is [no legal recognition](#) of same-sex marriage and [no anti-discrimination laws](#) protecting LGBTQ+ in the DRC. Despite sexual orientation not being overtly illegal, there have been cases where the Penal Code, which criminalizes “acts against public decency,” has been [used as the legal basis](#) to prosecute LGBTQ+ persons.

Overall, women and girls are key leaders and stakeholders in promoting peace and political dialogue in the DRC. For instance, in the North Kivu and South Kivu provinces, local women [lead participatory decision-making processes](#) in Local Peace and Development Committees to mediate disputes. Women peacebuilders in the DRC also [mediate dialogue between armed forces and communities and monitor human rights violations](#). The inclusion of women in political and peace processes remains crucial to ensuring lasting peace and reducing violent conflict in the DRC.

Accelerants and Triggers

Election-Related Violence and Disenfranchisement

The 2018 elections were marred by [voter exclusion](#), [delays](#), [claims of fraud](#), and [violence](#) against demonstrators protesting the postponements and [opposition rallies](#). [Independent analysis](#) of polling data indicated that opposition candidate Martin Fayulu likely won the election. However, the Constitutional Court [affirmed](#) Felix Tshisekedi’s win. Mistrust from previous elections could lead to low voter turnout and undermine the legitimacy of the results.

Throughout 2022, [3,036 instances of political violence](#) occurred in the DRC—1,380 of which were against civilians. Election-related violence, specifically, began in late 2022 when M23 rebels raided electoral offices in Rutshuru. In April 2023, the Mai-Mai Yira militia [attacked a voter registration office](#)

in North Kivu. Leaders of opposition political parties [have been targeted by state forces](#) since spring, including through arrests and movement restrictions. In May, a top adviser of Moïse Katumbi was [arrested and charged with treason](#). In July, Chérubin Okende, a member of parliament and spokesman for Katumbi's party, was [found shot dead](#). In September, a high court in the DRC [sentenced presidential candidate Jean-Marc Kabund to seven years in prison](#) on 12 charges, including spreading false rumors and insulting the head of state. The Congolese police have also [violently cracked down](#) on peaceful demonstrations by opposing parties and [civilian protests against irregularities in voter registration](#).

Furthermore, the nearly [6.9 million displaced people](#) in the DRC—5.6 million of whom reside in the eastern provinces—will likely struggle to participate in the upcoming elections. [Around a million people](#) in the DRC have not been able to register to vote due to the violent conflict. Certain ethnic groups, such as Banyamulenge–Congolese Tutsi, have faced [violent intimidation when attempting to register to vote](#). Many youth in the west and North Kivu have also not had the chance to register to vote, which could result in mass feelings of electoral disenfranchisement.

Citizens may not have full confidence in the government's technical preparation for the elections. Assani Kizunguruka, a member of the former ruling party, has raised concerns that [“the existing political climate does not promote free, fair and credible elections.”](#) The cycles of violence and disillusionment have the potential to [dissuade citizens from participating in the upcoming elections](#). Election results deemed illegitimate or outright defrauded by the populace, civil society groups, and international actors could lead to violence in the streets of major cities. Police and military forces may meet or prevent demonstrations. The west, Katanga, and the Kivus have strong potential for protests that could face repression by the government. Concerns also remain around potential violence against CENI workers, given perceptions about its bias. The state of siege [risks excluding citizens from fully participating in the election process](#) by banning opposition rallies and arresting civil society organizers. The state of siege has already been a [flashpoint](#) in eastern DRC, and tensions could heighten if it escalates surrounding the elections.

As of early December, [22 candidates](#) are running for president. CENI has called on the [candidates to respect the laws and good electoral practices](#) during the 30-day campaign. Candidates have tried to influence this process, including through an unsuccessful [lawsuit to exclude candidate Mosie Katumbi](#), who is popular in eastern DRC. [Potential violence will likely be focused in places of political strongholds](#), particularly if the election is close or contested as it was in 2018. As of December 13th, [more than 30 incidents](#) of targeted violence against electoral officials, polling stations, CENI leadership, and 10 different political parties have taken place, compared to 24 during the 2018 election period. During a December briefing to the UN Security Council, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in the DRC [noted](#) “violent clashes between rival political parties' supporters in many provinces and intimidation against women candidates.” On December 13th, Moïse Katumbi [suspended parts of his campaign schedule](#) after violence broke out at a rally in Kongo Central Province. The Congolese government has [stated](#) that voting will be impossible in Rutshuru and Masisi territories of North Kivu due to ongoing conflict between the FARDC and armed groups.

Postponed or Cancelled Elections

The [potential postponement or cancellation of the upcoming elections](#) could heighten disillusionment of the promise of democracy and peace, drive mistrust of the government, and increase the legitimacy of and

support for armed groups and resistance. Protests against the postponement or cancellation of the election could result in retaliatory violence against protestors, [as seen earlier this year in response to anti-UN protests](#). Armed groups could seek to capitalize on an increase in [military-civilian violence](#) and foment additional unrest and displacement and [fuel further clashes](#) with government forces. The FARDC may also use its increased military operations against armed rebel groups—or escalation of violence in general—to justify postponement or cancellation of the election in certain parts of the country.

Closing Civic Space

Recent laws and government action are shrinking civic space. Civilians face violence and arrest for protesting. In May 2023, [clashes with anti-government protesters](#) demonstrating over alleged irregularities in voter registration broke out and security forces detained at least a dozen protesters. An August 2023 crackdown on a protest in Goma against the presence of UN peacekeepers and other foreign forces killed [at least 56 civilians](#).

Furthermore, [new press laws](#) enacted in April subject journalists to prosecution for sharing information deemed “false” and are creating a chilling effect on open media discussions of political developments and the election. Prominent Congolese journalist Stanis Bujakera was [arrested](#) in September 2023 on suspicion of spreading false information about the killing of Chérubin Okende in an [article](#) published on the *Jeune Afrique* website. The article, which did not name Bujakera as an author, discussed a confidential note by the National Intelligence Agency regarding the circumstances surrounding the death of Okende. In October 2023, the high court in Kinshasa-Gombe [rejected a request](#) to release Bujakera from detention. Activists and press freedom groups have [denounced his detention, called for his release, and asked for a halt to attacks against the press](#).

Widespread Mis/Dis/Malinformation

The DRC faces a [massive influx of disinformation](#) that is destabilizing its security and political situation. Online spaces in the DRC [amplify](#) hate speech and inaccurate or misleading information coming from and about various actors, including diaspora communities, armed groups, and political figures. [Fake accounts on social media](#) carry out coordinated messaging in support of violence perpetrated by M23 and railing against the FARDC, while [hate speech against Kinyarwanda speakers circulates online](#) amid accusations surrounding Rwanda’s support for M23. Disinformation originating from armed groups also often [targets MONUSCO](#) to undermine community trust in the mission. The DRC also suffers from [low levels of digital literacy](#), making the population more susceptible to online disinformation. A lack of information and transparency issues surrounding the elections—driven and exacerbated by this destabilizing information environment—could result in uncertainty and unrest. In particular, transparency will be critically needed from CENI, which is already viewed as [biased toward the ruling party](#), to prevent boycotts or election-related violence.

MONUSCO Drawdown

The drawdown is officially in motion after MONUSCO [signed a withdrawal plan](#) with the Congolese Government in November 2023. Given [anti-MONUSCO sentiment](#) among many civilians, extended operations could result in protests and unrest. The initial phase of the withdrawal will take place in Ituri province, where the mission protects between 50,000 and 70,000 displaced people, and could lead to [a security vacuum that jeopardizes the protection of civilians](#) as the elections take place. In eastern DRC,

civilian defense-style groups, called [Wazalendo groups](#), have emerged in response to increasing violent attacks. Civilian populations are demonstrating they are ready to engage in violence to protect themselves in instances of security vacuums, with [some support from the government](#).

Spillover of Conflict from the Central African Republic (CAR)

Since March 2023, fighting between the Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique (UPC), which recruits ethnic Peuhl, and the Azande Ani Kpi Gbe (AAKG), which recruits ethnic Azande, has [escalated significantly](#) in eastern CAR. This fighting has forced [thousands](#) of Central Africans to flee across the border to the Uélé provinces in northeastern DRC and [exacerbated existing inter-communal tensions](#). The UPC has also [increased its operations in Zangba Sub-Prefecture](#) in Basse Kotto, which borders the DRC and is a strategic area for trade in weapons and ammunition with the DRC. As of November 2023, the conflict in the CAR has created nearly 800,000 refugees, of which the DRC hosts [27%](#). These refugee populations can [exert pressure on and strain the resources of](#) host communities in the DRC, in turn [leading to conflict](#). Additionally, both the UPC and AAKG could start recruiting more heavily from Peuhl and Azande communities in DRC to open up a new front to the conflict.

Plausible Atrocity Scenarios

Demonstrations and Retaliatory Violence Related to Election Administration

Previous [flaws in voter registration collection](#) and difficulty in election administration due to the security situation in the DRC have created concerns over a free and fair election. In early November 2023, a [CENI delegation traveled](#) to South Korea to visit Miru Systems, the company responsible for printing ballots and manufacturing voting machines. During the trip, CENI Chairman Denis Kadima [stated](#) the electronic voting devices and paper ballots had been manufactured and CENI was prepared to distribute the election materials throughout the DRC. However, in early December, CENI [reported](#) that a fire had broken out in one of its warehouses in Mai-Ndombe province, destroying hundreds of voting machines to be used in the upcoming elections. Voters in the DRC have also [reported](#) issues with voter registration cards becoming illegible and needing replacement shortly before the election. Voting in regions of the DRC severely impacted by armed conflict, such as Masisi and Rutshuru in North Kivu Province, [will be nearly impossible](#). The EU's decision to withdraw its EOM and the [DRC Government's restrictions on the use of electronics](#) could weaken the legitimacy of election results, leading to disenfranchisement and grievances within the DRC population. Should any of these factors undermine the people of DRC's faith in the electoral process, facilitate electoral fraud, or contribute to grievances of armed groups or retaliatory violence by state forces, the DRC will face exacerbated atrocity risks.

Demonstrations and Retaliatory Violence in Kinshasa

In May 2023, a peaceful protest in Kinshasa organized by a coalition of opposition political parties was [violently repressed by police](#), leading to dozens of arrests and injuries. President Tshisekedi commended the police officers for handling the demonstration with zero deaths, raising concerns that a [government official is encouraging excessive use of force](#) by police. Given the precedent and praise, future protests could be handled in similar ways, leading to violence against civilians and heightened atrocity risks.

Demonstrations and Retaliatory Violence in the Eastern Provinces

Continued violence in eastern DRC has led to [more than one million citizens without voter cards](#), and concerns abound that voter exclusion may lead to disputed results and violence. In August, [dozens of civilians were shot and arrested](#) in Goma by DRC forces during demonstrations. Similar and scaled responses to potential protests over the elections could give rise to atrocities.

MONUSCO and EACRF Drawdowns and the Resultant Security Vacuum

The upcoming MONUSCO drawdown and ongoing EACRF withdrawal present significant risks of a security vacuum in eastern DRC that could endanger innocent civilians, allow armed groups and repressive force by the DRC Government to flourish, and embolden external and bad actors. Without robust monitoring of the situation, a clear understanding of the atrocity risks on the ground will become more difficult, and bad actors will more easily be able to pursue their interests using dangerous means.

Recommendations

The U.S. Government should:

- **Spearhead and amplify diplomatic messaging focused around atrocity prevention**
 - Bilateral diplomacy with the DRC and with armed groups:
 - Call on M23 and the FARDC to respect the March 2023 and December 11th/14th ceasefires.
 - Urge all armed actors to protect women and girls and other marginalized groups.
 - Condemn the FARDC's joint efforts with other armed groups against M23 that have or do contribute to human rights violations and violence against civilians.
 - Urge the DRC Government to respect and protect the freedoms of expression and assembly for civil society, including for political opposition leaders and supporters.
 - Publicly condemn ongoing and potential future attacks on freedoms of expression and assembly and other fundamental rights as soon as they happen.
 - Regional diplomacy:
 - Urge the withdrawal of Rwandan troops from the DRC that are working in bad faith with M23 to carry out violence in the country and accountability..
 - Call on Uganda and Rwanda to refrain from supporting any armed groups within the DRC that are contributing to violence and instability.
 - Urge the humane repatriation of foreign fighters within the DRC to their home countries.
 - International/multilateral diplomacy:
 - Pressure all regional and multilateral stakeholders—including the ICGLR, the EAC, the AU, the SADC, MONUSCO, and the UN Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes—to utilize all available diplomatic means to de-escalate violence, promote dialogue and mediation, and ensure protection of human rights and adherence to international humanitarian law.

- Impose sanctions in line with the [Presidential Memorandum on Promoting Accountability for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#).
- Urge the Congolese Government to implement the Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Recovery, and Stabilization (DDRCS) program, provide financial, technical and logistical assistance, and support the institution of credible leadership.
- Encourage the DRC Government to coordinate with the CAR to reduce armed group activity and related inter-communal tensions along their shared eastern border.

The Atrocity Prevention Task Force, in particular, should:

- Share with civil society the priorities for civilian protection, broken down by scenario, to allow for contingency planning and quick adaptive response.
- Map out actors and influencers who can provide early warning and de-escalate conflicts and ensure that resources are available to be quickly disseminated to them should violence escalate.
- Meet with other embassies and share analysis and priorities for civilian protection for various election scenarios, as well as determine thresholds and redlines for joint diplomatic engagement.
- Share guidance and engage with implementing partners in the DRC about how to adapt or maintain programming in areas at high risk of violence.
- Create a list of high-risk areas and implement situation planning/joint messaging with other embassies.
- Channel resources to digital de-escalators—frontline influencers who are working to dismantle mis/disinformation and de-escalate violent discourse around the elections and calls for political violence.
- Engage local-level governance to build relationships and trust given the context-specific nature of the conflict and varying local political dynamics across the country.