

THE GREAT LAKES REGION

**Regional  
solutions  
to regional  
problems ?**

## **INSECURE LIVELIHOODS SERIES**

The Insecure Livelihoods Series publishes independent and field-driven information and analysis on the complexity of conflict and security in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its reports are based on independent, non-partisan and collaborative research.

## **CONFLICT RESEARCH GROUP (CRG)**

Director: Koen Vlassenroot

## **GOVERNANCE IN CONFLICT NETWORK (GIC)**

Coordinator: Tomas van Acker

[www.gicnetwork.be](http://www.gicnetwork.be)

## **PUBLISHING**

Copy-editing: Natalie Domaas

Designer: Marie Wynants, [achttien.eu](http://achttien.eu)

© Governance in Conflict Network,  
Ghent University, Belgium. 2023



**THE GREAT LAKES REGION**

# **Regional solutions to regional problems ?**



# Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of the regional trends and dynamics affecting the current crisis in Eastern DRC. Regional efforts in addressing the crisis are at an all-time high and include prominent roles for the region's major organizations: the EAC, SADC, ICGLR and increasingly the AU. However, these regional interventions have not yet brought any tangible positive result. The regional efforts are closely followed by an anxious Congolese public opinion that affects the political space of the Congolese government, requiring careful management of political discourse and nationalist posturing. The report argues that engaging Congolese political and civil society leaders in regional matters is essential. Despite uncertainties, the region and the international community must maintain a credible regional military presence to support political and other tracks. The refugee issue needs to be addressed without overloading regional efforts. Existing policies and strategies within the EAC, ICGLR and at continental level should be operationalized, emphasizing the need for DRC commitment and refraining from excessive nationalist posturing. The crisis underlines the need for deep reform in the DRC and for regional factors to be addressed to ensure sustainable stability.

# Table of Contents

<b>1   INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2   A DYNAMIC &amp; COMPETITIVE GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1. The Big Four	12
2.2. Deeply Entrenched Militarized politics in the Great Lakes	15
2.3. Regional conflict dynamics	17
2.4. President Félix Tshisekedi’s Regional Diplomacy	19
2.4.1. A developing relationship with Burundi	23
2.4.2. A Complex Relationship with Uganda	24
2.4.3. A Brief & Contested Honeymoon with Rwanda	28
<b>3   THE RETURN OF THE M23 AND THE CRISIS WITH RWANDA</b>	<b>34</b>
3.1. The M23	34
3.2. The 2021-2022 ‘M23’ offensive	36
3.3. Rising Tension and A War of Narratives with Kigali	39
3.4. The Political Impact in the DRC	44
<b>4   REGIONAL DIPLOMACY IN THE LEAD</b>	<b>50</b>
4.1. The EAC and the Start of the Nairobi Process	51
4.2. Angola Enters the Scene: the Luanda Process	54
4.3. The AU and a Renewed Effort	57
4.4. Full EACRF Deployment and Ceasefire	59
4.5. Enter SADC and a New Breath for EACRF	61
4.6. Increased Coherence & Coordination?	
The AU and the Quadripartite	64
4.7. Too Many Chefs? Or an Unbridgeable Gap?	64
<b>5   TALK OR FIGHT?</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>76</b>

# Introduction

In November 2021 the Mouvement du 23 Mars (M23) re-appeared in the tri-border area of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Uganda. Initially a small-scale phenomenon, it quickly gathered steam. The M23 repeatedly overpowered the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) and rapidly expanded its territory, threatening Goma, North Kivu's provincial capital. These events came as a shock, and it looked like a re-make of the crisis a decade earlier. In the months before, despite considerable criticism at home, President Félix Tshisekedi had tried to build a new base for sustainable regional stability by actively reaching out to Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi to deepen regional co-operation, and increase the transparency of regional trade. With strong support from Kenya, this also led to the DRC's entry into the East African Community (EAC).

The re-appearance of the M23 and the rapidly growing concerns about the Rwandan military involvement placed the DRC government in a position where concessions and diplomacy were considered signs of weakness by a frustrated and angry population. In this electoral year (elections at all levels are scheduled for the December 2023), the restless and frustrated population feels, once again, humiliated by Rwanda and its armed proxy. This humiliation drives a patriotic mood that defines the countries' diplomatic space, while also providing the incumbent with a straightforward narrative ahead of tense elections.

Several years of significant personal investment by President Tshisekedi in regional and international diplomatic outreach cannot mask the DRC's fundamentally weak position. After decades of conflict and mismanagement, it still has a fragile army, a weak diplomatic apparatus, and deeply entrenched

corruption. The good intentions of recent years have often been stranded due to improvisation and instability in the top-layers of the state. Fully aware of the limitations of the FARDC and the ineffectiveness of the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force (MONUSCO), the DRC followed a familiar pattern: turning towards regional allies for political and military support. As it also did in the past, the DRC government increased its co-operation and association with and dependency on local armed groups (including the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR)). Since this latest crisis, it also started building-up its military with the recruitment of fresh troops, the acquisition of new military equipment, and the hiring of foreign military contractors.

A decade ago, during the previous crisis with Rwanda and the M23, regional and international partners responded with an ambitious multi-pronged approach. First was the adoption of the wide-ranging 'Peace Security and Cooperation Framework for the DRC and the region' (PSCF). This brought a renewed focus on the 'root causes' of the conflicts, from the local to the regional. Second, was the reinforcement of the stumbling MONUSCO force with an offensive military capacity called the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), which was composed of regional Southern African Development Community (SADC) forces. Third, there was considerable diplomatic pressure by major international donors, including the freezing of bilateral aid and security cooperation with Rwanda, the M23's main regional supporter. And fourth, there was a political track of talks between the DRC government and the M23 called the 'Kampala dialogue', which was facilitated by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and supported by SADC that resulted in an agreement with the group.

Today, despite the huge humanitarian impact and the considerable risk for further regional escalation, the conflict is less on the international agenda than it was a decade ago. The region and the continent are overshadowed by the war in Ukraine. There is also considerable Congo fatigue amongst international actors. The traditional international partners (the European Union and its member states, the United States, and the United Kingdom) have taken some actions, including sanctions against some individuals, but remain mostly on the side-lines. From the early days of this crisis the UN,

and the constantly struggling MONUSCO, have taken themselves out of the equation, declaring the M23 too much of a military threat to counter.<sup>1</sup> The UN's recently adopted 'Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes Region' (2020) and its ambitious action plan have proven to be irrelevant.<sup>2</sup> The elaborate mechanisms and dialogues established by the ICGLR and/or the follow-up mechanisms for the PSCF, including the efforts of the Office for the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes, have also failed to rewire regional relations and prevent the return of a new full-blown regional crisis.

As a result of these many factors, regional organizations, and increasingly the African Union (AU), are now in the driver seat. In an attempt to avoid further regional contagion and escalation, the EAC, ICGLR, and SADC have taken the lead in finding an answer to the current political, security, and humanitarian challenges. The EAC launched its 'Nairobi process' that is focused on an 'intercongolese' dialogue with the Congolese armed groups, which initially also included the M23. It also deployed a military force, the EAC Regional Force (EACRF), a first in the organizations' history. The ICGLR and its 'Luanda process' focus on the relationship between Rwanda and the DRC and seek to support the demobilization of the M23. The Angola ICGLR presidency also announced its intention to send a small military force to support this process. SADC, already on the ground with the MONUSCO Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) entered at a later stage. In May 2023, it decided to provide support to Kinshasa with the intention to deploy an additional military force, the 'SADC Mission in the DRC' (SAMIDRC), to Eastern DRC.

In June 2023, two regional summits, including a quadripartite summit in Luanda, composed of the three previously mentioned regional communities and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) focused on the harmonization and coordination of these regional peace initiatives. To

---

<sup>1</sup> RTBF. 2022. "RDC: le chef de l'ONU admet l'incapacité de la MONUSCO à vaincre la rébellion du M23". 19 September 2022. <https://www.rtb.be/article/rdc-le-chef-de-l-onu-admet-l-incapacite-de-la-monusco-a-vaincre-la-rebellion-du-m23-11069657>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Security Council. 2020. United Nations Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes Region. [https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s\\_2020\\_1168\\_e\\_0.pdf](https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_2020_1168_e_0.pdf)



that end, the quadripartite adopted a 'Joint Framework on the Coordination of Peace Initiatives in Eastern DRC'.<sup>3</sup>

The cocktail of regional, national, and local interests and grievances again created a violent and explosive mixture, that may be hard to contain by a region that lacks the resources and seems to be too divided to act decisively. The complex regional involvement that lacks clear leadership is also a cover for the deeper distrust and conflicting intentions of several of the regional states. As such, instead of stabilizing the region it could contribute to further escalation. Despite these concerns, it is also important to remember that from the early days of the Congo wars in the mid and late 1990's, the decisive steps in the conflict resolution processes have been initiated and driven by regional actors. These include: the Lusaka agreement, the all-inclusive agreement that launched the transition to democratic elections, and the initially successful MONUSCO FIB. These were however actively supported by a multitude of international partners.

This report analyses these regional dynamics, with a focus on the response to this latest M23 crisis and looks at its domestic response. It is based on a review of relevant literature and numerous conversations and exchanges over the past years and months with a wide range of international policy makers, diplomats, analysts, and numerous Congolese interlocutors. The paper starts with an overview and analysis of current regional dynamics, including regional Congolese diplomacy. Second is an analysis of the current crisis with the M23, followed by an assessment of the regional response. It concludes with some recommendations.

---

<sup>3</sup> Joint Framework on Coordination and Harmonization of Peace Initiatives in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo by the East African Community (EAC), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the United Nations (UN) under the auspices of the African Union (AU). Communiqué of the Quadripartite Summit of the East African Community, Economic Community of Central African States, International Conference on the Great Lakes Region and Southern African Development Community, under the auspices of the African Union, Luanda, 27 June 2023. <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20230627/quadripartite-summit-east-african-community-economic-community-central>. <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/joint-framework-on-eastern-democratic-republic-of-congo-fr.pdf>

# A Dynamic & Competitive Geopolitical Environment

While this report is focused on the regional dimensions of conflict in Eastern DRC, the DRC's relations with most of its neighbours and the wider environment are complex.<sup>4</sup> The DRC is an internally largely disconnected, archipelago state. A (mostly) landlocked country, it has nine neighbours and the highest population densities are in the border areas. The populations in the border regions are to a large degree culturally, or economically outward looking. This is also a consequence of the lack of national infrastructure. The southern provinces are focused on southern Africa; Kinshasa, Kongo Central, the central and equatorial areas are more integrated into francophone Central Africa; and the East is mostly oriented towards the Indian Ocean.

This is also reflected in the DRC's membership and integration in various Regional Economic Communities (REC's), including ECCAS (founding member, 1983), SADC (since 1998), and most recently, the EAC (since 2022).<sup>5</sup> The DRC is also one of three members of the dormant Economic Community of the Great Lakes Region (CEPGL), together with Rwanda and Burundi.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> In recent years there have been (small-scale) territorial conflicts with Zambia, disputes with Angola about the maritime border and immigration, and there are persistent security concerns at the borders with the Central African Republic (CAR), and the Republic of South Sudan. Together with Angola, the Republic of Congo has played a considerable role in managing the DRC's recent domestic political crises, but there is also an element of unease in the relationship with Brazzaville, that maintains strong bilateral relations with Rwanda.

<sup>5</sup> Overlapping memberships are a reality for several states in the region (Angola is in SADC and ECCAS, Tanzania is in EAC and SADC). Both Rwanda and Burundi are also member of ECCAS and Burundi has applied to join the SADC. There is also the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), but the later has no political and security role.

<sup>6</sup> Its specialised organ CINELAC manages the hydro-electrical power stations on the Ruzizi River. Throughout the different phases of regional conflict in the past decades, this unit has continued functioning.

Lastly, there is the ICGLR, a largely donor driven platform that has its basis in UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that called for such a conference in 2000. This organization has an important role in establishing standards for the trade in minerals and is also ‘home’ to several security and conflict management platforms such as the 2013 PSCF and the Extended Joint-Verification Mechanism (EJVM), both resulting from the previous M23 crisis.

In the eastern provinces, leaders and citizens alike have learned to look away from Kinshasa (at more than 1.500 km and no functioning overland connection) for trading and commercial opportunities. And Kinshasa often looks away as well – as was reflected in the speech of the Congolese inspector-general of finances, Alingete Key, during a talk in the US in early 2022:

“Rest assured, we do not have war in the Congo. We see war on television. We are in Lubumbashi, in Kinshasa, in the big cities where we have never seen the war in Congo. So, it is a situation more than 2,000 kilometers from the institutions.”<sup>7</sup>

The physical infrastructure in Eastern DRC is limited, vulnerable to disruption, and large parts of the territory are insecure. This makes the region structurally dependent on its immediate neighbours, mostly Rwanda and Uganda, for strategic commodities such as fuel, food, construction materials and consumer products. Many of these are imported through the Kenyan or Tanzanian ports. These countries are also the Eastern DRC’s connection to global trading networks, including a rapidly intensifying link to the Middle East, in particular the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The Congo’s borders are also notoriously porous and difficult to police due to their length, their geography, the corruption of border officials, and the close-knit trans-border connections between communities. These are areas of intense formal and informal trade that are essential for communities on both sides of the borders. The two Congo Wars and the persistent involvement of competing Rwandan and Ugandan interests and political/military

---

<sup>7</sup> RFI. 2022. “Les propos tenus par le patron de l’IGF Jules Alingete à Houston créent la polémique en RDC”. 29 April 2022. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220429-les-propos-tenus-par-le-patron-de-l-igf-jules-alingete-a-houston-créent-la-polémique-en-rdc>

networks have added to the complexity of the regions historic trading patterns. This factor remains one of the key drivers of conflict.

## **2.1. The Big Four**

Beyond the intricacies of the Great Lakes region, regional relations are further complicated due to the lack of obvious regional leadership. The multitude of REC's also allows for forum shopping by and through the different pretenders. Angola, Kenya, South Africa, and Tanzania are all in some form of competition for regional leadership. One aspect is the competition for control over regional transport nodes and corridors that are also of vital importance for the trade in (Congolese) minerals (particularly the industrial quantities produced in the Katangese Copperbelt). Recent regional developments on these rival logistic nodes include developing projects between Rwanda and Tanzania, with plans to extend rail networks to Rwanda to provide direct access to Dar-Es-Salaam. Uganda is also working on a link to Burundi through Tanzania to bypass Rwanda, and in the process reduce its reliance on Kenya for access to international markets. Such regional competition also extends to the development of infrastructure in the DRC, as is the case with the Uganda roads project (see below). Other areas of economic competition on the DRC market include banking, insurance and financial services, and telecommunications.

South Africa, having assumed a leadership role during the Congo wars (including the 2003 Sun City agreement), has peacekeepers in MONUSCO since 2001 and was also prominently present in the 2012-2013 M23 crisis (when the South African contingent was integrated in the FIB). South Africa also had a long running training and security cooperation mission with the FARDC. It has however been rather discrete for several years, as it has been concentrating on its domestic socio-economic priorities and security emergencies in its direct neighbourhood (Mozambique). Since early 2023, it has re-appeared on the scene, in phase with the increasingly active role by SADC. In July 2023, President Ramaphosa was in Kinshasa for a bilateral meeting during which President Tshisekedi announced bilateral security arrangements.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Africanews.com. 2023. "DR Congo and South Africa plan security pact". 07 July 2023. <https://www.africanews.com/2023/07/07/dr-congo-and-south-africa-plan-security-pact>

Angola has been a long-standing actor in the DRC. It was one of the countries that supported Laurent-Désiré Kabila in the 1996-1997 war. It intervened forcefully alongside Zimbabwe and Namibia in the second Congolese war when Rwanda-supported rebels threatened Kinshasa and remained a military ally of the Kabila regime until the end of the war. Angola has remained closely involved in the DRC and remains concerned about the possible impact of unrest at its borders (as was the case during the Kasai crisis from 2016 – 2018). It was also heavily involved in the management of the 2015-2018 electoral crisis. At first sceptical about the outcome of the elections, in 2020, in the midst of the political conflict between President Tshisekedi and his predecessor, Angola made a visual statement of its security partnership with President Tshisekedi by briefly sending fighter jets to Kinshasa.<sup>9</sup>

Kenya, the economic powerhouse of Eastern Africa, showed clear regional leadership ambitions under former President Uhuru Kenyatta's second term (2017 – 2022). It has delicate relations with Tanzania and Uganda. It must also divide its attention for the Great Lakes with the permanent instability in the Horn of Africa (now further compounded with the developing conflict in Sudan). From the early days of his presidency in 2019, President Tshisekedi reached out to Kenya for economic, developmental, and military/security cooperation.<sup>10</sup> Kenya was involved in the DRC before, but not very prominently and Tshisekedi was looking for a fresh actor with which he had a functioning direct link. Kenyan businesses have now expanded their reach in the DRC, and Kenya increased its diplomatic footprint with the planned opening of consulates in Goma and Lubumbashi.

---

<sup>9</sup> Actualité.cd. 2020. "RDC: des avions de chasse congolais et angolais survolent Kinshasa ce vendredi dans le but de "magnifier l'entente parfait entre les deux forces aériennes"". 19 November 2020. <https://actualite.cd/2020/11/19/rdc-des-avions-de-chasse-congolais-et-angolais-survoleront-kinshasa-ce-vendredi-dans-le>.

<sup>10</sup> Félix Tshisekedi launched his campaign as presidential candidate, on a joint platform with Vital Kamerhe from Nairobi. He enjoys a close relationship with senior Kenyan politicians including Raila Odinga (who was close to Etienne Tshisekedi) and later with Uhuru Kenyatta. The latter was the only Head of State present when Felix Tshisekedi took the oath of office in January 2019. Kalonza Musyoka, another senior Kenyan politician mediated between the Kabila and Tshisekedi camps before the break in 2021. The DRC's entry into the EAC was also first discussed during bilateral talks between Presidents Tshisekedi and Kenyatta early 2019. Mwangi Maina. 2021. "Why Kenya sees DRC's entry as a game-changer to intra-regional trade in East Africa". The Africa Report, 30 December 2021. <https://www.theafricareport.com/160921/why-kenya-sees-drcs-entry-as-a-game-changer-to-intra-regional-trade-in-east-africa>

Kenya also signed a series of security agreements, provides training to the FARDC in Kisangani and it deployed forces to the MONUSCO FIB in 2021. The Kenyan elections that brought President Ruto to power changed the dynamic somewhat. Nevertheless, Kenya stayed the course and in November 2022 the first Kenyan troops were deployed to North Kivu, awaited by a sceptical public opinion.<sup>11</sup> Kenya's economic interests remained, but President Ruto does not have the same personal relationship to President Tshisekedi as his predecessor Kenyatta or his challenger Raïla Odinga had. In fact, he seems closer to Paul Kagame, and under Ruto Kenya is championing a further extension of the EAC to the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean. Kenya is also deepening its relationship with Congo Brazzaville, where it signed multiple economic agreements in the course of July 2023.<sup>12</sup>

Tanzania played a lead-role in the first M23 crisis, as tensions rose sharply between former President Kikwete and his Rwandan counterpart. As a result, Tanzania deployed a contingent to the MONUSCO FIB, alongside South Africa, that also had a tense relationship with Kigali. The Tanzanian contingent in the FIB remains in place, and Tanzania enjoys a good relationship with the DRC and Rwanda. However, the country remains mostly passive in regional diplomacy, dividing its attention between the EAC and SADC. They are also concerned about the conflict in neighbouring Mozambique, where Rwanda plays a major military role (alongside SADC) in trying to neutralize an Islamist insurgency movement that has linkages with the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) active in Eastern DRC.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Communication with local journalist, November 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Jeune Afrique. 2023. "De Brazzaville à Oyo, Denis Sassou Nguesso et William Ruto, toujours plus proches". 12 July 2023 <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1462873/politique/de-brazzaville-a-oyo-denis-sassou-nguesso-et-william-ruto-toujours-plus-proches/>

<sup>13</sup> The New Times. 2023. "Rwanda, Tanzania seek to enhance defence cooperation". 19 January 2023 <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/4345/news/security/rwanda-tanzania-seek-to-enhance-defence-cooperation>

## 2.2. Deeply Entrenched Militarized politics in the Great Lakes

As a result of their civil wars and the political dominance of rebel movements turned governing parties, the militaries remain the dominant political institutions in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. In recent years the three (most notably Rwanda and Uganda) have also become successful in maintaining and further developing their militaries through the participation in UN and AU peacekeeping missions that have brought financial resources and opportunity, often at a high human cost.<sup>14</sup> Rwanda and Uganda have both also developed some expeditionary capacities and have deployed national contingents in self-sustained operations. Uganda deployed forces in the Republic of South Sudan in 2013 and 2016 and in Eastern DRC in 2021. Rwanda has ongoing operations in the Central African Republic (CAR) since 2020, in Mozambique since 2021, and has had several discrete smaller deployments in the DRC.<sup>15</sup> Burundi is a major supplier of peacekeeping troops in Somalia and its forces and allied Imbonerakure militia have occasionally pursued military operations in South Kivu province. Since 2022, Burundi has also deployed a sizeable force in South Kivu for joint operations with the FARDC.

Kigali has learned from the 2012/2013 M23 confrontation. In that conflict, Rwanda had come under unprecedented international and regional pressure. Regional relations with Tanzania and South Africa were particularly bad and both countries, under SADC, took the lead in forming a military response to work with the FARDC and effectively neutralize the M23 (the SADC/MONUSCO FIB).<sup>16</sup> Since then, with remarkable efficiency, Paul Kagame has focused on his and Rwanda's international outreach. He remains in charge of the AU reform agenda and has thus become a fixture in multiple international forums.

---

<sup>14</sup> The East African. 2023. "Families of Somalia AU mission casualties paid \$200m". 17 April 2023. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/usd200m-payout-for-somalia-au-mission-casualties-4201876>

<sup>15</sup> Donelli F. 2022. Rwanda's New Military Diplomacy. Paris: IFRI – DGRIS. <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/dgris/Note%2031%20RWANDA%27S%20NEW%20MILITARY%20DIPLOMACY.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit. 2013. "Relations between Rwandan and Tanzania are strained". 13 September 2013.

<http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1480954332&Country=Rwanda&topic=Politics;>  
ISS Today. 2014. "Managing Paul Kagame; Africa's enfant terrible". 27 March 2014  
<https://issafrica.org/iss-today/managing-paul-kagame-africas-enfant-terrible>

Rwanda's former foreign minister, Louise Mushikiwabo, is the Secretary-General of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) (2019 – 2027), and Paul Kagame is the Chair in Office of the Commonwealth (2022 – 2024). Rwanda has also concluded a lucrative and controversial agreement on migration with the UK and is in talks about the issue with other countries, including Denmark.<sup>17</sup>

Rwanda has also continued to invest considerable resources in its military (RDF), still the bedrock of the governing regime with a wide reach in the country's economy. In the CAR and Mozambique where Rwanda has deployed military forces, it also pursues direct economic interests in mining and agriculture through bilateral agreements with both governments.<sup>18</sup> This mix of security and an active economic diplomacy is a particular dimension of Rwanda's successful foreign policy.<sup>19</sup> The considerable Rwandan military presence in the CAR has added to Congolese concerns of encirclement.<sup>20</sup> In addition, in the frame of its active regional economic diplomacy, Rwanda has signed economic agreements with Congo Brazzaville and Zambia where it develops interests in agriculture and mining.<sup>21</sup>

Rwanda's military also maintains an important outreach to other armed forces on the continent and beyond. For its military deployment in Mozambique, Rwanda has ensured financial support from the EU through the European

---

<sup>17</sup> Gower, Melanie and Butchard, Patrick and McKinney, CJ.. 2022. The UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership. London: House of Commons Library Research Briefing. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9568/CBP-9568.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit. 2021. "Mozambique and Rwanda sign MoU for closer economic ties". 29 September 2021 [http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=231460206&Country=Mozambique&topic=Politics&subtopi\\_6](http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=231460206&Country=Mozambique&topic=Politics&subtopi_6) ; Anadolu. 2021.

"La Centrafrique et le Rwanda signent 4 nouveaux accords de coopération". 9 August 2021 <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/la-centrafrique-et-le-rwanda-signent-4-nouveaux-accords-de-cooperation/2328953>.

<sup>19</sup> Handy, Paul-Simon. 2021. Rwanda: the emergence of an African smart power. ISS Today. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/rwanda-the-emergence-of-an-african-smart-power>.

<sup>20</sup> Rwanda participates in the UN Peacekeeping force MINUSCA and also a national military contingent in support of the authorities in Bangui. DW.com. 2022. "La RDC s'inquiète de la présence de soldats rwandais en RCA". 7 October 2022. <https://www.dw.com/fr/rdc-soldats-rwandais-en-centrafrique/a-63375572>

<sup>21</sup> Anadolu. 2022. "Rwanda / Congo Brazzaville : signature de plusieurs accords de coopération". 13 March 2022 <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/rwanda-congo-brazzaville-signature-de-plusieurs-accords-de-cooperation/2562403>.



Peace Facility (EPF).<sup>22</sup> While there are obvious international concerns about these developments, these Rwandan troops are hard to replace by forces of similar quality or cost. This is particularly useful when the West attempts to counter the presence of Russian security and economic interests on the ground. For the moment, at least this strategic interest outweighs the concerns about using RDF as a proxy force in places where the West does not want to get boots on the ground.<sup>23</sup> Following a visit to Benin, Rwanda may now also send its forces to the Sahel.<sup>24</sup> Uganda has also been successful in gaining geopolitical advantages and considerable isolation from donor pressure through the participation of its troops in dangerous foreign missions, where they are difficult to replace.

### **2.3. Regional conflict dynamics**

Over the past decades most of the DRC's neighbours have also had a troubled and violent past. All these neighbours and others have been directly involved in the two Congo wars (1996-1997 and 1998-2003). From the very start of these regional wars to today, the presence in Eastern DRC of foreign armed groups (or 'negative forces') has been a justification for successive overt and covert cross-border military interventions. The groups that are still active include: the ADF of Ugandan origin, the (factionalized) FDLR, and the Burundian Forces for National Liberation (FNL) and the Résistance pour un État de Droit (RED-Tabara).<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Council of the EU. 2022. European Peace Facility : Council adopts assistance measures in support of the armed forces of five countries. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/01/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-assistance-measures-in-support-of-the-armed-forces-of-five-countries>

<sup>23</sup> Mail & Guardian. 2021. "Rwanda's military is the French proxy on African soil". 12 September 2021 <https://mg.co.za/africa/2021-09-12-rwandas-military-is-the-french-proxy-on-african-soil/>.

<sup>24</sup> Le Monde. 2023. "Le Rwanda promet un soutien militaire au Bénin face aux djihadistes". 17 April 2023. [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/04/17/le-rwanda-promet-un-soutien-militaire-au-benin-face-aux-djihadistes\\_6169839\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/04/17/le-rwanda-promet-un-soutien-militaire-au-benin-face-aux-djihadistes_6169839_3212.html)

<sup>25</sup> The FDLR are the remnants of the former Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and Interahamwe militias that fled to the DRC in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Different FDLR groups are: FDLR-FOCA (the main group), FDLR-RUD and CNRD-Ubwiyunge.

The internal (political) conflicts in neighbouring countries and the conflicts in the DRC have also resulted in large refugee populations spread throughout the region.<sup>26</sup> In most cases there are complex connections between refugee populations and armed groups. This is particularly relevant for the FDLR with the Rwandan refugee population in Eastern DRC and the M23 with the Congolese (Tutsi) refugees in Rwanda and Uganda. The presence of refugee populations, with varying degrees of social and cultural linkages to host communities, can also be a factor of local instability and conflict.

The regional trade and smuggling of minerals (in the East mostly gold and the 3T's: Tin, Tantalum and Tungsten) and agricultural products (coffee, cacao, wood, and charcoal) is another major component of the regional conflict dynamics. This large-scale smuggling has become deeply embedded and has an impact that reaches well beyond their local effect. For both Rwanda and Uganda, the rents of the militarized, deeply exploitative, and non-regulated access to the Eastern DRC's vast mineral resources and other economic opportunities seem to remain important for regime stability. Both countries, most clearly Rwanda, have set-up an economic infrastructure, including a growing mineral processing industry, handling considerable volumes of resources smuggled from the DRC. This regional factor remains an important contributor to conflict and instability.<sup>27</sup>

In the second Congo war, competition between Uganda and Rwanda turned violent as both countries supported rival rebel groups and their armies even confronted one another directly in Kisangani in 1999 and 2000.<sup>28</sup> Since this clash, the patterns of competition between the deeply entrenched

---

<sup>26</sup> Main Congolese refugee populations are in Uganda (522,223), Burundi (115,000), Tanzania (83,106) and Rwanda (78,408). UNHCR. 2023. Democratic Republic of the Congo Regional Refugee Response plan January – December 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/ff3eb70d-aba6-4ce9-b4c9-932e4571eab8/2023%20DRC%20Regional%20RRP%20%281%29.pdf>. At the same time, the DRC hosts an estimated 520 thousand refugees with the largest groups originating from the Central African Republic (211,361), Rwanda (208,317) and South Sudan (56,423) (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/cod>).

<sup>27</sup> Matthysen, Ken and Gobbers, Erik. 2022. Armed conflict, insecurity and mining in eastern DRC – Reflections on the nexus between natural resources and armed conflict. Antwerp. IPIS. [https://ipisresearch.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/20221208\\_ILRG\\_IPIS\\_Armed-conflict-insecurity-and-mining-in-eastern-DRC.pdf](https://ipisresearch.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/20221208_ILRG_IPIS_Armed-conflict-insecurity-and-mining-in-eastern-DRC.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> The damages incurred by these clashes are part of proceedings and reparations at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

commercialised military / security networks of both countries have persisted.<sup>29</sup> A recurring element in this competition are the mutual accusations of proxy warfare, mostly on DRC soil, where the actual support (or the threat thereof) of armed opposition groups is an important source of tension. As a result, just in the past five years, we have seen the threat of direct armed conflict between Rwanda and Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi and now, again, Rwanda and the DRC.

Rivalling national and local Congolese political, economic and security elites have piggybacked on these dynamics.<sup>30</sup> It is an important factor in the perpetuation of the splintered, militarized political economy of Eastern Congo. In the past 20 years, through several failed attempts at Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), the armed groups landscape in DRC has become deeply fragmented and entrenched in this regional political economy. Several have become proxies of the fragile Congolese armed forces (FARDC), while others have developed deep relations with the neighbouring states. Estimations on the number of active armed groups in Eastern DRC vary widely between 100 and even more than 200 according to the P-DDRCS national co-ordinator.<sup>31</sup>

## **2.4. President Félix Tshisekedi's Regional Diplomacy**

The second Congo war (1998 – 2003) that involved the direct confrontation of armies of several African states in the DRC, ended twenty years ago. For large parts of Eastern DRC, the official end of the war has brought neither peace nor stability. Former Congolese President Joseph Kabila, who came

---

<sup>29</sup> Henning Tamm. 2018. "Status Competition in Africa: Explaining the Rwandan-Ugandan clashes in the Democratic Republic of Congo" *African Affairs* 118(472), 509-530.

<sup>30</sup> Carayannis, Tatiana. and Vlassenroot, Koen and Hoffman, Kasper and Pangburn, Aaron. 2018. *Competing networks and political order in the Democratic Republic of Congo: a literature review on the logics of public authority and international intervention*. Conflict Research Programme. LSE; [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100161/1/Vlassenroot\\_Competing\\_networks\\_Published.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100161/1/Vlassenroot_Competing_networks_Published.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Radio Okapi. 2023. "Est de la RDC: 266 groupes armés locaux et étrangers recensés par le P-DDRCS". 18 April 2023. <https://www.radiookapi.net/2023/04/18/actualite/securite/est-de-la-rdc-266-groupes-armes-locaux-et-etrangers-recenses-par-le-p-ddrccs>. Baromètre sécuritaire du Kivu. 2021. *La cartographie des groupes armés dans l'Est du Congo – Opportunités manquées, insécurité prolongée et prophéties auto-réalisatrices*. <https://kivusecurity.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/reports/39/2021%20KST%20rapport%20FR.pdf>

to power in 2001 after the assassination of his father Laurent-Désiré Kabila, and his political network were deeply entangled in these regional dynamics. Yet, at no moment was he able (or willing?) to disrupt them. The regional politics remain managed by regimes led by strongmen that came to power in domestic wars: Museveni in Uganda (since 1986), Dos Santos (1979) and later Lourenço (2017) in Angola, Sassou Nguesso in Congo Brazzaville (since 1997), and Kagame in Rwanda (since 1994). Except for a leadership change in Angola, these regimes have been able to maintain a stable hold on power with limited international interference, and a largely muzzled domestic press and opposition. Amongst these former rebel and military leaders turned Head of State, Tshisekedi, with no past in the deeply militarized politics so prevalent in the region, is an outsider.

Tshisekedi and his party, the Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS), have only a limited foothold in the East and no active past involvement in the regional conflicts or diplomacy. Not only did he have little experience, but also, he had only limited control over his first coalition government stuffed with Kabila allies. Tshisekedi also had only limited connections within the security forces.<sup>32</sup> For his connection to the Eastern provinces, he needed to rely on several competing networks. One network is linked to the first lady, Denise Nyakeru, whose family originates from South Kivu. Another was connected to his electoral ally and first chief of staff, Vital Kamerhe (since March 2023 deputy Prime-Minister and Minister of Economic Affairs). For his regional connections there were a few individuals from the security services, previously active under Joseph Kabila, namely former security advisor François Beya and intelligence chief Justin Inzun Kakiak, or some former RCD-Goma figures, such as Fortunat Biselele.<sup>33</sup> There was also a group of close advisors with strong linkages to regional countries, such as the head of the national

---

<sup>32</sup> Hoebeke, Hans and Chiza, Christian and Mukungilwa, Bienvenu. 2022. L'ancien se meurt et le nouveau ne veut (encore) naître – La réforme du secteur de la sécurité en République Démocratique du Congo. GIC, Série Insecure Livelihoods. <https://www.gicnetwork.be/lancien-se-meurt-et-le-nouveau-ne-veut-encore-naître/>.

<sup>33</sup> François Beya was an old hand in the regional security dynamics. Under Joseph Kabila he was head of the Direction Générale de Migration (DGM). He played an important part in the exchanges with the intelligence and security agencies and political leaders of regional countries. He was arrested in February 2022. Justin Inzun was replaced at the head of the National Intelligence Agency (ANR) in December 2021, and Fortunat Biselele was arrested in January 2023.

PSCF follow-up mechanism, Claude Ibalanky with South Africa and the late Gilbert Tshimanga with Kenya, where Tshisekedi also has a strong personal connection with the unsuccessful presidential candidate Raila Odinga and former President Uhuru Kenyatta.

At the start of his presidency in January 2019, Tshisekedi's main regional and international interest and preoccupation was to gain legitimacy and establish a foothold amongst his peers, many of which had been deeply involved in the management of the DRC's 2015 – 2018 prolonged electoral crisis. His main regional threat was the potential fall-out of the increasing tension between Rwanda on the one hand and Uganda (and Burundi) on the other hand. The joint effort between Tshisekedi and his Angolan counterpart João Lourenço in the ICGLR 'quadripartite' process to resolve the tension between Kigali and Kampala saw the DRC, for once, acting as a mediator in regional conflict.<sup>34</sup> This process remained frail, at least in part, due to the impact of Covid-19. The relationship between Rwanda and Uganda was eventually 'normalized' due to the intervention in 2022 of the controversial Muhoozi Kainerugaba, the eldest son of the Ugandan president.<sup>35</sup>

In the complex web in the DRC's eastern neighbourhood, President Tshisekedi has been actively building relations and investing in cooperation and partnerships, an important pillar in his approach to the stabilization of the Eastern Provinces. The regional aspect seems to rest on three important pillars. First, involve regional actors in the stabilization effort on the ground. In practice this consisted of allowing overt and covert participation in security operations.

---

<sup>34</sup> Amidst mutual accusations of supporting each other's opposition, Rwanda closed its border with Uganda in February 2019, it was only re-opened in January 2022. On 21 August 2019, in the framework of the quadripartite both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding. Its follow-up was managed through an ad-hoc commission, facilitated by Angola and the DRC. Reyntjens Filip. 2022. Rwanda has reopened the border with Uganda but distrust could close it again. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/rwanda-has-reopened-the-border-with-uganda-but-distrust-could-close-it-again-176861>. International Crisis Group. 2020. Averting Proxy Wars in the Eastern DR Congo and Great Lakes. Africa Briefing N°150. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/democratic-republic-congo/b150-averting-proxy-wars-eastern-dr-congo-and-great-lakes>.

<sup>35</sup> Jeune Afrique. 2023. "Paul Kagame: "Le problème n'est pas entre moi et Tshisekedi, mais entre Tshisekedi et le M23". 19 September 2023. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1483925/politique/paul-kagame-le-probleme-nest-pas-entre-moi-et-tshisekedi-mais-entre-tshisekedi-et-le-m23/>.

Second, it involved the development of more formalized economic partnerships of mutual benefit. And third, it consisted of the integration into the EAC, a dynamic regional integration project, dominated by Kenya. Entry into the EAC would offer a regional framework streamlining regional trade networks. It is an approach that also fits well with the traditional European Union (EU) narrative linking economic integration with political partnership and peaceful collaboration. Upon its entry, the DRC offered to create and host an EAC body on mines and minerals.<sup>36</sup>

During 2021 and early 2022 many of these efforts came together in the signing of a series of bilateral agreements with Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Zambia.<sup>37</sup> These covered a wide range of issues including trade, infrastructure, and security. At the same time the DRC finalized its meteoric entry into the EAC, with membership signed in April 2022. For most EAC members, the opportunity to develop trade with the DRC as a market and source of resources is important, and competition is intense. In particular, the rapid growth of direct Kenyan economic interests stands out (see below). The prospect of increased formalization of trade is an opportunity for the Congo, but a threat to the more established interests that thrive in the militarized, criminalized economy. There are also strong concerns amongst Congolese economic operators about their lack of competitiveness and preparation, including the complexities in regional trade and taxation which puts them at a disadvantage.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> The Star. 2022. "DRC calls for mining, natural resources organ after EAC admission". 9 April 2022 <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/africa/2022-04-09-drc-calls-for-mining-natural-resources-organ-after-eac-admission/>. Nation. "Live: DRC president Felix Tshisekedi in Kenya to sign EAC treaty", uploaded on 8 April 2022. YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/live/Lmoc-vDCAfE?feature=share>.

<sup>37</sup> The East African. 2021. "All systems go as Uganda, DRC sign agreement on road projects". 01 June 2021. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/business/uganda-drc-sign-road-project-deal-3421384>. The New Times. 2021. "Rwanda, DR Congo sign three bilateral agreements". 26 June 2021. <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/187108/News/rwanda-dr-congo-sign-three-bilateral-agreements>. RFI. 2021. "Accords et entente entre la RDC et le Burundi". 14 July 2021. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210714-accords-et-entente-entre-la-rdc-et-le-burundi>.

<sup>38</sup> FEC Nord Kivu. 2022. Mémorandum de la FEC / Nord-Kivu à la bienveillante attention de Son Excellence le Ministre du Commerce en mission de travail à Goma le 20 Avril 2022. Goma. FEC. (note on file).

On 13 January 2023, in a ceremony announcing the first official Congolese artisanal gold export to Dubai by the newly created company, Primera Gold, President Tshisekedi clarified the economic base of this – partly failed – strategy to build partnerships with neighbouring countries:

“...it is exactly this kind of partnership that I had sought with our neighbours, to put an end to this trafficking and smuggling of minerals, in order to benefit our respective populations, obviously creating this value chain that will bring many benefits to our countries and our respective peoples... Unfortunately, I regret that I was not heard with that ear. This kind of saving initiatives have not been understood by some of our neighbours who have preferred to sow obstacles and especially to shed the blood of our compatriots...”<sup>39</sup>

#### **2.4.1. A DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIP WITH BURUNDI**

Compared to other countries in the region, the DRC’s outreach to Burundi was rather slow. However, since 2021 relations have deepened quite rapidly. In July 2021, during a state visit to Kinshasa, the Presidents Évariste Ndayishimiye and Tshisekedi signed several memoranda, including the construction of a railroad linking Gitega to Uvira and further inland to Kindu.<sup>40</sup> A few weeks later both countries held a general bilateral commission. As chair of the EAC (2022 – 2023), and incoming chair of the PSCF Regional Oversight Mechanism (ROM), Burundi now also holds a significant position in the regional peace processes. In December 2021, Burundi was allowed to send a military contingent to South Kivu for operations against the RED-Tabara and Forces Nationales de Libération (FNL) armed groups. Burundi has a bilateral military contingent active in South Kivu (since mid-2022) and deployed forces to North Kivu for the EAC Regional Force (EACRF). In March 2023 Burundi and the DRC signed an agreement on military cooperation, a step that is likely to be looked at with considerable suspicion in Kigali, that

---

<sup>39</sup> Agence Congolaise de Presse. 2023. “RDC-Émirats Arabes Unis : Tshisekedi coupe les sources de financement des guerres dans l’Est congolais”. 13 January 2023 <https://acpcongo.com/index.php/2023/01/13/rdc-emirats-arabes-unis-tshisekedi-coupe-les-sources-de-financement-des-guerres-dans-lest-congolais/>

<sup>40</sup> Radio Okapi. 2021. “RDC-Burundi : signature de plusieurs accords à la suite de la visite du Président Ndayishimiye à Kinshasa”. 12 July 2021. <https://www.radiookapi.net/2021/07/13/actualite/politique/rdc-burundi-signature-de-plusieurs-accords-la-suite-de-la-visite-du>

will perceive any such cooperation as a threat.<sup>41</sup> Locally in North Kivu there are suspicions that the Burundi contingent of the EACRF collaborates with local armed groups and the FDLR.<sup>42</sup> As the military situation on the ground in North Kivu intensifies – with risks to an extension into South Kivu, the position of Burundi will become increasingly sensitive and could reignite the bilateral tension with Kigali. While the DRC joined the EAC, Burundi pursues its ambition for membership in SADC, with support from Tanzania and the DRC.<sup>43</sup>

#### **2.4.2. A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP WITH UGANDA**

In late May, early June 2021 the DRC and Uganda signed and launched a series of projects to construct and rehabilitate roads to improve the connection between the Uganda border posts of Mpondwe/Kasindi and Bunagana with Beni/Butembo and Goma respectively.<sup>44</sup> This road network would allow traders to bypass Rwanda and directly connect to the developing transport and logistics infrastructure in Uganda leading towards Kenya and Tanzania. The road project is carried out by the Ugandan company Dott Services and traverses areas of high instability. It also includes a considerable military and security component.

In close connection to this project, at the end of November 2021, the Ugandan military (UPDF) and the FARDC launched the joint operation 'Shujaa' to neutralize the ADF, a notorious armed group of Ugandan origin that is considered

---

<sup>41</sup> The relations between Burundi and Rwanda have been rocky since 2015, when Burundi suspected Rwanda to support a coup attempt against former President Nkurunziza. And there have been mutual accusations about harbouring opponents as well as some border incidents. Relations started to normalize in 2022. Handy, Paul-Simon and Estime Antoine-Prosper. 2022. Burundi and Rwanda on a reconciliation path. Pretoria, ISS Today ; <https://issafrika.org/iss-today/burundi-and-rwanda-on-a-reconciliation-path>. Agence Congolaise de Presse. 2023. "RDC-Burundi: signature d'un mémorandum d'entente militaire". 8 March 2023 <https://acpcongo.com/index.php/2023/03/08/rdc-burundi-signature-dun-memorandum-dentente-militaire/>.

<sup>42</sup> TV5 Monde., 2023. "Burundi: l'armée rejette les accusations de collaboration avec les groupes armés de RDC". 24 May 2023. <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/burundi-larmee-rejette-les-accusations-de-collaborations-avec-les-groupes-armes-de-rdc>.

<sup>43</sup> An initial application was rejected in 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Agence Congolaise de Presse. 2021. "Signature of two agreements between the DRC and Uganda on the road project". 29 May 2021. <https://acpcongo.com/index.php/2021/05/29/signature-of-two-agreements-between-the-drc-and-uganda-on-the-road-project/>.



the main responsible for numerous deadly attacks on Congolese civilians in the area around Beni and adjacent territories of Ituri province.<sup>45</sup> On 16 November 2021, two weeks before the launch of the Shujaa operation, the Ugandan capital Kampala was rocked by a series of bomb attacks attributed to the ADF and claimed by the Islamic State (ISIS).<sup>46</sup> Since a few years, the ADF has developed complex relations with wider Islamist networks associated to the Islamic State in Eastern and Southern Africa (ISCAP).<sup>47</sup> Kinshasa has been looking for international assistance to neutralize the group that is widely considered the main actor responsible for attacks on civilians in the Grand Nord in North Kivu.<sup>48</sup> After joint evolutions in 2023, the operation has been extended into Ituri province to cover the area into which the ADF is looking for refuge.<sup>49</sup>

Uganda and its industrial partners (including French energy giant Total and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC)) are developing oil fields near Lake Albert, with an associated refinery and pipeline in Uganda, linking up to Tanzania.<sup>50</sup> There remains a concern that the ADF presents a threat to these activities. The DRC is also seeking to develop its oil industry and is observing the developments on its joint border with Uganda.<sup>51</sup> The area is close to the conflict zone in Ituri Province, and it is also the area of

---

<sup>45</sup> Congo Research Group. 2022. Uganda's Operation Shujaa in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Fighting the ADF or Securing Economic Interests?. New York: Congo Research Group. <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/ugandas-operation-shujaa-in-the-democratic-republic-of-congo-fighting-the-adf-or-securing-economic-interests/>. Titeca Kristof. 2022. "Total

Success"? The real goals of Uganda's Operation Shujaa in DRC. African Arguments. <https://africanarguments.org/2022/06/total-success-the-real-goals-of-uganda-operation-shujaa-in-drc>

<sup>46</sup> Mathani, Dino. 2021. The Kampala Attacks and Their Regional Implications. Q&A, International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/great-lakes/uganda/kampala-attacks-and-their-regional-implications>.

<sup>47</sup> UN. 2022. Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo. 14 June 2022. New York. UN Security Council (S/2022/479).

<sup>48</sup> Al Jazeera. 2021. "DR Congo accepts US military help against ADF militia". 16 August 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/16/dr-congo-accepts-us-military-help-against-adf-militia>.

<sup>49</sup> Actualité.cd. 2023. "Évaluation des opérations contre les ADF: FARDC et UPDF pas opposés à la demande d'élargissement du rayon d'action". 7 April 2023. <https://actualite.cd/2023/04/07/evaluation-des-operations-contre-les-adf-fardc-et-updf-pas-opposees-la-demande>.

<sup>50</sup> The East African Crude-Oil Pipeline (EACOP). <https://eacop.com>.

<sup>51</sup> International Crisis Group. 2022. Easing the Turmoil in the Eastern DR Congo and Great Lakes. Brussels, Nairobi, New York: International Crisis Group, Africa Briefing No°181. <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/b181-dr-congo-great-lakes.pdf>.

operations of the ADF. In response, several countries including France, have developed close ties to the Ugandan military.<sup>52</sup>

The M23 crisis has removed considerable Congolese resources from the fight against the ADF and broader security operations in the affected regions of the Grand Nord of North Kivu and southern territories of Ituri Province. According to a Congolese security source in North Kivu:

“I can say that if it were not for the Ugandan army, we would already be in a difficult abyss to overcome against the ADF because at the same time as we deployed the FARDC against the M23 in the petit nord ; it is the Ugandans who have taken over here and are doing almost most of the work.”<sup>53</sup>

The nature of the joint operation Shujaa with the UPDF has also changed due to Congolese concerns about Uganda’s attitude towards the M23. Despite the close joint military cooperation against the ADF, Uganda has taken no steps to limit the M23’s freedom of movement in the border area and its control over the Bunagana border post in June 2022 remained unchallenged.<sup>54</sup> Diplomatically, Uganda has also remained discrete. After a long delay, it deployed a considerable contingent to the EACRF amidst Congolese concerns about the potential complicity with the M23. Although the DRC government does not officially call out the UPDF for supporting the M23, during a press conference on 13 March, Foreign Minister Lutundula spoke of an attack by two foreign armies.<sup>55</sup>

The relationship between Kinshasa and Kampala could be positively impacted by the recent reshuffle of the Congolese government. Two former rebel

---

<sup>52</sup> Congo Research Group. 2022. Uganda’s Operation Shujaa in the DRC – Fighting the ADF or Securing Economic Interests. New York: Congo Research Group / Ebuteli. <https://www.congoresearchgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/report-crg-ebuteli-uganda-operation-shujaa-drc-adf-securing-economic-interests.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Confidential interview, Beni, 1 March 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Chimpreports. 2023. “Despite UPDF Takeover, M23 Still Governs Bunagana – Locals”. 13 April 2023. <https://chimpreports.com/despite-updf-takeover-m23-still-governs-bunagana-locals/>.

<sup>55</sup> RTNC. 2023. “Guerre dans l’Est de la RDC : “Les FARDC font face à une armée terroriste et 2 armées régulières” (VPM Lutundula)”. 14 March 2023. <https://rtnc.cd/guerre-dans-lest-de-la-rdc-les-fardc-font-face-a-une-armee-terroriste-et-2-armees-regulieres-vpm-lutundula/>.

leaders (from the second Congolese war) of groups backed by Uganda have entered the government in strategic positions affecting regional diplomacy. Jean-Pierre Bemba, the historic leader of the Mouvement de Libération du Congo (MLC) has become deputy Prime-Minister and Minister for Defence.<sup>56</sup> Mbusa Nyamwisi, the leader of the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie / Mouvement de Libération (RCD/ML) originating from North Kivu, is the new Minister for Regional Integration.

At home, Uganda is also entering uncertain times. President Yoweri Museveni is in power since 1986 and while the country is currently stable, there are growing concerns about the post-Museveni transition, as any change of leadership will have profound effects on regional relations and could lead to further region instability that will affect the DRC.<sup>57</sup> The Presidents' son Muhoozi Kainerugaba is increasingly outspoken on his ambition to succeed his father. Muhoozi had a meteoric rise and is a senior officer in the UPDF, which is still the dominant institution in the country. The relationship between Museveni and Rwanda's Kagame has been complex from the start, and tense much of the time. In the past years, this gave rise to concerns about a possible direct military confrontation, requiring active mediation by the region. Much of this tension is linked to competition for access to Eastern DRC. It is therefore widely assumed that the 2021 Uganda – DRC road deal and the subsequent agreement to allow the UPDF to openly intervene in the DRC were a cause for concern and frustration in Kigali.

---

<sup>56</sup> Jean-Pierre Bemba was also one of the four vice-Presidents during the 2003-2006 political transition that followed the end of the war and prepared for the 2006 democratic elections. After the 2006 election, in which he was defeated by Joseph Kabila in the second round Bemba's MLC soldiers based in Kinshasa clashed with Kabila's forces. Jean-Pierre Bemba sought refuge at the South African Embassy in Kinshasa. He was arrested in Belgium in 2008 as he was charged for crimes committed by MLC troops in the CAR. He was convicted but in 2018 he won the appeal and was subsequently released and returned to the DRC.

<sup>57</sup> Murithi, Mutiga. 2021. Uganda's Museveni Clings to Power – But Trouble Lies Ahead. International Crisis Group, Q&A. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/uganda/ugandas-museveni-clings-power-trouble-lies-ahead>.

In the course of the past year however, Muhoozi has been instrumental in getting Kampala and Kigali closer together.<sup>58</sup> Such a move could in future provide Muhoozi with a powerful regional ally in case of a power struggle within Uganda. At the regional level, Rwanda is not openly challenged but it has only one source of vocal support, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, who openly expressed his support to both Rwanda and the M23 and threatened military action against the FDLR.<sup>59</sup>

### **2.4.3. A BRIEF & CONTESTED HONEYMOON WITH RWANDA**

Ever since the 1996-1997 “First Congo War” in which Laurent-Désiré Kabila came to power backed primarily by Rwandan troops, Rwanda has been at the centre of the political, security and socio-economic dynamics in much of Eastern DRC. When the second Congo war ended in 2002/2003 this complex relationship continued under Joseph Kabila. During the 2006 – 2019 period, there were several ups and downs in the relationship with Paul Kagame. On several occasions Rwandan forces were allowed to operate (openly or covertly) on DRC soil. In the meantime, Rwanda maintained a close relationship with some Congolese armed groups (such as the Nduma Defence of Congo – Rénové (NDC-R)).<sup>60</sup>

Rwanda had also maintained a network, mostly composed of former RCD-Goma / CNDP elements within the FARDC. Rwanda was closely involved with the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP) that developed into the M23 after the November 2011 elections and the failed integration of its members in the Congolese security forces. Amongst the dozens of Congolese armed groups, the CNDP and later the M23, mostly due to their

---

<sup>58</sup> Al Jazeera. 2022. “Can Museveni and Kagame’s renewed bromance inspire regional peace?”. 27 April 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/27/can-museveni-and-kagames-renewed-bromance-inspire-regional-peace>.

<sup>59</sup> UGnews. 2022. “DR Congo: Gen Muhoozi warns Rwandan Rebel Group, FDLR, of Military Action”. 28 May 2022 <https://ugnews24.info/politics/dr-congo-gen-muhoozi-warns-rwandan-rebel-group-fdlr-of-military-action>

<sup>60</sup> RFI. 2020. “RDC : le NDC-Rénové a reçu “un appui de plusieurs armées de la région” (GEC)”. 13 May 2020. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200513-rdc-le-ndc-renové-a-reçu-appui-plusieurs-armées-la-région-gec>. The Chronicles. 2020. “NDC-R: Congo’s Contract Militia Which “Killed” FDLR’s Gen Sylvestre Mudacumura”. 15 May 2020. <https://www.chronicles.rw/2020/05/15/ndc-r-congos-contract-militia-which-killed-fdlrs-gen-sylvestre-mudacumura/>.

cross-border networks in Rwanda and Uganda, remained the main strategic security challenge to the Congolese state. Other armed groups may have a very large impact on local populations, but rarely do they present a political challenge individually or even collectively to the State.

At the start of his presidency, the relationship between President Tshisekedi and his Rwandan colleague Kagame was rocky. As Chair of the AU from January 2018 to February 2019, Kagame was heavily involved in the regional and international response to the December 2018 Congolese elections. On 17 January 2019, Kagame presided a high-level meeting in Addis Ababa that “concluded that there were serious doubts on the conformity of the provisional results, as proclaimed by the National Independent Electoral Commission, with the votes cast”. The meeting decided to send a delegation to Kinshasa to “reach a consensus with the Congolese stakeholders.”<sup>61</sup> As the situation on the ground developed quickly, that mission was cancelled.

The first meeting between both leaders took place in the margins of the February 2019 AU Summit in Addis Ababa.<sup>62</sup> At that summit, President Tshisekedi was elected as the second vice-President of the AU (preparing him to run for Chair in 2021).<sup>63</sup> The following months there were several contacts between both countries at the most senior levels. In May 2019, President Kagame was present in Kinshasa during the funeral of Etienne Tshisekedi.

Under Tshisekedi, the operations with Rwanda to neutralize the FDLR, remnants of the 1994 genocidal forces and still operating from Eastern DRC, continued. Since the end of the second Congo War, there had been several instances of Rwandan military deployments to Eastern DRC, some discrete,

---

<sup>61</sup> African Union. 2019. Communiqué of the High-Level Consultative Meeting of Heads of State and Government on the Situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo”. 17 January 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Radio Okapi. 2019. “Tête-à-tête Felix Tshisekedi – Paul Kagame à Addis Abeba”. 11 February 2019. <https://www.radiookapi.net/2019/02/11/actualite/politique/tete-tete-felix-tshisekedi-paul-kagame-addis-abeba>.

<sup>63</sup> Hoebeke, Hans and Sematumba Onesphore. 2023. The Democratic Republic of Congo’s Chairmanship of the African Union. In *Yearbook on the African Union 2021 Vol. 2*. Edited by Engel, Ulf. Brill.

others less so.<sup>64</sup> Several reports, including by the UN Group of Experts and the Kivu Security Tracker (KST) report discrete Rwanda Defence Forces (RDF) operations often reportedly in collaboration with the Congolese armed forces during the period 2019-2021.<sup>65</sup> In September 2019, the FDLR Commander Sylvestre Mudacumura was killed in a military operation. This was the first in a series of targeted killings of FDLR / RUD-Urunana / CNRD leaders and senior officers. In December 2019, in South Kivu the FARDC conducted operations against the Conseil national pour le renouveau et la démocratie (CNRD), a break-away from the FDLR; in the same month a large group of dependents and combatants were repatriated to Rwanda. In May 2021, the head of the FDLR special forces unit 'Commando de Recherche et d'Action en Profondeur (CRAP)', who were accused as the authors of the deadly attack on a convoy carrying, amongst others, the Italian Ambassador to the DRC, was arrested and reportedly handed over to Rwanda. Under the state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri provinces, in force since May 2021, the newly installed provincial authorities were also initially focusing their attention on the ADF and FDLR.<sup>66</sup>

In 2019, while relations between Rwanda and the DRC were on the mend, the Rwandan government accused Uganda of supporting the FDLR.<sup>67</sup> In June 2021, the Rwandan newspaper The New Times reported that "In the

---

<sup>64</sup> Most prominent was the large-scale February 2009 Umoja Wetu ('our unity') operation. Johnson, Dominic and Schlindwein, Simone and Schmolze, Bianca. 2019. Les FDLR, histoire d'une malice rwandaise: des forêts du Kivu aux tribunaux de l'Allemagne. Ch.Links 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Kivu Security Tracker. 2019. "The deadliest month ever recorded by KST". Monthly report, November 2019. KST.<https://kivusecurity.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/reports/29/Monthly%20Report%20November%202019%20-%20final.pdf>. Kivu Security Tracker. 2020. "Incursions étrangères et affrontements". Monthly report, April 2020. KST. <https://kivusecurity.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/reports/34/rapport-mensuel-n30-avril20.pdf>. UN Security Council. 2020. "Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo". New York. UN Security Council (S/2020/1283). 23 December 2020. RFI. 2020.

Militaires rwandais en RDC [1/2] : Kigali mène t'elle une guerre secrète ?. 23 April 2020. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200422-militaires-rwandais-en-rdc-kigali-mè-t-elle-une-guerre-secrète-12>; RFI. 2020. "Militaires rwandais en RDC : quelles preuves ? (2/2)". 24 April 2020. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200423-militaires-rwandais-en-rdc-queelles-preuves-22>.

<sup>66</sup> Politico.cd. 2021. "État de siège: "tous les sanctuaires, toutes les places fortes, tous les quartiers généraux de l'ADF ont été démantelés et occupés" (Armée)". 10 June 2021. <https://www.politico.cd/la-rdc-a-la-une/2021/06/10/etat-de-siege-tous-les-sanctuaires-toutes-les-places-fortes-tous-les-quartiers-generaux-de-ladf-ont-ete-demanteles-et-occupes-armee.html/86037/>.

<sup>67</sup> Reuters. 2019. "Rwanda accuses Uganda of supporting rebels". 5 March 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uganda-rwanda-diplomacy-idUSKCN1QM1T9>.

past two years, hundreds of FDLR fighters were repatriated to Rwanda by Congolese authorities. Pressure from the Congolese army coupled with internal wrangles has seen the FDLR gradually weaken.”<sup>68</sup> But since 2022, when its relations with Uganda were improving, Rwanda once again accused the DRC government of partnering with the FDLR as a justification for freedom of action in Eastern DRC.

In June 2021 the attempt at normalization of the bilateral relationship reached its peak. In a series of meetings at the border, both presidents signed a series of agreements. The talks covered the creation of favourable investment conditions, trans-border trade, and the economic cooperation between both countries. Agreements were signed on the promotion and protection of investment, the avoidance of double taxation, against tax fraud and fiscal evasion. An agreement between the Congolese state-owned mine company Société Aurifère du Kivu et du Maniema (SAKIMA SA) and a Rwandan company, Dither Ltd was the key achievement of the talks. Artisanal gold produced by SAKIMA would be refined in Rwanda by Dither.<sup>69</sup> Earlier, the Rwandan airline, Rwandair had added connections to several Congolese airports. Both countries were also jointly working on the exploitation of the methane gas in Lake Kivu.

For different reasons, most prominently, palace-politics within the Congolese presidency, the main interlocutors between Tshisekedi and Kagame have been removed at different stages.<sup>70</sup> This has brought considerable instability in the management of this crucial and sensitive relationship, which has become increasingly political as the shadow of the 2023 elections approaches (see above).

---

<sup>68</sup> The New Times. 2021. “DR Congo military captures another top FDLR commander”. 03 June 2021. <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/186482/News/dr-congo-military-captures-another-top-fdlr-commander>.

<sup>69</sup> Agence Congolaise de Presse. 2021. “Tshisekedi et son homologue rwandais Paul Kagame renforcent les liens de coopération entre leurs deux nations”. 26 June 2021. <https://acpcongo.com/index.php/2021/06/26/felix-tshisekedi-et-paul-kagame-pour-le-developpement-de-la-cooperation-entre-la-rdc-et-le-rwanda/>.

<sup>70</sup> Vital Kamerhe was arrested in April 2020 and released in December 2021. François Beya was arrested early February 2022 and Fortunat Biselele was arrested in January 2023. Others have also been arrested or removed from their position, including Lt Gen Philémon Yav, who was the commanding officer of the 3rd Military Zone – comprising the Eastern Provinces.

The economic agreements with Rwanda, including the gold refinery deal, were a subject of controversy as Rwandan operators are widely suspected of buying, processing and exporting vast quantities of the Eastern DRC's smuggled artisanal gold production. With limited national production, and no transparent data on provenance, gold has quickly become one of Rwanda's major exports, with most of the output directed to the UAE. In October 2021 President Tshisekedi visited the UAE and signed cooperation agreements. Nearly a year later, this was followed by concrete protocols for UAE investment in agriculture, mining and renewable energies. Most prominent is the creation of Primera gold, a company partly owned by the DRC government and the UAE company Primera Group Limited. The company is currently mostly active in South Kivu. It has been given the management of the Centre Spécialisé d'Achat de Commercialisation et d'Exportation de l'Or issu de l'exploitation artisanale (CSACEO).<sup>71</sup> From January to April 2023, Primera gold reported 650 kg of gold exports. Previously official Congolese exports of artisanal gold were in the dozens of kg. The express aim of the joint venture and the CSACEO is to capture the artisanal production, that was otherwise smuggled abroad (mostly to Rwanda) in the official circuit.<sup>72</sup> Primera gold has rapidly become the main weapon in the economic war with Kigali.

In the immediate run-up to the current conflict, the two countries were still seemingly on a course of normalization. They had established a joint intelligence sharing on border threats in Gisenyi, across the border with Goma.<sup>73</sup> And on 10 November 2021, as part of an evaluation tour of the Eastern provinces, the Congolese Chief of Defence Staff General Célestin Mbala Munsense, visited Rwanda for talks, including on the M23.<sup>74</sup> A day earlier, Rwanda had denied any involvement with M23 actions and the Ministry of

---

<sup>71</sup> Décret N°22/48 du 30 Décembre 2022 Portant mesures incitatives en vue de la lutte contre la fraude à l'exportation de l'or issu de l'exploitation artisanale par la création d'un centre spécialisé d'achat, de commercialisation et d'exportation de l'or issu de l'exploitation artisanale. Kinshasa. 2022.

<sup>72</sup> Radio Okapi. 2023. "Le ministre Nicolas Kazadi explique les avantages du contrat entre la RDC et Primera Gold". 6 June 2023. <https://www.radiookapi.net/2023/06/06/actualite/economie/le-ministre-nicolas-kazadi-explique-les-avantages-du-contrat-entre-la>.

<sup>73</sup> Confidential interview with UN official, February 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Ministry of Defence, Rwanda. 2021. "DRC Armed Forces Chief of General Staff visits Rwanda". 10 November 2021. <https://www.mod.gov.rw/news-detail/drc-armed-forces-chief-of-general-staff-visits-rwanda>.



Defence published a statement: “Any reports, in the media or by officials in the region, that the ex-M23 armed group originated from or retreated to Rwanda, is propaganda aimed at undermining the good relations between Rwanda and DRC.”<sup>75</sup>

In late November 2021, President Kagame travelled to Kinshasa for bilateral talks and to participate in President Tshisekedi’s conference on ‘positive masculinity’.<sup>76</sup> Mid-December 2021, Rwanda and the DRC signed an agreement on bilateral police collaboration, covering trans-border criminality, trafficking, and counterterrorism. Under the agreement a joint operations centre was to be established in Goma.<sup>77</sup> Disinformation about the agreement spread rapidly, with rumours that the Rwandan police would deploy to Goma. This led to immediate, violent protest led by activist groups. This serves as a reminder, if one was needed, of the extreme sensitivity of the relationship between both countries.<sup>78</sup> It was also a sign that, despite growing concerns, there was still a functioning bilateral relationship at the end of 2021.

---

<sup>75</sup> Ministry of Defence, Rwanda. 2021. Press Release: RDF not involved in M23 attack in DRC. 9 November 2021.

<https://www.mod.gov.rw/news-detail/press-release-rdf-not-involved-in-m23-attack-in-drc>.

<sup>76</sup> The New Times. 2021. “Kagame, Tshisekedi discuss ties on margins of masculinity meeting”. 25 November 2021. <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/191484/News/kagame-tshisekedi-discuss-ties-on-margins-of-masculinity-meeting>.

<sup>77</sup> Rwanda National Police. 2021. Rwanda, DRC Police institutions sign cooperation pact. 13 December 2021 <https://www.police.gov.rw/media-archives/news-detail/news/rwanda-drc-police-institutions-sign-cooperation-pact/>.

<sup>78</sup> Al Jazeera. 2021. “Several killed as protests rock Goma in eastern DRC”. 21 December 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/21/several-killed-as-protests-rock-goma-in-eastern-drc>.

# The Return of the M23 and the Crisis with Rwanda

In November 2021, a few months after the signing of the bilateral agreements with Kigali and other regional states that seemed to signify a normalization of regional relations, developments in the borderlands of North Kivu showed that the page was not yet turned. In a few months, the reappearance of the M23, mainly a proxy force for Rwandan interests, and its military successes destroyed the basis of President Tshisekedi's stabilization strategy. By the summer of 2022, Rwanda and the DRC were in the deepest confrontation in a decade and on the cusp of open warfare.

## 3.1. The M23

The M23 is the latest incarnation of the Rwanda-supported armed groups operating in Eastern DRC. The group is named after the failed peace agreement of 23 March 2009 between the DRC government and the CNDP.<sup>79</sup> The CNDP itself was composed of mostly Tutsi former RCD-Goma combatants, the major armed group in the 1998-2003 war. The M23 started its military campaign in April 2012, and briefly occupied the North Kivu provincial capital

---

<sup>79</sup> DRC Affinity Group. 2014. Consolidating the Peace: Closing the M23 Chapter. New York: Social Science Research Council. <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/consolidating-the-peace-closing-the-m23-chapter/>. The peace agreement with the CNDP covered issues related to the CNDP members (amnesty, reconciliation, integration in the security forces) but also wider issues such as the management of local conflicts, the return of refugees and Security Sector Reform (SSR). ( [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CD\\_090323\\_Accord%20de%20paix%20entre%20le%20gouv%20et%20le%20CNDP%20%28French%29.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CD_090323_Accord%20de%20paix%20entre%20le%20gouv%20et%20le%20CNDP%20%28French%29.pdf)).

of Goma in November of the same year. The M23 offensive led to intense regional and international diplomatic activity, prompted by the fall of Goma.<sup>80</sup> The major initiatives were the appointment of a UN Special Envoy for the Region, the adoption of the PSCF, the reinforcement of MONUSCO with the (SADC) FIB, the reinforcement of ICGLR initiatives, and strong pressure on Rwanda.

After their military defeat in 2013, the M23 retreated to camps in Rwanda and Uganda. ICGLR, supported by SADC, facilitated talks between the government and the M23 that resulted in the 12 December 2013 Nairobi Declarations.<sup>81</sup> These included concrete steps that would allow for the repatriation of the M23 combatants via a new Congolese Disarmament and Demobilization Plan, amnesty for combatants, and the return of Congolese refugees. At the same time, SADC and ICGLR focused on the other main regionally disruptive armed groups, the FDLR and the ADF. However, there were increasing signs that all of these processes were beginning to be bogged down due to a diminishing convergence of interests and the FDLR successfully pretending a voluntary disarmament.<sup>82</sup>

In the period 2014 – 2019 there was little, if any, progress other than partial gestures such as the adoption in the DRC of an amnesty law.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Shepherd, Ben. 2018. Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Democratic Republic of Congo (M23) Case Study. Stabilisation Unit, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, United Kingdom. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/766018/DRC\\_case\\_study.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766018/DRC_case_study.pdf).

<sup>81</sup> There were three documents after the talks. The DRC government and the M23 both signed a detailed declaration and there was also a communiqué signed by SADC (Malawi) and the ICGLR (Uganda). (<https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/793>).

<sup>82</sup> International Crisis Group. 2014. Congo: Ending the Status Quo. Africa Briefing N°107. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/democratic-republic-congo/congo-ending-status-quo>.

<sup>83</sup> L'accord cadre pour la paix, la sécurité et la coopération pour la République Démocratique du Congo et la région. Premier rapport d'étape. 19 September 2014. [https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/premier\\_rapport\\_detape\\_sur\\_laccord\\_cadre\\_pour\\_la\\_paix\\_la\\_securite\\_et\\_la\\_cooperation\\_pour\\_la\\_rdc\\_et\\_la\\_region.pdf](https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/premier_rapport_detape_sur_laccord_cadre_pour_la_paix_la_securite_et_la_cooperation_pour_la_rdc_et_la_region.pdf). Rapport d'étape sur la mise en oeuvre de l'accord cadre pour la paix, la sécurité et la coopération pour la République Démocratique du Congo et la région. Projet 14 October 2016. [https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/14\\_10\\_2016\\_rapport\\_detape\\_mise\\_en\\_oeuvre\\_de\\_laccord\\_cadre\\_fr\\_17h45.pdf](https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/14_10_2016_rapport_detape_mise_en_oeuvre_de_laccord_cadre_fr_17h45.pdf).

The M23 combatants remained in the camps in Rwanda and Uganda.<sup>84</sup> The issue remained a fixture on the agenda of the PSCF's Regional Oversight Mechanism (ROM) and occasional initiatives by the UN Special Envoy on the Great Lakes Region. In 2019 there were new talks between Rwanda and the DRC about the return of the M23 combatants.<sup>85</sup> The outcome of the talks between the DRC and Rwanda in 2019 provided for the suspension of arrest warrants, amnesty, and a process to select M23 members for integration in the FARDC or as rangers for the protection service of the national parks.<sup>86</sup> From September 2020, the M23 was also in direct talks with the DRC government, led by the Congolese National PSCF Follow-up Mechanism (MNS). The group focused on the modalities of their return to the DRC.

### **3.2. The 2021-2022 'M23' offensive**

In early November 2021 the M23 suddenly re-appeared with attacks on the FARDC and rangers of the Virunga Natural Park (VNP) in Rutshuru Territory.<sup>87</sup> For a while, M23 elements had been based in the vicinity of the Mount Sabinyo area near the tri-border area (Rwanda/DRC/Uganda), where it enjoyed considerable freedom of movement.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> There have been reports about M23 combatants recruited or active in other security crises, see: International Crisis Group. 2020. DR Congo: Ending the Cycle of Violence in Ituri. Africa Report N°292. <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/292-drc-ending-violence-in-ituri%20%281%29.pdf>. Actualité.cd. 2020. "Bertrand Bisimwa rejette les accusations de l'International Crisis Group et accuse les services de renseignements congolais de rapatrier clandestinement les ex-combattants M23". 18 July 2020. <https://actualite.cd/2020/07/18/bertrand-bisimwa-rejette-les-accusations-de-linternational-crisis-group-et-accuse-les>.

<sup>85</sup> Jeune Afrique. 2021. "RDC-Rwanda: ce que prévoit l'accord pour le rapatriement des ex-combattants du M23". 16 November 2021. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1266464/politique/rdc-ce-que-prevoit-laccord-avec-le-rwanda-pour-le-rapatriement-des-ex-combattants-du-m23/>.

<sup>86</sup> The talks resulted in a roadmap signed by the then (now deceased) head of the Congolese military intelligence service Maj Gen Delphin Kahimbi, the head of the Rwandan intelligence agency NISS and Jean-Marie Runiga for the M23.

<sup>87</sup> Initial attacks were reported on 7/8 November at Chanzu and Runyoni, on 20 Nov at Bukima and on 21/22 November on Ngugu, all in Rutshuru Territory. In September 2021 there was a limited border incident on the Congolese – Rwandan border – unlikely related to the M23 but a possible warning sign of things to come.

<sup>88</sup> According to UN sources, the group was present in the area since 2017. Communication UN official, January 2023.

Most observers linked the timing of this offensive to the competition between Rwanda and Uganda (see above). The Ugandan road-building project in North Kivu that would allow to circumvent Rwanda was one element, the other was an agreement between the DRC, Uganda and Burundi that allowed both countries to operate on Congolese soil (see above) – but not Rwanda. This explanation is aligned with the assessment that the M23 is mainly a proxy for Rwanda. There are also several elements that could have driven the M23 to act. First, there is the lack of progress in the implementation of talks with the Congolese government. Second, the offensive coincided with some initial progress in the development of the DRC's new national DDR policy, the P-DDRCS. This would have made it difficult to treat the M23 differently from other Congolese armed groups. The DRC's international partners and donors had strongly insisted that there should be no repetition of past re-integration attempts of armed group members into the armed forces. Allowing the M23 to integrate into the institutions would also not have been easily accepted by domestic public opinion. However, on its own, the M23 would not have been able to exert serious pressure on the Congolese government.

From November 2021 up to April 2022, M23 activity was mostly limited to local skirmishes with the FARDC and VNP ranger units deployed in the borderlands. Given the experience from a decade earlier, concerns were rapidly rising that the group might expand its aims to capture border posts and could threaten the provincial capital, Goma. During this phase, the group also targeted MONUSCO troops and helicopters. In late March 2022 a MONUSCO helicopter was downed, immediately hampering the missions freedom of movement. Around the same period, the North Kivu provincial government denounced Rwandan support to the M23.<sup>89</sup> From the outset, there were numerous reports of M23 recruitment activities in Rutshuru and Masisi territories. Recruitment was also reported amongst Congolese refugee populations in Uganda and Rwanda. The M23 is also likely to have profited from the frustrated demobilized combatants that were mostly abandoned in camps in North Kivu. As a result, by May 2022, the M23 numbers had increased considerably.

---

<sup>89</sup> Jeune Afrique. 2022. "RDC-Rwanda : le rapport confidentiel des renseignements congolais sur les rebelles du M23". 29 March 2022. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1334378/politique/rdc-rwanda-le-rapport-confidentiel-des-renseignements-congolais-sur-les-rebelles-du-m23>

Shortly after the DRC's entry into the EAC in April 2022, as a conclusion of the conclave of EAC heads of state and the launch of the Nairobi process, talks were launched between the DRC government and Congolese armed groups, including the M23. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, the first day of these talks, clashes erupted between the M23 and government forces. The Congolese government immediately demanded the exclusion of the M23 (Makenga wing) from the consultations. According to the M23, the fighting was the result of a planned FARDC offensive, aiming to derail the Nairobi process. Fighting continued and on 25 May, the group briefly took control over Rumangabo, the largest FARDC military base in the area. On 28 May 2022, the Congolese government decided to consider the M23 as a 'terrorist group', thereby excluding it from the Nairobi process. From May 2022, the DRC government also systematically denounced the Rwandan support to the M23. This support was later documented by the UN Group of Experts.<sup>90</sup> It has since also been denounced internationally.<sup>91</sup>

From May 2022 to February 2023, the M23 – supported by RDF elements – continued to make considerable territorial gains in North Kivu, consistently defeating the FARDC and its allied local armed groups and almost totally encircling the city of Goma. On 12 June the M23 captured the town of Bunagana, a strategic border post on the Uganda – DRC border. The images of well equipped, well dressed M23 combatants increased Congolese public outcry about direct involvement of RDF troops in the fighting. The fall of Bunagana also increased Congolese concerns about the attitude of

---

<sup>90</sup> The Group of Experts confirmed Rwandan military operations in Rutshuru Territory, attacking positions of the FDLR and providing support to the M23 in its (leaked) confidential update to the Security Council of July 2022. Le Monde. 2022. "RDC : un rapport confidentiel de l'ONU apporte des « preuves solides » de l'implication du Rwanda dans l'Est". 4 August 2022. [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/08/04/un-rapport-confidentiel-de-l-onu-accuse-des-militaires-rwandais-d-attaques-contre-l-armee-congolaise-et-de-soutien-au-m23\\_6137182\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/08/04/un-rapport-confidentiel-de-l-onu-accuse-des-militaires-rwandais-d-attaques-contre-l-armee-congolaise-et-de-soutien-au-m23_6137182_3212.html).

<sup>91</sup> Le Monde. 2022. "La guerre diplomatique et médiatique entre la RDC et le Rwanda s'accélère depuis le drame de Kishishe". 21 December 2022. [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/12/21/la-guerre-diplomatique-et-mediatique-entre-la-rdc-et-le-rwanda-s-accelere-depuis-le-drame-de-kishishe\\_6155318\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/12/21/la-guerre-diplomatique-et-mediatique-entre-la-rdc-et-le-rwanda-s-accelere-depuis-le-drame-de-kishishe_6155318_3212.html). France24. 2022. "European Union urges Rwanda to stop supporting M23 rebels in DR Congo". 31 December 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20221231-european-union-urges-rwanda-to-stop-supporting-m23-rebels-in-dr-congo>. US Department of State. 2023. Statement on Report by UN Group of Experts. <https://www.state.gov/statement-on-report-by-un-group-of-experts/>.

the Ugandan armed forces. This and the normalization of relations between Kampala and Kigali during this period have added to the concerns about Kampala's intentions (see above).<sup>92</sup>

The conflict has a profound socio-economic and humanitarian effect in North Kivu. The city of Goma is held in a noose and the prices of food and charcoal for households are rising. The important cross-border trade (that had already been affected by the Covid crisis) has been deeply impacted, affecting the livelihoods of numerous households. Since June 2022 the border closes at 15:00, also reducing transborder transactions.<sup>93</sup> This situation is worsened by the arrival in and around Goma of huge numbers of internally displaced persons, an 800.000 estimated by March 2023.<sup>94</sup>

### **3.3. Rising Tension and A War of Narratives with Kigali**

The conflict has seen a swift escalation of tensions between Kigali and Kinshasa, including very strong direct personal attacks between the leaders of both countries. The looming crisis between Rwanda and the DRC was already present at the DRC's entry into the EAC. While President Tshisekedi proclaimed a Congolese desire for good neighbourliness when he signed the accession to the EAC in Nairobi on 8 April 2022, the distant body language and the few words spoken by President Kagame told another tale.

The bilateral fabric that had been woven in the previous years unravelled in mere months. The Congolese government suspended all bilateral agreements with Rwanda, including the Rwandair flights.<sup>95</sup> In October 2022, the

---

<sup>92</sup> Jeune Afrique. 2023. "L'EAC n'y a rien changé". 1 February 2023.

<sup>93</sup> Actualité.cd. 2022. « RDC-Rwanda : désormais tous les postes-frontières seront fermés à 15 heures, rapporte le gouverneur du Sud-Kivu ». 17 June 2022. <https://actualite.cd/2022/06/17/rdc-rwanda-desormais-tous-les-postes-frontieres-seront-fermes-15-heures-rapporte-le>.

<sup>94</sup> RFI. 2023. « RDC: le camp de Bulengo à Goma au bord de la saturation ». 19 March 2023. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230319-rdc-le-camp-de-bulengo-a-goma-au-bord-de-la-saturation>.

<sup>95</sup> Agence Congolaise de Presse. 2022. "La RDC considère désormais le M23 comme un mouvement terroriste". 28 May 2022. <https://acpcongo.com/index.php/2022/05/28/la-rdc-considere-desormais-le-m23-comme-un-mouvement-terroriste/>. RFI. 2022. « RDC: tous les accords signés avec le Rwanda suspendus après un Conseil de défense » 16 June 2022. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220616-rdc-tous-les-accords-signés-avec-le-rwanda-suspendus-après-un-conseil-de-défense>.

Rwandan Ambassador to DRC was expelled from the country.<sup>96</sup> The situation at the mutual border became tense as Rwanda denounced multiple rocket attacks on its territory. There were also several incidents at border posts, mostly in Goma, but also at the border in South Kivu. Rwanda notified several of these incidents to the ICGLR's Extended Joint Verification Mechanism (EJVM). In a more serious incident, on 24 January 2023, a Congolese Air Force Sukhoi-25 ground attack aircraft was fired at with a surface to air missile (SAM) from Rwanda. Rwanda claimed the Congolese jet had violated its airspace.<sup>97</sup> The Congolese government denied this and called the action "a deliberate act of aggression that equals an act of war to sabotage the implementation of the Luanda and Nairobi processes".<sup>98</sup>

Rwanda's public defence and response to Congolese and international critique about its now well-documented involvement in the DRC through the M23 is not very different from a decade ago. On 8 February 2022, President Kagame had decried the threat emanating from the FDLR presence in Eastern DRC and threatened with a military response even without Congolese approval.<sup>99</sup> He was clearly concerned and frustrated that in the months before, the DRC had approved operations by Ugandan and Burundian troops against the ADF and RED-Tabara respectively. Rwanda continues to paint a picture of the persistent security threat presented by the FDLR and the supposed DRC government collaboration with the group. President Kagame reserves for Rwanda the unequivocal duty to intervene when its security is threatened by the FDLR – a continuous argument since 1994:

"The threat posed to our security by the activity of a group steeped in genocidal ideology like the FDLR is clearly likely to lead us to intervene on Congolese territory, without apology or notice" and to continue: "The FDLR are integrated within the FARDC itself and that is where

---

<sup>96</sup> Al Jazeera. 2022. « DR Congo expels Rwandan Ambassador as M23 rebels seize towns ». 30 October 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/30/dr-congo-expels-rwandan-ambassador-as-m23-rebels-gain-ground>.

<sup>97</sup> Two months earlier, a similar Congolese jet had effectively violated Rwandan airspace when it (probably) erroneously landed on Gisenyi airfield (in very close proximity to Goma with a parallel runway).

<sup>98</sup> Congolese Ministry of Communication and Media. Communiqué officiel. 24 January 2023.

<sup>99</sup> International Crisis Group. 2022. Easing the Turmoil in the Eastern DR Congo and Great Lakes. Africa briefing N°181. <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/b181-dr-congo-great-lakes.pdf>.



the problem lies. This state of affairs does not prevent us from claiming our legitimate right to put out the fire at its source, wherever it is, with or without anyone's consent."<sup>100</sup>

In March 2023, at a Rwanda government conference on 'The consolidation of Gains in National Unity and Regional Peacebuilding: Addressing the Threats in the Great Lakes Region', the Rwandan Presidential Security Advisor, General James Kabarebe (a veteran of the Congo wars) stated that the Rwandan concern is not so much the FDLR's numbers, but its ideology, and that has to be stopped before it spreads. After the conference the Rwandan 'The New Times' commented: "The resurgence of hate speech and genocide ideology in the region, particularly in eastern DR Congo, constitutes a threat not only to Rwanda's gains in unity and reconciliation but also to sustainable peace in the region".<sup>101</sup>

For President Kagame, the M23 are representatives of the Congolese Rwandophone community that is not accepted in the DRC and is fighting for its rights. In the Rwandan narrative, the root cause of the M23 crisis lies within the domestic governance deficiencies in the DRC. This is also best worded by President Kagame in an interview published by Jeune Afrique on 27 January 2023. Kigali puts the blame for the security crisis on the lack of effective governance in Kinshasa, on the attitude of Western countries, the failure of the UN and MONUSCO, and portrays Rwanda as the ideal culprit in this narrative:

"I can hear that Rwanda is part of the Eastern problem, but how can we maintain that it is the problem, the one and only? This is simply dishonest and, above all, totally counterproductive."

In Kigali's public narrative the root of the problem is therefore obviously Congolese. Rwanda finds a somewhat sympathetic ear for this narrative amongst several regional and international actors that remain frustrated by

---

<sup>100</sup> Jeune Afrique. 2023. "Paul Kagame : « Je n'accepte pas que le Rwanda soit le bouc émissaire des dirigeants congolais »". 27 January 2023. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1411424/politique/paul-kagame-je-naccepte-pas-que-le-rwanda-soit-le-bouc-emissaire-des-dirigeants-congolais/>.

<sup>101</sup> The New Times. 2023. "Youth reflect on unity, peace consolidation in Great Lakes Region. 10 March 2023. <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/5657/news/rwanda/youth-reflect-on-unity-peace-consolidation-in-great-lakes-region>.

the lack of effective reform in the DRC, and who for a long time remained prudent in publicly attributing any blame to Kigali. This has caused a growing frustration within the Congolese government and population (see further). However, in the DRC, there are critical voices:

“Regional tensions are the responsibility of the Congolese first. A vast territory (2,345,000 km<sup>2</sup>), populated by 100 million inhabitants, should have a dissuasive, well-trained and well-armed army. » For good cooperation, we must move away from the diplomacy of weakness, the diplomacy of pity. Diplomats sometimes tell me: “you express yourself poorly, you have no project”. But Kagame knows how to sell himself, he has clear plans for his country.”<sup>102</sup>

The DRC has developed a discourse focused primarily on denouncing the invasion by the RDF and discrediting the M23 and its claims. In the official Congolese narrative, the M23 is little more than a camouflage for the political, economic, and strategic interests of the Rwandan regime. At the May 2022 AU summit and a few days later in New York during a meeting of the UNSC, Congolese Foreign Minister Christophe Lutundula condemned the Rwandan support to the M23. In early June 2022, during a visit to the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), President Tshisekedi for the first time also publicly accused Rwanda of being behind the M23’s resurgence.<sup>103</sup> A few days after these declarations, the border town of Bunagana was taken by the M23. Most other Congolese political leaders, including the speaker of parliament Christophe Mboso and opposition politician Martin Fayulu, have also denounced Rwandan support to the M23.<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> Confidential interview with Congolese senior official, Kinshasa, February 2023.

<sup>103</sup> RFI. 2022. “Pour Félix Tshisekedi, “le Rwanda a soutenu le M23 pour venir agresser la RDC””. 06 June 2022. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220606-pour-felix-tshisekedi-le-rwanda-a-soutenu-le-m23-pour-venir-agresser-la-rdc>. At the time, the Congolese President Sassou Nguesso, who is on good standing with both countries’ leadership, expressed his confidence that dialogue would resolve the issue soon.

<sup>104</sup> Dépêche.cd. 15 Jun 22. « Soutien des pays frontaliers de la RDC au M23 : Dénoncé par Mboso, le fils de Museveni veut rencontrer Félix Tshisekedi ». 15 Jun 22. <https://depeche.cd/2022/06/15/soutien-des-pays-frontaliers-de-la-rdc-au-m23-denonce-par-mboso-le-fils-de-museveni-veut-rencontrer-felix-tshisekedi/>. Politico.cd. 2022. « Agression dans l’Est : « Le Rwanda et l’Ouganda se donnent à cœur joie dans la déstabilisation de la RDC » (Martin Fayulu) ». 16 November 2022. <https://www.politico.cd/la-rdc-a-la-une/2022/11/16/agression-dans-lest-le-rwanda-et-louganda-se-donnent-a-coeur-joie-dans-la-destabilisation-de-la-rdc-martin-fayulu.html/120965/>.

Even if the FARDC have continued to lose ground since the beginning, Félix Tshisekedi draws some political dividends from this discourse of firmness that is based on the notion of “no negotiation with the M23, Rwanda is the aggressor”. President Tshisekedi said in his speech to the diplomatic corps in Kinshasa on 30 January 2023:

“Always the same refrain rehashed at will by Rwandan leaders, namely: “FDLR” and hate speech against Rwandan speakers... no credit can be given to these allegations which are not supported by any irrefutable proof; proof that, moreover, the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo is still waiting for from the Rwandan authorities and the international community.”

For the DRC the real reasons for the Rwandan intervention lie elsewhere:

“...the real issues behind the aggression of the Democratic Republic of Congo by Rwanda and the security crisis in the East of my country are economic and hegemonistic. No Congolese is fooled or naive about this evidence.”<sup>105</sup>

The conflict and its communication war have become increasingly personal, often to an unprecedented level. In another speech in Kinshasa in December 2022, President Tshisekedi called for a regime change in Kigali:

“It’s pointless to see Rwandans as enemies. It’s the Rwandan regime headed by Paul Kagame, which is an enemy to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Rwandans are our brothers and sisters. In fact, they need our help to liberate themselves. It has nothing to do with what their leader has imposed on them.”<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Discours Président Félix Tshisekedi au corps diplomatique, Kinshasa, 31 January 2023 (<https://www.forumdesas.net/2023/01/discours-de-son-excellence-monsieur-felix-antoine-tshisekedi-tshilombo-president-de-la-republique-democratique-du-congo-chef-de-letat-president-en-exercice-de-la-sadc-lors-de-lech/>).

<sup>106</sup> Chimpreports.2022. “Tshisekedi, Kagame Trade Barbs as DRC, Rwanda Teeter on Verge of War”. 5 December 2022. <https://chimpreports.com/tshisekedi-kagame-trade-barbs-as-drc-rwanda-teeter-on-verge-of-war/>

In his annual speech to the diplomatic corps in Kigali on 08 February 2023, President Kagame rebuked, stating that, “This Person (President Tshisekedi) has dishonoured dozens of agreements he has made with people including even last time in Bujumbura”.<sup>107</sup>

These latest remarks are all the more important as they came mere days after an EAC summit meeting in Bujumbura, where both leaders met in person for the first time since their meeting in New York which was facilitated by French President Emmanuel Macron on 21 September 2022 (see below).

### **3.4. The Political Impact in the DRC**

When the M23 offensive escalated from May 2022, the developments on the ground pushed Kinshasa into an increasingly outspoken verbal confrontation with Kigali which included a firm position on the M23 by formally excluding all negotiations with the Group. These strong positions are particularly important now that the DRC is entering a sensitive electoral period. It is preparing for national, provincial, and local elections that are to be held in December 2023. Despite concerns voiced by the political opposition and civil society about the technical preparations of these elections, the M23 conflict and the tension with Rwanda dominate public discourse.<sup>108</sup> The evolution of the conflict will also to a large degree decide whether the elections can effectively be organized on the entire national territory and within the constitutional delay. The occupation by the M23 of large parts of the territories of Rutshuru, Masisi and Nyiragongo has made it impossible to register voters for the upcoming elections in these areas.

---

<sup>107</sup> The New Times. 2023. “Video – DR Congo: Kagame calls out international community on political, diplomatic hypocrisy”. 09 February 2023. <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/4878/news/security/video---dr-congo-kagame-calls-out-international-community-on-political-diplomacy-hypocrisy>.

<sup>108</sup> RFI. 2023. “RDC : quatre leaders de l'opposition donnent à Lubumbashi un signal d'actions communes”. 14 April 2023. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230414-rdc-quatre-leaders-de-l-opposition-donnent-a-lubumbashi-un-signal-d-actions-communes>.

In 2021, when President Tshisekedi broke the alliance with his predecessor Joseph Kabila, the new government coalition of the 'Union Sacrée de la Nation' (USN) started its government programme with an emphasis on the stabilization of the East.<sup>109</sup> The first and major controversial decision of the Sama Lukonde government, barely out of its starting blocks, was the imposition of a 'state of siege' in the provinces of Ituri and North Kivu in May 2021.<sup>110</sup> The government also adopted a new DDR policy based on community support to contribute to the neutralization of the domestic armed groups, the Programme de Désarmement, Démobilisation, Relèvement Communautaire et Stabilisation (P-DDRCS). In the same year President Tshisekedi led an active regional diplomacy (see above). President Tshisekedi also spent several weeks in the Eastern provinces to add to the political momentum.

With his government's focus on the stabilization of the Eastern Provinces, President Tshisekedi took a considerable political risk. From the start, the May 2021 decision to declare a state of siege in the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri was met with scepticism. Positive results remained elusive, even before the M23 offensive, as the Congolese government was quickly confronted with the impact of its own improvisation and the structural deficiencies of its security forces.<sup>111</sup>

The regional diplomatic part of the stabilization strategy, in particular the 2021 economic and security agreements with Rwanda and Uganda and the entry in the EAC, were also met with a lot of criticism from Congolese politicians and civil society leaders that considered the approach as naïve and reckless. Members of former president Kabila's Front Commun pour le Congo (FCC) found a common cause with their former opponents, the youth activists of Filimbi, Lucha, Veranda Mutsanga, etc. As early as September 2020, Filimbi led a protest in Kinshasa to have the Rwandan Ambassador

---

<sup>109</sup> Gouvernement de l'Union Sacrée de la Nation ; Premier Ministre. 2021. Plan d'Actions 2021-2023 Construire un État fort, prospère et solidaire. Kinshasa, April 2021.

<sup>110</sup> REF TO STATE OF SIEGE REPORT

<sup>111</sup> Reports by the Congolese Parliament, and by the Minister for Defence quickly showed that the policy was ill-prepared, improvised, and showcased the structural deficiencies of the Congolese security forces. The acknowledgment of these issues in themselves opened a possible window for reform. From late 2021 onwards however, the focus increasingly moved to countering the urgent threat posed by the M23 / Rwanda offensive.

expulsed, a call often echoed by FCC Senator Francine Muyumba.<sup>112</sup> Former presidential candidate Martin Fayulu and the 2018 Nobel Prize winner Denis Mukwege also opposed the normalization of bilateral relations with the Kagame-government. Fayulu also opposed membership to the EAC as it would 'contribute to the economic balkanization of the country'. Fayulu also accused the President of high treason.<sup>113</sup>

Several actors in the ground are also critical. According to a representative of an armed group in Ituri:

"Our national government has good faith but allows itself to be trapped by Rwanda every time. None of these agreements bring any positive result other than war." <sup>114</sup>

A local leader from the same region stated:

*"The idea wasn't bad at first. I do not condemn the president for having initiated the entry of the DRC into the EAC. But today, it is clear that there is hypocrisy and complicity against the DRC. Hence, you simply have to leave the EAC."* <sup>115</sup>

While according to a civil society leader:

"The presence of Rwanda and Uganda in EAC sufficiently shows that we are not well positioned there. It was not the right decision to embark on this because there is strong complicity among EAC member countries against the DRC. As proof, since the deployment of these forces in North Kivu, which armed group have they already fought?" <sup>116</sup>

---

<sup>112</sup> The cause for these calls in 2020 were remarks by the Rwandan Ambassador about violence in the context of the second Congo war. Actualité.cd. 2020. "RDC : la sénatrice Francine Muyumba hausse le ton et appelle au remplacement de Vincent Karega". 7 September 2020. <https://actualite.cd/2020/09/07/rdc-la-senatrice-francine-muyumba-hausse-le-ton-et-appelle-au-remplacement-de-vincent>.

<sup>113</sup> Mediacongo.net. 2022. "Intégration de la RDC à l'EAC : Pour Martin Fayulu, Félix Tshisekedi contribue à son insu à la balkanisation économique du pays". 19 May 2022. [https://www.mediacongo.net/article-actualite-104907\\_integration\\_de\\_la\\_rdc\\_a\\_l\\_eac\\_pour\\_martin\\_fayulu\\_felix\\_tshisekedi\\_contribue\\_a\\_son\\_insu\\_a\\_la\\_balkanisation\\_economique\\_du\\_pays.html](https://www.mediacongo.net/article-actualite-104907_integration_de_la_rdc_a_l_eac_pour_martin_fayulu_felix_tshisekedi_contribue_a_son_insu_a_la_balkanisation_economique_du_pays.html).

<sup>114</sup> Interview armed group representative, Iga Barrière, 25 January 2023.

<sup>115</sup> Interview, local leader, Iga Barrière, 24 January 2023.

<sup>116</sup> Interview, civil society representative, Iga Barrière, 24 January 2023.

One of the issues that galvanized this hostile discourse, even before the resurgence of the M23, was the periodic debate on the UN 'Mapping report' that provides an overview of the human rights violations and war crimes committed in the DRC in the period 1993–2003.<sup>117</sup> In May 2021, President Kagame rebuked the report and directly attacked Dr. Mukwege. In the same interview, Kagame commented positively on his relationship with Félix Tshisekedi by saying “we can talk to each other, which was lacking before”.<sup>118</sup> In a response during an interview with AFP, President Tshisekedi defended Mukwege and stressed the importance of justice for the victims. However, he also stated he did not wish to pick a media dispute with Kagame.<sup>119</sup> The mutually hostile discourses on the mapping report were proof that the distance between Kinshasa and Kigali remained huge and probably irreconcilable.

Since the two regionalized wars in the 1990's in which Rwanda played a central role, Congolese public opinion has been sceptical and sometimes openly hostile against several neighbouring countries, in particular Rwanda. In an otherwise fragmented society where identity is often instrumentalized by local elites and can lead to explosions of inter-community violence (as currently witnessed in Mai-Ndombe Province), the aversion to Rwanda is a uniting force. Stigmatization and whispering campaigns about linkages to Rwanda are prevalent on Congolese social media. For example, former President Kabila was often 'accused' of being Rwandan.<sup>120</sup> The 'Rwandophone' question and the relationship with Rwanda are often considered through

---

<sup>117</sup> Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2010. DRC: Mapping human rights violations 1993 – 2003. Geneva, United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/africa/2010-drc-mapping-report>. Politico.cd. 2021. “Rapport Mapping : M. Fayulu, A. Muzito, J.C. Katende, N. Tshiani et plusieurs autres politiques s'opposent aux propos de Paul Kagame”. 19 May 2021. <https://www.politico.cd/la-rdc-a-la-une/2021/05/19/rapport-mapping-m-fayulu-a-muzito-jc-katende-n-tshiani-et-plusieurs-autres-politiques-sopposent-aux-propos-de-paul-kagame.html/84204/>.

<sup>118</sup> France 24. 2021. “Campaign for DR Congo's war victims puts Rwanda's Kagame on defensive”. 20 May 2021. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/campaign-for-dr-congo-s-war-victims-puts-rwanda-s-kagame-on-defensive>.

<sup>119</sup> Radio Okapi. 2021. “Rapport Mapping : réaction de Félix Tshisekedi au propos de Paul Kagame”. 19 May 2021. <https://www.radiookapi.net/2021/05/19/actualite/politique/rapport-mapping-reaction-de-felix-tshisekedi-au-propos-de-paul-kagame>.

<sup>120</sup> Afrikarabia. 2014. “RDC : jusqu'ou ira Honoré Ngbanda ?”. 23 November 2014. <http://afrikarabia.com/wordpress/rdc-jusquou-ira-honore-ngbanda/>.

the lens of the so-called 'balkanization'.<sup>121</sup> Locally, the issue is complicated by long-running conflicts that predate the wars about citizenship of the Congolese Rwandophone communities and recurring tensions concerning their relationship to customary power. In North Kivu, the Banyarwanda are numerically important and therefore a considerable political factor.

This 'balkanization' narrative has deep roots in Congolese history, including in the East. It goes back to Patrice Lumumba and the early days of independence when foreign actors were seen as plotting to dismember the country.<sup>122</sup> It also often surfaces in the context of identity politics, focusing on the Kinyarwanda speaking communities as a 'fifth column', preparing for the dismemberment of the country. This often colourful language depicts a sinister plot by regional states, who are supported by powers within the international community, to find ways to dominate and exploit Congo's resources. These ideas certainly have some justification given the violent experiences of the region in its recent and colonial histories. And it is fed by declarations such as those by President Kagame in Benin in April 2023.<sup>123</sup>

The populist discourse has been carried in a particularly forceful way by senior representatives of the Catholic Church such as Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, the chairman of the Congolese episcopal conference (CENCO). In the context of the tense electoral process this populist 'balkanization' discourse carries considerable weight, seriously affecting the political margin for manoeuvre and pushing towards increased radicalization. Social media are inundated with claims of treachery. On 26 December 2022, Denis Mukwege (Nobel Prize 2018), co-signed a statement together with former Prime Minister Augustin Matata Ponyo (Leadership et Gouvernance pour le Développement/LGD) and Martin Fayulu (Engagement pour la Citoyenneté et le Développement/ECIDé). The joint statement criticized, among others, the deployment of

---

<sup>121</sup> Muzalia, Godefroid and Rukata Thierry. 2022. The "Balkanization" of the Democratic Republic of Congo – Heated debates and conspiracy theories in Greater Kivu area ; The Insecure Livelihoods Series, GIC. December [https://www.gicnetwork.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/16\\_GIC\\_The-Balkanization-of-the-Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo.pdf](https://www.gicnetwork.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/16_GIC_The-Balkanization-of-the-Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo.pdf).

<sup>122</sup> In those early days it referred to the Katangese and Kasai secession attempts.

<sup>123</sup> RFI. 2023. "La RDC réagit aux déclarations du président rwandais Paul Kagame sur les frontières congolaises". 17 April 2023. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230417-la-rdc-reagit-aux-declarations-du-president-rwandais-paul-kagame-sur-les-frontieres-congolaises>.



EAC troops given that Rwanda and Uganda are seen as aggressors, thus allowing the 'balkanization' of the DRC 'instead of providing the country with an effective army'.

The persistent crisis with Rwanda has also caused a high-level of psychosis amongst senior Congolese officials. Several high-ranking officials within the presidency or the armed forces have been placed under arrest under suspicion of linkages with Kigali.<sup>124</sup> In Congolese society, this is a potentially dangerous dynamic where lines are regularly crossed, putting the Congolese Kinyarwanda speaking communities or individuals associated with them in the line of fire.<sup>125</sup> Such dynamics awaken the ghosts of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the violence against individuals of Rwandan descent in Kinshasa in August 1998. While the radicalized discourse in the DRC provides an easy justification for Rwandan 'attention' and raises concerns for the international community, the M23 and Kigali are now cynically portraying themselves as the protector of these targeted communities.<sup>126</sup>

---

<sup>124</sup> Africa Intelligence. 2022. "Congolese lieutenant-general Philémon Yav accused of colluding with Kigali". 21 September 2022. Jeune Afrique. 2021. "Ce que l'on reproche à Fortunat Biselele, l'ex-conseiller de Félix Tshisekedi". 21 January 2021.

<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1411211/politique/ce-que-lon-reproche-a-fortunat-biselele-lex-conseiller-de-felix-tshisekedi/>

<sup>125</sup> France 24. 2023. "RD Congo: une journée "ville morte" vire aux pillages à Goma". 7 February 2023. <https://observers.france24.com/fr/afrique/20230207-goma-pillage-tutsi-haine-violence-m23-ville-morte-eac>.

<sup>126</sup> Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. 2023. "Letter from H.E. Adama Dieng and Hon. Gareth Evans on the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo". <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/dieng-evans-drc-letter/>.

## Regional Diplomacy in the Lead

Over the course of only a few months, the Congolese initiatives aimed to stabilize the Eastern provinces and improve regional relations had exactly the opposite effect. The declaration of the state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri had not contributed to much, and regional diplomacy had failed to deepen the relationship with Kigali. In addition, the mechanisms and platforms that had been built over the past decade in the framework of the ICGLR and PSCF showed to be mostly ineffective.

The M23 crisis and the rapidly rising tension between the DRC and Rwanda mobilized a rapid regional response. Acting through the EAC, Kenya took the lead for a new regional peace initiative called the 'Nairobi process'. The Nairobi process initially focused on the armed groups operating in Eastern DRC by offering space for dialogue and the possibility of military action by a new regional force. As the crisis deepened between the DRC and Rwanda, Angola joined the initiative through the 'Luanda process' and by acting through the ICGLR to focus on the regional aspect of the crisis. Observed by a restless and frustrated Congolese population, the region was once again in the driver seat.

The regional response filled a void left by the wider international community, including the UN that remained mostly absent. Both the UN Special Envoy, an office created during the previous M23 crisis and with a remit including the implementation of the 2013 PSCF, and MONUSCO remained on the side-lines. The lack of response from the UN offices on the ground merely reflected the absence of the UN Secretariat. Throughout 2022, the DRC became increasingly

frustrated with what it saw as a lacklustre response, and in particular the lack of international condemnation for Rwanda. It also quickly became frustrated with the limited support by the EAC and started to reach out to SADC where it felt it would be able to garner more effective backing.

#### **4.1. The EAC and the Start of the Nairobi Process**

The first few months of 2022 saw intense diplomatic activity, with several meetings between Presidents Tshisekedi and Kagame.<sup>127</sup> On 29 March 2022, the DRC was officially admitted to the EAC. Less than two weeks later, on 8 April, President Tshisekedi signed the accession Treaty in Nairobi. In the margins of the meeting a first 'conclave' of heads of state on the situation in Eastern DRC was held. It united Presidents Tshisekedi, Kagame, Museveni, and Kenyatta. According to media reports, a dialogue with the M23 was tabled in Nairobi, with talks set to start soon after.<sup>128</sup> This was the official entry of the EAC as an actor into the Congolese conflict and the start of what was to become the Nairobi process.

On the 21 April, a second conclave meeting was held in Nairobi, this time also including Burundi (the incoming EAC chair). The Nairobi process was further formalized with a two-track approach to promote peace, stability, and development in the region. The first track takes a political approach and consists of consultations, facilitated by President Uhuru Kenyatta, between the DRC government and local Congolese armed groups (at that stage still including the M23). The second track focuses on military/security enforcement, and consists of the deployment of a regional force composed of troops from EAC countries (EACRF) with a mandate to 'help contain and where necessary fight the negative forces'.<sup>129</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> There was a bilateral meeting on the margins of an anti-terrorism summit in Aqaba (Jordan) in March 2022 and there were also several meetings in the format of the Nairobi conclaves.

<sup>128</sup> Jeune Afrique. 2022. "M23 en RDC – Tshisekedi, Kagame, Museveni et Ke yatta : dans le secret du sommet de Nairobi". 12 April 2022. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1338367/politique/rdc-m23-dans-le-secret-du-sommet-de-nairobi/>.

<sup>129</sup> EAC. 2022. Communiqué – The Second Heads of State Conclave on the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nairobi, 21 April 2022. <https://www.presidence.gov.bi/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Final-Draft-Communique-DRC-21-April-2022-1-1.pdf>.

Under the political track, rather improvised talks with some armed groups started shortly thereafter, with considerable confusion about the chaotic selection process and a lack of clarity on the connection of these talks with the Congolese P-DDRCS. The technical DDR structures of the Congolese government had been effectively side-lined and remain on the margin of the Nairobi process.<sup>130</sup> In response to continued fighting, the Congolese government immediately demanded the exclusion of the M23 from the talks.

On 15 June 2022, a few days after the M23 took the border town of Bunagana, Uhuru Kenyatta published a statement following phone consultations with the other regional heads of state. In this statement he called to declare Ituri and North Kivu a weapons free zone and for the activation of the EACRF. Regarding the EACRF, Kenyatta stated:

“The East African Regional Force shall be deployed to the Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu provinces immediately to STABILIZE the zone and ENFORCE peace in support of the DRC security forces and in close coordination with MONUSCO. The Regional Force will work with local provincial authorities to support an orderly and permanent disarmament process under the P-DDRCS in order to create enabling conditions towards stability and peace in the eastern DRC.”<sup>131</sup>

This is the most far-reaching statement on the EACRF mandate both in its geographic scope by having a deployment in three provinces, and with an active mandate to enforce peace.

During two meetings in June 2022, the second taking place on 19 June, the heads of the defence forces of the EAC member states met to discuss the modalities for the deployment of the future force. The resulting agreement was discussed in the third conclave meeting in Nairobi on 20 June. Regarding the force the conclave stated: “Heads of State instructed that the Regional Force should in cooperation with the military and administrative

---

<sup>130</sup> Confidential interview, Congolese senior official, Kinshasa, February 2023.

<sup>131</sup> Statement by his Excellency Hon. Uhuru Kenyatta, CHQ, President of the Republic of Kenya, on the Security situation in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo”; Nairobi; 15 June 2022.

forces of the DRC seek to stabilize and secure the peace an in the DRC.”<sup>132</sup> The conclave reiterated the primacy of the Congolese constitution and the country’s sovereignty, and included language on the return of refugees, the fate of combatants during reintegration, participation in the political process, and the presence of foreign negative elements. The scope of the statement shows that the political sensitivities, complexity, and inter-linked nature of the issues had clearly come through.

At the EAC Summit in July 2022, the Community officially invoked Article 4 of its protocol on Peace and Security and formally appointed outgoing Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta as the Facilitator overseeing the Nairobi process. The Summit also discussed funding modalities and formally decided “to expeditiously deploy a joint regional force in Eastern DRC.”<sup>133</sup> In September 2022, nearly six months after the initial decision to deploy a force was made, the Concept of Operations and the Agreement on the Status of Forces were signed in Kinshasa.<sup>134</sup>

These preparatory steps were followed with interest and concern outside the EAC. On 25 April 2022, the Chairperson of the AU Commission welcomed the EAC decision. In a July press statement, the UN Security Council (UNSC) “took note of the steps to operationalize a regional force.” It stressed the importance of the protection of civilians and of the cooperation and information sharing with MONUSCO. At the end of August, the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) endorsed the EAC regional force (EACRF) and requested the

---

<sup>132</sup> EAC. 2022. Communiqué – The Third Heads of State Conclave on the Democratic Republic of Congo – The Nairobi Process ; Nairobi, 20 June 2022. <https://www.eac.int/communique/2504-communiqué-the-third-heads-of-state-conclave-on-the-democratic-republic-of-congo-the-nairobi-process>.

<sup>133</sup> Both the DRC and Rwanda were represented by their Prime Ministers. EAC. 2022. Communiqué of the 22nd Ordinary Summit of the EAC Heads of State. Arusha. 22 July 2022. <https://www.eac.int/communique/2537-communiqué-of-the-22nd-ordinary-summit-of-the-east-african-community-heads-of-state>.

<sup>134</sup> Republic of Kenya, the National Assembly – Departmental Committee on Defence, Intelligence and Foreign Relations. 2022. Report on a request by the National Executive to deploy the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) to the East African Community Regional Force – Democratic Republic of Congo (EACRF-DRC). November 2022 <http://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2022-11/REPORT%20OF%20THE%20COMMITTEE%20ON%20DEFENCE%20ON%20DEPLOYMENT%20OF%20KENYA%20DEFENCE%20FORCES%20%28KDF%29%20TO%20DEMOCRATIC%20REPUBLIC%20OF%20CONGO.pdf>.

AU Commission to establish a strategic support cell and explore and mobilize funding. The PSC also commended the deployment of a Burundi military contingent and affirmed the significance of coordination, cooperation, and complementarity between all the efforts deployed to the region. In October 2022, the initiative was also discussed at the annual joint consultative meeting between the UNSC and the AU PSC.

## **4.2. Angola Enters the Scene: the Luanda Process**

While the Nairobi process was clearly focused on Congolese armed groups, the tensions between Rwanda and the DRC quickly gained prominence. The EAC was not equipped to manage a conflict between two of its member states. During the AU Extraordinary Summit in Malabo on 28 May 2022, Congolese foreign minister Christophe Lutundula openly challenged Rwanda for its support to the M23. At the meeting, the AU Assembly mandated Angola, as ICGLR chair, to mediate talks between both countries. On 6 July, Angolan President João Lourenço convened a tripartite summit in Luanda with Presidents Tshisekedi and Kagame. The tripartite summit adopted the detailed 'ICGLR Roadmap on the Pacification Process in the Eastern Region of the DRC'.<sup>135</sup> This roadmap covered the broad range of issues and aligned with the EAC process on the cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of the M23. To accommodate Rwanda, it also included a response to the other regional negative groups, in particular the FDLR and its splinter groups. In addition to the re-activation and expansion of existing platforms, the roadmap planned for the creation of an ad-hoc Verification Mechanism to be headed by an Angolan senior officer. On 20 and 21 July, a 'Joint Permanent Commission' of the DRC and Rwanda met in Luanda to discuss the implementation of the Roadmap.<sup>136</sup>

---

<sup>135</sup> The New Times. 2022. "DR Congo crisis: Luanda summit roadmap released". 7 July 2022. <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/201075/News/dr-congo-crisis-luanda-summit-roadmap-released>.

<sup>136</sup> The New Times. 2022. "East Africa: Regional Force Tasked to Ensure Total Eradication of FDLR, Splinter Groups". 22 July 2022. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202207250054.html>. The meeting called for the rapid deployment of the EACRF, the cessation of hostilities by the M23 and the disarmament of the FDLR. It also called for the rapid installation of the ad-hoc Verification Mechanism.

In early November 2022, Angola organized a tripartite meeting at the level of the Foreign Ministers. The meeting decided to maintain the political dialogue, to define a calendar to accelerate the implementation of the ICGLR Roadmap, and the immediate deployment of the ad-hoc Verification Mechanism in Goma. The meeting was to be continued by the heads of the intelligence services. As a direct result, the ad-hoc Verification Mechanism was finally deployed in Goma on 9 November 2022. The countries also agreed to organize co-ordination meetings at all levels between the Luanda and Nairobi processes.<sup>137</sup>

As progress stalled, on 23 November 2022 Angola organized a regional ‘Mini-Summit on Peace and Security in the Eastern Region of the Democratic Republic of Congo’.<sup>138</sup> For the first time, it brought together the Luanda and Nairobi processes. Rwanda was however only represented at the level of its Foreign Minister. The Summit’s main objectives were to establish a timetable for the immediate withdrawal of the M23 and to further coordinate the Luanda and Nairobi processes. For the withdrawal of the M23, the summit decided on the cantonment of the M23 on Congolese territory under control of the FARDC, EACRF, the ad-hoc verification mechanism and MONUSCO. It did not specify a site and it was assumed that the M23 would retreat to the Mount Sabinyo area (from where it launched its offensive).

The major measures were outlined in an ambitious timetable with a major role for the EACRF that had only just started its effective deployment in Goma. The summit also interpreted the EACRF’s mandate to be pro-active through “Intervention of EACRF against the M23 in case of non-compliance by M23 to cease hostilities and withdraw from the occupied territories”. While there was a strong focus on the M23, there were also clear references to other “negative and terrorist forces in the DRC” such as the FDLR-FOCA and the ADF. The

---

<sup>137</sup> Communiqué Final - Réunion Tripartite des Ministres des Relations Extérieures / Affaires Étrangères de la République d’Angola, de la République Démocratique du Congo et de la République du Rwanda. Luanda, 5 November 2022.

<sup>138</sup> ICGLR. 2022. “Mini-Summit on Peace and Security in the Eastern Region of the Democratic Republic of Congo”. Luanda, 23 November 2022. <https://icglr.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/EN-Final-communication.pdf>. The participants included the President of Burundi (and EAC Chair), as well as Uhuru Kenyatta, the EAC Facilitator; Rwanda and the DRC.

region also recommended to the DRC to “accelerate the implementation of the P-DDRCS” that still remained in its preparatory phase.

Shortly after the Luanda meeting, while the Kenyan contingent of the EACRF was deploying, the third EAC-led talks with Congolese armed groups was organized in Nairobi. It saw the participation of 53 armed groups that agreed to lay down their arms while Kinshasa addressed their grievances, including the removal of the foreign armed groups from Congolese territory. This third meeting was to be followed by meetings in Goma and Bunia that were initially planned for January and February 2023.<sup>139</sup> The M23 remained excluded from these talks. EAC facilitator Kenyatta stated that the M23 would be integrated into the process if they honour the requirements of the Luanda summit which include ending hostilities and withdrawing from the areas they occupied since the launch of their offensive.<sup>140</sup> The Congolese position on M23 remained firm.<sup>141</sup>

In late December 2022, the M23 agreed to withdraw from Kibumba town, 20 kilometres from Goma, and from the Rumangabo military barracks further north. The agreements were sealed with the Kenyan commander of the EACRF at publicized events in December 2022 and in early January 2023. The M23 handed over control of the areas to the Kenyan contingent. The extent of these handovers was immediately criticized by Congolese commentators that were concerned about the EACRF installing some type of buffer-zone. In the bigger picture, these small steps were empty gestures. The M23 continued to pursue their offensive and clash with the FARDC, causing local armed groups to mobilize against the rebel movement. These meetings were the start of the rapidly swelling critique on the EACRF.

---

<sup>139</sup> At the time of writing, these Nairobi IV meetings are still to be organized.

<sup>140</sup> The East African. 2022. “We’ve made progress, Uhuru says as Nairobi meeting on DRC ends”. 06 December 2022. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/armed-groups-pledge-to-stop-drc-war-4045426>.

<sup>141</sup> In February 2023, during the 52<sup>nd</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Council President Tshisekedi stated: “The M23 and the CODECO have excluded themselves from this peace process by taking up weapons against the DRC, of which they claim nevertheless the citizenship” <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2023/02/1132672> (translation by author).



Despite these symbolic gestures, the DRC's confidence in the EAC-led processes diminished as the M23 continued its advance in North Kivu, further increasing their grip on the areas surrounding Goma. Throughout its offensive, the M23 maintained the claim that it was defending itself from attacks by the FARDC and other armed groups. It claimed that the Congolese government was not serious about securing peace. The DRC government, asserting its sovereignty, did not consider a ceasefire in their attempt to reclaim the national territory.<sup>142</sup>

By January 2023 it was clear that both the Nairobi and Luanda processes were stalling. There was a lull in the diplomatic action, and not only were the Luanda process deadlines for the M23 pullback missed, but the rebel group continued its offensive action. The tension between Kinshasa and Kigali also continued to escalate during this time, which included the Rwandan missile attack on a FARDC jet.

### **4.3. The AU and a Renewed Effort**

To relaunch the process, on 4 February 2023, the EAC held a Summit meeting in Bujumbura where Presidents Kagame and Tshisekedi met for the first time since their meeting in New York in September 2022. The summit took no new decisions, but it was important to reconfirm the regional consensus on the Nairobi and Luanda processes. The summit urged South Sudan and Uganda to deploy their contingents to the EACRF. For Kinshasa, however, it was a disappointment that the EAC refused to take a stand against Kigali. In the margins of the meeting, President Tshisekedi had an encounter with the Kenyan EACRF Force Commander in the presence of Kenyan President Ruto. President Tshisekedi urged him to be prudent in dealing with the M23 as it

---

<sup>142</sup> While the M23 kept piling the pressure on Goma in January 2023, Felix Tshisekedi presented the Congolese government position for the exit of the crisis in 10 steps, mainly:

- 1) The cessation of hostilities and the laying down of arms by the M23 terrorists;
- 2) The withdrawal of the M23 from occupied areas on Congolese territory;
- 3) The return of those displaced by war to their homes;
- 4) The cessation of all Rwandan support to the M23;
- 5) The neutralization of all national and foreign armed groups operating in the DRC by the EACRF and the FARDC with the support of MONUSCO.

risked turning the population against the force.<sup>143</sup> A communiqué published by Kinshasa after the Bujumbura summit also caught the ire of the Rwandan president Kagame, who called the Congolese totally untrustworthy.<sup>144</sup>

As planned, the Bujumbura summit was followed by a meeting between the Chiefs of Defence of the EAC countries. At the meeting the military commanders proposed a new timeline for the withdrawal of the M23. The meeting also recommended a new deployment plan for the EACRF, which would see a more concentrated force initially focused on North Kivu. The military leaders also recommended the reinforcement of the ICGLR verification mechanism and the creation of an EAC Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (EAC-MVM). On Congolese social media the plan was described as an occupation force that would exclude the Congolese army from acting on its territory, therefore contributing to the 'balkanization' of the country. Political and popular pressure against the EACRF kept increasing during this phase.

The technical recommendations were adopted by a joint EAC / ICGLR Summit on 17 February 2023 that was organized in the margins of the yearly AU Summit in Addis Ababa. The Addis format effectively combined the two processes. On the same day, the AU PSC met at Presidential level in Addis to discuss the situation in Eastern DRC. The PSC expressed its support for both the Luanda and Nairobi processes and endorsed the conclusions of the earlier joint EAC – ICGLR summit. It also called for support to the embattled EACRF. To maintain a balance amongst regional states, the PSC “demands all armed groups, particularly the M23, as well as the ADF, and FDLR to immediately cease hostilities and unconditionally withdraw from the eastern DRC.”<sup>145</sup> The PSC conclusions provided a strong backing for the regional efforts.

---

<sup>143</sup> The Africa Report. 2023. “DRC: Lack of trust holds back regional force as Angola steps in”. 14 March 2023. <https://www.theafricareport.com/291887/drc-lack-of-trust-holds-back-regional-force-as-angola-steps-in/>.

<sup>144</sup> Rwanda TV. “Diplomatic Corps Dinner / Remarks by President Paul Kagame. Kigali 8 February 2023.” Uploaded on 8 February 2023. YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOrrIKdKDtE>.

<sup>145</sup> African Union. 2023. Communiqué, 1140th Meeting of the African Union Peace and Security Council (Heads of State and Government Level). Addis-Ababa, 17 February 2023. <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/drc-1140.comm-en.pdf>.

Angola and Kenyatta committed to meet the M23 and communicate the results and the timeline to the group. In the talks with the M23 Angola announced a ceasefire at noon on 07 March. This deadline was not respected and the M23 continued fighting around Sake, which it failed to take, and further reinforced its grip around Goma.

As the process kept faltering, on 11 March 2023, Angola announced its intention to deploy a military contingent to North Kivu. The Angolan contingent would secure the areas where the M23 would be cantoned after its pull-back and would protect the members of the Angola-led ad-hoc Verification Mechanism. The deployment of a 500-strong contingent was confirmed by the Angolan parliament on 17 March 2023. There is not yet a timeline on the deployment of these forces, but Angola has already sent an exploratory mission to Kindu (Maniema) province where the government plans the cantonment site for the M23.<sup>146</sup>

From early March to mid-April, the remaining EACRF contingents deployed to North Kivu. First, troops from Burundi were deployed to North Kivu. On 31 March the UPDF contingent crossed the border at the Bunagana border post that was still controlled by the M23. Lastly, in early April the South Sudanese were airlifted into Goma.<sup>147</sup>

#### **4.4. Full EACRF Deployment and Ceasefire**

The situation on the ground changed mid-March 2023. The deployment of the remaining EACRF contingents – most notably the deployment of the Burundian contingent in Masisi – led to a halt in the M23 offensive. The group pulled back some of its fighters to avoid confrontations with the

---

<sup>146</sup> Actualité.cd. 2023. "Le gouvernement est formel: le Rwanda doit retirer ses troupes et ses armes et les combattants du M23 éligibles au DDR vont être identifiés et désarmés avant qu'ils ne soient cantonnés près de Kindu". 14 April 2023. <https://actualite.cd/2023/04/14/le-gouvernement-est-formel-le-rwanda-doit-retirer-ses-troupes-et-ses-armes-et-les>.  
Radio Okapi. 2023. "Pour l'Angola, l'envoi de militaires en RDC dépend des conditions dans les zones de cantonnement". 19 March 2023 <https://www.radiookapi.net/2023/03/19/actualite/securete/pour-langola-lenvoi-de-militaires-en-rdc-depend-des-conditions-dans>.

<sup>147</sup> The East African. 2023. "EACRF says full troop deployment in eastern DR Congo achieved". 7 April 2023. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/eacrf-troops-now-fully-deployed-in-drc-4191138>.

regional forces of the EACRF. On 18 April 2023 the EACRF Force Commander could effectively announce that a monthlong ceasefire had been observed between the conflicting parties.<sup>148</sup> Local public opinion and the Congolese government remained unconvinced.

Kinshasa considered the redeployments as preparations for potential further attacks.<sup>149</sup> Locally, Congolese citizens report that while M23 combatants were effectively pulling out of some areas, some fighters remained behind, and the group continued to man road barriers and levy taxes. People clearly remain concerned.<sup>150</sup> During a press conference on 22 April the EACRF confirmed that the M23 was still present in Kibumba, Rutshuru and Bunagana.<sup>151</sup> The now fully deployed EACRF and its contingents (including several FARDC officers in its command structures) are mobilized in Rutshuru and Masisi. In his press conference on 22 April, the Force commander stressed this partnership with the FARDC to counter the narrative of his forces' complicity with the M23.<sup>152</sup> The Force commander also raised concerns about the practicality of the locations for the cantonment of the M23, as the living conditions in the Mount Sabinyo area are very difficult.<sup>153</sup>

The EACRF contingents seem to be engaging in outreach to the communities and have announced to secure convoys on the main roads.<sup>154</sup> On two occasions (at the time of writing), EACRF units have engaged with armed elements. The first case seems to have been 'Wazalendo' (patriots), a self-defence militia that are mobilizing to fight the RDF / M23.<sup>155</sup> In the second case, initial reports stated that the Burundi contingent had clashed with M23 elements. This has since been denied by the EACRF. The pictures produced as

---

<sup>148</sup> [https://twitter.com/eacrf\\_drc/status/1648182711410884610?s=61&t=-LrEQIqcMv12IPIkKHPjOg](https://twitter.com/eacrf_drc/status/1648182711410884610?s=61&t=-LrEQIqcMv12IPIkKHPjOg)

<sup>149</sup> Actualité.cd. 2023. "RDC: Le M23 poursuit le renforcement de ses positions, ce qui présage des attaques futures contre la population et l'armée, d'après le gouvernement".

22 April 2023. <https://actualite.cd/2023/04/22/rdc-le-m23-poursuit-le-renforcement-de-ses-positions-ce-qui-presage-des-attaques-futures>.

<sup>150</sup> Communication with local journalist, Rutshuru, April 2023.

<sup>151</sup> <https://twitter.com/michombero/status/1649798423623659521?s=61&t=-LrEQIqcMv12IPIkKHPjOg>

<sup>152</sup> <https://twitter.com/michombero/status/1649737381547855873?s=61&t=gtqyWbPDxtQ2rbigM0lXw>

<sup>153</sup> <https://twitter.com/michombero/status/1649688341057609729?s=61&t=Uu6LNZO6baJzotU0ZgsboA>

<sup>154</sup> <https://twitter.com/michombero/status/1649046137733537792?s=61&t=-LrEQIqcMv12IPIkKHPjOg>

<sup>155</sup> The East African. 2023. "EACRF foils attack by armed group in east DR Congo's Kibumba". 13 April 2023. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/eacrf-foils-attack-in-drc-kibumba-4197446>.

proof of captured equipment showed mostly old generic weaponry, which is common amongst local armed groups.<sup>156</sup>

In a statement to the press in April 2023 following a meeting with the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, the EAC Facilitator Uhuru Kenyatta laid out an ambitious vision for the Nairobi process. He stressed the importance of building confidence and the role of the EACRF as an inter-positional army. He also emphasized the need to add a third track focusing on refugees and IDPs, and a fourth long-term developmental track. In the same communiqué, he also insisted on the importance of “...limiting new bilateral and multilateral initiatives that tend to make the situation of peacebuilding in the eastern DRC complex and confusing.”<sup>157</sup>

#### **4.5. Enter SADC and a New Breath for EACRF**

That latest remark by Kenyatta seems to have been missed by SADC. On 21 February 2023, immediately after the AU Summit, the FARDC deputy chief of staff in charge of operations Major General Chiko Tshitambwe, made a public statement after a mission to several SADC countries.<sup>158</sup> He referred to the earlier support of SADC countries when the DRC was attacked in 1998 and 2013, and stated that the DRC would win the war against Rwanda. Shortly after this communication, a SADC assessment mission led by the Namibian deputy chief of defence staff visited Goma and Beni.<sup>159</sup> Also, during the 25 February 2023 ECCAS summit in Kinshasa, President Tshisekedi reportedly appealed to the organization to sanction Rwanda for its aggression against the DRC. The organization, of which Rwanda, Burundi and Angola are members, did not follow Kinshasa and instead aligned itself with the position adopted by the PSC a week earlier, namely, expressing support for the Nairobi and Luanda processes and

---

<sup>156</sup> <https://twitter.com/michombero/status/1648022144968716296?s=61&t=-LrEQIqcMvI2lPIkKHPjOg>

<sup>157</sup> Office of the Facilitator to the EAC-Led Inter-Congolese Dialogue on the restoration of peace and stability on the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. 2013. Press Release, Nairobi, 13 April 2023.

<sup>158</sup> <https://twitter.com/stanysbujakera/status/1628000071538057217?s=61&t=lrPjOJDfovI4y71lbYxihg>

<sup>159</sup> Agence Congolaise de Presse. 2023. “Une délégation de la SADC en visite à Beni”. 6 March 2023. <https://acpcongo.com/index.php/2023/03/06/une-delegation-de-la-sadc-en-visite-a-beni/>.

condemning the M23 and appealing to the group to abide by the call to pull-out of the areas it has conquered.

In May, SADC discussed the situation in DRC. At a defence subcommittee meeting preceding the 8 May extraordinary Organ Troika Summit, the SADC reviewed the situation on the ground, including the status of the MONUSCO FIB. During the meeting, the DRC pleaded for the deployment of a SADC brigade to stop the advancement of armed groups. The DRC reported to SADC that the EACRF is not conducting its operations in accordance with the status of forces agreement, and that they were no longer interested in the EACRF deployment. In response, the SADC meeting urged the DRC to re-engage with the EAC at a political level. Concerning the FIB, the SADC assessment on the ground concluded that the FIB is no longer effective and requires reinvigoration. The meeting noted the need for further engagement between SADC and the UN concerning the FIB, the last MONUSCO element to withdraw from the DRC. To provide more rapid support to the DRC, the SADC meeting discussed two options: the deployment of a brigade size force or the enhancement of the FARDC. It decided to pursue the first option. This was approved at the Troika Summit. The Troika also strongly insisted on the need to have “a more coordinated approach, given the multiple deployments under multilateral and bilateral arrangements in Eastern DRC.”<sup>160</sup>

Kinshasa continued to publicly criticize the EACRF. President Tshisekedi was particularly direct in his comments on the mission in Gabarone immediately after the SADC summit.<sup>161</sup> He initially refused to prolong the mission’s mandate for the foreseen six months, instead only allowing a three-month extension. However, the surprise departure of the EACRF’s first Force Commander at the end of April 2023 provided an opportunity for a prudent restart.<sup>162</sup> Upon

---

<sup>160</sup> SADC. 2023. Communiqué of the Extra-Ordinary Organ troika summit, plus SADC Troika and Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) Troop Contributing Countries (TCCS). 8 May 2023.

<sup>161</sup> Agence Congolaise de Presse 2023. “Tshisekedi: la force régionale est-africaine pourra quitter la RDC fin juin 2023”. 9 May 2023. <https://acp.cd/nation/tshisekedi-la-force-regionale-est-africaine-pourra-quitter-la-rdc-fin-juin-2023/>.

<sup>162</sup> The Citizen. 2023. “EAC defends regional force sent to restore peace in DRC”. 02 May 2023. <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/east-africa-news/eac-defends-regional-force-sent-to-restore-peace-in-drc-4220270>.

the departure of the First Commander, Kinshasa indicated to wait for the AU's quadripartite summit to consider the future of the EAC force.

The 31 May 2023 EAC Summit saw some considerable advances. The DRC formally agreed on an extension of the EACRF for the full six months until 8 September 2023. The summit agreed to carry out a technical evaluation of the implementation of the force's mandate. This evaluation started in early July and is headed by Major General Ignace Sibomana of Burundi and is composed of representatives from all EAC member states. The EAC also decided to appoint a civilian head of mission at the EACRF to coordinate the mission's political matters. The EAC Summit also saw an important breakthrough with a decision on a realistic site for the pre-cantonment of the M23 (previously, it was assumed that the M23 would withdraw to Mount Sabinyo area). It ordered the verification of the suitability of Rumangabo, an important military camp.<sup>163</sup> The summit also confirmed the lead role of the EACRF in the process, including the safeguarding of the areas vacated by the M23 to ensure that "local armed groups do not occupy areas vacated by M23 and foreign armed groups to be disarmed and repatriated."<sup>164</sup> This is an important message so that Rwanda cannot claim that its security interests are not taken into consideration.

This was the begin of a new, more pragmatic Congolese attitude towards the EACRF. On 6 July 2023 during a press conference with the visiting South African President, President Tshisekedi stated that "he had criticized the attitude of the EACRF, but that he had not rejected it."<sup>165</sup> Following sincere discussions, and pending the ongoing assessment and the developments on the ground, the DRC will be able to see by early September how the force will handle itself.

---

<sup>163</sup> On 20 June the M23 blocked a first attempt at verification of the Rumangabo site, the joint reconnaissance mission (EACRF, EJVM and MONUSCO) succeeded to visit the site on 22 June.

<sup>164</sup> EAC. 2023. Communiqué 21st Extra-Ordinary Summit of the East African Community Heads of State, Bujumbura. 31 May 2023.

<sup>165</sup> Edusplorer. "South Africa DR Congo Presidents hold press conference in Kinshasa Cyril Ramaphosa Felix Tshisekedi". Uploaded on 7 July 2023. YouTube video. <https://youtu.be/v-OrAKOfsBE>.

## 4.6. Increased Coherence & Coordination?

### The AU and the Quadripartite

Briefly after the EAC summit extended the EACRF mandate, an ICGLR Summit was organized in Luanda. It included representatives of the EAC and the other RECs involved in the DRC peace processes (SADC and ECCAS) as well as the AU and the UN. This summit prepared the ground for the 27 June 2023 Quadripartite Summit organized by the AU that brought together the four RECs currently involved in the conflict management, as well as the Regional Oversight Mechanism of the PSCF. The aim of the Quadripartite Summit and preceding technical meetings was to harmonize the different approaches and increase coherence and coordination. In order to achieve this, the summit adopted the Joint Framework on Coordination and Harmonization of Peace Initiatives in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

This Framework rests on the earlier decisions and communiqués of the different RECs, the AU, and the PSCF. It is organized in four processes: political, military (including DDR), humanitarian, and mobilization of resources. The new elements in the framework are the central role for the AU that “defines the strategic orientation of the coordination and harmonization of the peace efforts in Eastern DRC” and the role for the DRC that “will ensure the operational coordination.”<sup>166</sup>

---

<sup>166</sup> Cadre conjoint adopté par le sommet quadripartite de la Communauté de l'Afrique de l'Est (CAE), de la communauté des Etats de l'Afrique Centrale (CEEAC), de la Conférence Internationale sur la Région des Grands Lacs (CIRGL), de la Communauté de Développement de l'Afrique Australe (SADC) et de l'Organisation des Nations Unies (ONU) sur la coordination des initiatives de paix dans l'Est de la République démocratique du Congo (RDC) sous les auspices de l'Union Africaine (AU), le 27 juin 2023 à Luanda (Angola).



## 4.7. Too Many Chefs? Or an Unbridgeable Gap?

During the eighteen months of the current crisis, the number of regional players and initiatives has continued to expand. Kinshasa was clearly concerned about putting all of its eggs in the East African basket. In popular perception the actors in the sub-region are now strongly associated to the fear of 'balkanization'. According to a local analyst:

"This is also reflected in the various initiatives to resolve the Congolese crisis which overlap and collide, with a tendency for Félix Tshisekedi to sometimes play them against each other (SADC against EAC for example), while the Congolese are wondering about the country's interest in belonging to all these blocs."<sup>167</sup>

In response to these concerns about the EAC there is some romanticization about SADC. Kinshasa seems to have been posturing to appease public opinion, now increasingly mobilized against the EAC. It is a fine line to dance as it could lead to increased diplomatic isolation, at least within the East African region.

However, the AU and several regional organizations, including SADC and EAC, have identified the risk and have insisted regularly to enhance coherence and coordination between the different initiatives. At least on paper, the situation on the ground could become very complex with the deployment of several military forces by different organizations, with not necessarily well-aligned mandates. At the time of writing, the regional actors move ahead with great caution, likely also as a result of the lack of resources and predictable international funding. For instance, according to the recent Joint Framework, the SADC force would be based on MONUSCO's FIB, and the role of a future Angolan contingent is also well defined and limited in scope.<sup>168</sup>

---

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Congolese analyst, Kinshasa, February 2023.

<sup>168</sup> Angop. 2023. "L'envoi de militaires en RDC depend de conditions dans les zones de cantonnement". 18 March 2023. <https://www.angop.ao/fr/noticias/politica/envio-de-convivente-a-rdc-passa-pela-criacao-de-condicoes-nas-areas-de-aquartelamento/>. The Angolan deployment is foreseen to last 12 months.

Between the first EAC meeting in April 2022 and the Quadripartite Luanda Summit of 27 June 2023, a considerable number of regional and international summits were held in various formats. As per usual, ambitious timelines were only exceptionally respected. The main positive take-aways from the summits discussed are: 1) Despite a high risk for a complete erosion of unity and a dispersion of regional and continental efforts, the opposite has happened and there is now a mechanism for harmonization; 2) Despite the lack of external financial and logistics resources, the region, in particular the EAC countries, have carried the burden of a complex military operation and have not allowed to be distracted by this issue; 3) There has been a learning curve on some key issues, such as the initially vague and unrealistic M23 retreat to the border area with Rwanda / Uganda to a (theoretic) mechanism of cantonment that includes a confidence building mechanism to reassure Rwanda about border security. The only concrete element that seems to tentatively hold at this moment is a fragile ceasefire. Beyond this, there is little positive concrete results other than the fact that regional diplomacy and the deployment of the EACRF have most likely avoided a more direct military escalation between the DRC and Rwanda.

Since late March / early April 2023 and the full deployment of the EACRF, there have been no major military incidents, although there are regular skirmishes between the M23 and Congolese armed groups or FARDC. Despite the Congolese criticism on the passivity of most of the EACRF contingents it is highly improbable that the M23/RDF would risk an offensive that would oblige the regional force to react. At the time of writing, the FARDC do not yet have the capacity to envisage a more offensive attitude. However, this is a highly unstable situation and a build-up of military capacity. The tense Congolese political climate and popular pressure are likely to result in increasing skirmishes whereby both sides will try to provoke the other to breach the ceasefire.

Without meaningful developments on the ground and an effective start of the cantonment of the M23, it is politically impossible for Kinshasa to envisage talks with the M23. Congolese public opinion would react very negatively at the hint of talks, and this would constitute a huge political risk in pre-electoral times. Since the exclusion of the M23 from the inter-Congolese talks under the Nairobi process, the Congolese position is clear: there will be no negotiations with the M23. In his remarks during the visit of the Swiss president, President Tshisekedi also referred to the December 2022 parliamentary decision that makes any such talks impossible.<sup>169</sup> In remarks to the

---

<sup>169</sup> Agence Congolaise de Presse. 2023. "Félix Tshisekedi: "No more negotiations with armed groups"". 14 April 2023. <https://acpcongo.com/index.php/2023/04/14/felix-tshisekedi-no-more-negotiations-with-armed-groups/>. Actualité.cd. 2022. "RDC: Félix Tshisekedi félicite le Parlement qui, à travers une recommandation, a déclaré le M23 groupe terroriste". 10 December 2022. <https://actualite.cd/2022/12/10/rdc-felix-tshisekedi-felicite-le-parlement-qui-travers-une-recommandation-declare-le-m23>.

press in July 2023 during the visit of President Ramaphosa, who underlined the importance of talks, President Tshisekedi was again very clear about his refusal. He referred directly to the outcome of previous negotiations with armed groups associated to Rwanda where some group members were integrated into the FARDC, while others would remain in exile to prepare for a future remake. For the Congolese government, the M23 are puppets of Kigali and therefore there is no need talk to them. There is only one way ahead for Kinshasa: Pre-cantonment in Rumangabo, followed by cantonment in Maniema (protected by Angolan forces), followed by reintegration in society.<sup>170</sup>

The M23 continues to aspire to direct talks with the government. Facilitator Kenyatta also adopted the position that the group might reintegrate talks after pulling out its forces.<sup>171</sup> However, the M23 and Rwanda have little incentive to go along with the cantonment of their forces. This is because it is unlikely they would be able to walk away with any result from later talks or a reintegration of the political track of the Nairobi process. Also, the M23 and Rwanda are unlikely to accept the planned re-localization to Kindu while the security in the areas left by the M23 would revert to the FARDC. Neither Rwanda nor the M23 have confidence in such an arrangement., particularly due to the association of parts of the Congolese security forces with the FDLR and the coalition of local armed groups. As a result, there is a limited likelihood for any political breakthrough unless forced by developments on the ground.

---

<sup>170</sup> The national co-ordinator for the P-DDRCS, Tommy Tambwe, in a recent communication mentioned two pre-cantonment sites, one in Kitshanga for Masisi and a second in Jomba for Rutshuru. In the pre-cantonment Rwandan or Ugandan elements would be sent back to their country of origin. The DDR of the M23 seems not to be part of the wider P-DDRCS. Actualité.cd. 2023. "Cantonnement des combattants du M23: phase de regroupement prévue à Kitshanga et Jomba puis l'étape de Kindu avant la réinsertion sociale dans les villages d'origine, annonce Tommy Tambwe". 19 April 2023. <https://actualite.cd/2023/04/19/cantonnement-des-combattants-du-m23-phase-de-regroupement-prevue-kitshanga-et-jomba-puis>.

<sup>171</sup> RFI. 2023. "RDC: le facilitateur Kenyatta évoque la possibilité d'un retour du M23 dans le processus de Nairobi". 4 April 2023. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230404-rdc-le-facilitateur-kenyatta-la-possibilite-d-un-retour-du-m23-dans-le-processus-de-nairobi>. Facilitator Uhuru Kenyatta and the EACRF force commander maintain the need for talks. To demonstrate this, Uhuru Kenyatta had a separate meeting with the M23 leadership in January 2023 in Mombasa.

At this stage the DRC does not have the capacity for autonomous offensive military action. Building such capacity will take considerable time. The FARDC are overstretched and training and equipping of new recruits is underway.<sup>172</sup> The FARDC are also receiving new uniforms to better distinguish them from armed group members / former FARDC that remain active in the theatre of operations. Reportedly, this re-equipping also demonstrates the long present administrative problems within the armed forces.<sup>173</sup> The recent lifting of the UN arms embargo also seems to have some effect, as there are increasing reports about considerable arms purchases abroad, including drones and light strike aircrafts.<sup>174</sup>

Kinshasa clearly had some initial expectation that regional allies / forces would step in militarily. When the EAC failed to deliver, it looked for support within SADC. This dynamic seems well understood at a regional level. While there may have been some sympathy for the DRC's position on the EACRF, it is reassuring that SADC passed the message to Kinshasa to continue engaging with the EAC at the political level. Considering President Tshisekedi's most recent remarks on the matter in a long interview, the message seems to have been well received and there is a new degree of pragmatism on the EACRF and a more mitigated expectation on SADC support.<sup>175</sup> An additional element is the growing proximity between Burundi and the DRC and the increasing presence of Burundian troops in North and South Kivu. This could lead to a resumption of the bilateral tension between

---

<sup>172</sup> As was also acknowledged by President Tshisekedi in a recent interview. Jeune Afrique. 2023. "En RDC, Félix Tshisekedi interviewé par Félix Tshisekedi?". 10 July 2023. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1461899/politique/en-rdc-felix-tshisekedi-interviewe-par-felix-tshisekedi/>. President Tshisekedi also announced that with the arrival of newly trained troops, the troops currently present in theatre of operations will be rotated and recycled.

<sup>173</sup> Lescolissesrdc.info. 2023. "RDC/Nord-Kivu. La nouvelle tenue FARDC révèle de centaines de militaires non reconnus dans la banque de données". 11 April 2023. <https://lescolissesrdc.info/rdc-nord-kivu-la-nouvelle-tenue-fardc-revele-de-centaines-de-militaires-non-reconnus-dans-la-banque-de-donnees/>.

<sup>174</sup> Defenceweb. 2023. "DR operating CH-4 UAVs". 6 July 2023. <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/aerospace/aerospace-aerospace/drc-operating-ch-4-uavs/>; Defenceweb. 2023. "Democratic Republic of Congo emerges as Mwari's next customer". 27 June 2023. <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/aerospace/aerospace-aerospace/democratic-republic-of-congo-emerges-as-mwaris-next-customer/>

<sup>175</sup> Jeune Afrique. 2023. "En RDC, Félix Tshisekedi interviewé par Félix Tshisekedi?". 10 July 2023. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1461899/politique/en-rdc-felix-tshisekedi-interviewe-par-felix-tshisekedi/>

Burundi and Rwanda which could include confrontations between troops of both countries on Congolese soil. It might also however inspire Rwanda to prudence as a further expansion of the conflict could become too costly.

Given the lack of easy alternatives, the DRC government has reverted to a policy of broad mobilization. This was set in motion in a presidential speech on the crisis in the East in November 2022 that led to thousands volunteering to join the FARDC. Legislation was also introduced to provide military training to students. But most important, the DRC government has de facto reversed its position on the collaboration with local armed groups. At first this was mostly ad hoc, building on previous practice and networks. However, on 19 April 2023, the DRC government announced legislation to create a reserve force.<sup>176</sup> Since then, members of government have indicated that this reserve will consist at least in part of members of armed groups.<sup>177</sup> The creation of this force raises questions on the future of the P-DDRCS and the Nairobi process (see further). Both policies can co-exist, but the reserve, if the modalities are confirmed, could be a parallel road to some level of formalization. In operational and political terms this policy raises a lot of questions. Even if this collaboration would temporarily increase the FARDC's capacity to respond to the threat represented by the M23/RDF, it remains to be seen whether the genie can be put back in the bottle.

---

<sup>176</sup> The Law on the creation of this reserve force was adopted in the National Assembly on 20 April 2023. RFI. 2023. "RDC: l'adoption d'un projet de loi sur un corps de réservistes au sein de l'armée se précise". 21 April 2023. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230421-rdc-l-adoption-d-un-projet-de-loi-sur-un-corps-de-reservistes-au-sein-de-l-armee-se-precise>.

<sup>177</sup> There were several declarations by government ministers that gave a rather different interpretation of the conditions of entry. The Minister for higher education Muhindo Nzangi indicated that armed groups would be integrated. The government spokesperson clarified that the law includes a morality clause and that the conditions will be strict. On 11 March, in an interview with Radio Okapi, the former Minister for Defence (who introduced the legislation) clarified that armed groups as such will not be integrated but he added, "all Congolese citizens can join, whether they are from an armed group or not". Politico.cd. 2023. "RDC: le gouvernement recourt aux militaires retraités et démobilisés de bonne moralité pour appuyer les FARDC". 9 March 2023. <https://www.politico.cd/encontinu/2023/03/09/rdc-le-gouvernement-recourt-aux-militaires-retraites-et-demobilises-de-bonne-moralite-pour-appuyer-les-fardc.html/129688/>. Radio Okapi. 2023. "RDC: les groupes armés ne seront pas des réservistes des FARDC, précise le ministre de la défense". 11 March 2023. <https://www.radiookapi.net/2023/03/11/actualite/securite/rdc-les-groupes-armes-ne-seront-pas-des-reservistes-des-fardc-precise>.

On the ground, members of armed groups under the guise of ‘Wazalendo’ (patriots) are de-facto deployed on the battlefield alongside or sometimes in competition with the FARDC, which adds arguments to the M23 which denounces this amalgam.<sup>178</sup> A member of parliament from North Kivu said that, “The supervision and deployment of these ‘patriots’ was the right way to defeat the M23, unlike the FARDC which are ‘infiltrated’ and with certain officers corrupted by Rwanda.”<sup>179</sup> However, others disagree:

“To try to fill the gaps, Tshisekedi is trying to rely on local armed groups, as during the time of Kabila Sr., but this strategy is risky. Faced with seasoned rebels supported by a professional army (RDF), these disorganized Mayi Mayi are no match. And this goes against the Nairobi process led by Kenyatta, who wants to disarm these same armed groups!”<sup>180</sup>

While government members have expressed their commitment to verify the track record of those that will integrate into such a force, it raises further concern for the collaboration with and support of FARDC by regional and international forces, in particular MONUSCO. Despite all these preparations, President Tshisekedi in July stated that war would be the last option and that he still believes in diplomacy to reach an outcome for the conflict.

---

<sup>178</sup> The use of the name Wazalendo is no longer allowed by the North Kivu Military region, and the provincial government has been cracking down on members of armed groups brandishing weapons in urban areas, increasing insecurity.

<sup>179</sup> Interview, MP, Kinshasa, February 2023.

<sup>180</sup> Confidential interview, Goma based Congolese official, February 2023.

# Conclusion

Amidst concerns for continuous forum shopping and thus an increasingly confusing situation, the latest summits by the EAC, SADC and ICGLR as well as the expanding role of the AU show a strong tendency to convergence. The recently adopted Joint Framework now puts the strategic steering at the level of the AU and the operational guidance with the DRC. Obviously, this is only the beginning and both Kinshasa and the AU will have to step up and demonstrate both willingness and capacity to take on these roles. The AU will have to oversee the activities of the different RECs and Kinshasa will have to tone down its rhetoric. Nevertheless, it is an encouraging sign that the pushy narrative on contentious issues, such as the presence of the EACRF, has, at least for the moment, been subdued.

Since the 31 May EAC Summit there is also a technically viable location for pre-cantonment of the M23. Regional actors will have to effectively increase the pressure on the group and Kigali to start the process. This also leaves an important role for Angola as a protector of the cantonment sites. The EACRF and other actors on the ground should also further enhance their co-operation and co-ordination with MONUSCO and the FIB. Despite the passivity of its military component, the mission maintains a considerable capacity for mobility and aerial surveillance, while JMAC, DDRRR Section, and Provincial offices could still contribute greatly to support the facilitation of the regional processes.

Even though there is yet no clarity on the future deployment of a SADC force, the political support by the Southern African region should provide a level of comfort to Kinshasa. In any case, SADC and regional leaders such as South Africa seem committed to remain engaged with the DRC and the UN to ensure a smooth transition for the departure of MONUSCO. To this end it is important for the UN Secretariat and the Security Council to actively work with SADC and focus on the revitalisation of the SADC / MONUSCO FIB.



In parallel to such initiatives, the regions international partners should work through the AU and the fourth pillar of the recently adopted Framework to ensure funding and operational support to the regional initiatives. Regional states, and some other African states, have shown their commitment by carrying the burden of the efforts thus far. However, the risks for the situation to spiral further out of control remain very real and thus the international partners have a vested interest to support the regional diplomatic initiatives.

The current 'uneasy stability' on the ground may, at this stage, provide a functional foundation for a discrete, regionally-led process between Kinshasa and Kigali. How would a dialogue / confidence-building track work with Rwanda? Rwanda made it clear that a solution to the problems in Eastern DRC would only be found once the root causes are addressed. It made this point and its commitment to the EAC process during a visit by Kenyan President William Ruto.<sup>161</sup> Fundamental bilateral issues include the position of Congolese refugees in Rwanda and Rwandan refugees in DRC, the FDLR and M23 and lastly, and perhaps most fundamentally, a structural clean-up of the regional trade and economic relations. And this is where it all began.

At the regional and international levels, the DRC's position has not been reinforced by the lack of follow-up on key policy areas such as DDR, and the lack of stability of its interlocutors for regional diplomacy. The attitude towards armed groups, in particular the collaboration on the ground with the FDLR, is a major source for concern.

In the strategic picture, the M23 is but a vehicle that can be inflated or deflated and the same can be largely said about the narrative of the FDLR threat. There certainly needs to be a solution for the core members of both armed groups as well as for the refugee communities they claim to represent. However, neither are a legitimate political partner for political talks or as representatives of 'their' communities. It is therefore an interesting sign, that even in complex pre-electoral times, neither Tshisekedi nor his political

---

<sup>161</sup> The East African. 2023. "New hope as Kenya, Rwanda back local political solution in DRC conflict". 9 April 2023. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/kenya-rwanda-back-local-political-solution-in-drc-conflict-4192216>.

allies have shied away from placing the refugee question on the table.<sup>182</sup> And UNHCR has since relaunched the tripartite dialogue with Rwanda and the DRC.<sup>183</sup>

However, the risk of a total collapse and further descent into open war also remains real. Elements within the negative forces (M23, FDLR) are the main risk for disruption. They are the main targets of the process, and it is unlikely that their demands will be met. Targeted violence against civilians / communities is therefore likely to occur and could seriously harm an already fragile confidence in the regional forces and processes. Hence the importance of a credible intelligence gathering capability and the development of a highly mobile and potent military response capability within the EACRF / MONUSCO and the future SAMIDRC. A second major risk factor is the dynamic amongst Congolese armed groups. The DRC government will have to effectively prioritize its P-DDRCS of the national armed groups, including the 'Wazalendo' (patriots). Where elements of armed groups integrate the new reserve force, such elements need to be well-controlled. The FARDC should also prioritize to rotate units that have been deployed in certain areas for too long, many of which have established a toxic collaboration with local armed groups or other interest groups. Several of these groups are now in the frontline and will expect a considerable compensation for their effort in 'protecting the nation' from foreign aggression.

Contrary to most of its neighbours, the DRC has a vibrant public opinion that affects the political space for the government. Domestic perception and attitudes are thus important, certainly in an electoral year. There is a considerable flow of disinformation and popular mobilization can be weaponized by

---

<sup>182</sup> Actualité.cd. 2023. "Réfugiés Congolais et Rwandais: Félix Tshisekedi a demandé la tenue "urgente" d'une tripartite RDC-Rwanda-HCR pour le rapatriement des ressortissants de deux pays". 27 February 2023. <https://actualite.cd/2023/02/27/refugies-congolais-et-rwandais-felix-tshisekedi-demande-la-tenu-urgente-dune-tripartite>. Actualité.cd. 2023.

"Réfugiés Congolais au Rwanda: la RDC va adopter une résolution afin de définir les principes devant régir le rapatriement". 16 March 2023. <https://actualite.cd/2023/03/16/refugies-congolais-au-rwanda-la-rdc-va-adopter-une-resolution-afin-de-definir-les>.

<sup>183</sup> Actualité.cd. 2023. "Rapatriement des réfugiés congolais vivant au Rwanda: le HCR s'active pour jouer son rôle, une première réunion tripartite annoncée pour fin avril à Genève". 23 March 2023. <https://actualite.cd/2023/03/23/rapatriement-des-refugies-congolais-vivant-au-rwanda-le-hcr-sactive-pour-jouer-son-role>.

actors on the ground. It makes for a potent and unpredictable force. While some political grandstanding and catering to audiences is to be expected, especially during electoral times, maintaining some distance from regional initiatives and constructive developments should be supported. Additionally, political discourse and nationalist posturing should be controlled. To that end, Congolese political and civil society leaders, and Congolese experts on regional matters, should be actively engaged with.

There remain many uncertainties on the future of the region-led processes. But despite the numerous obstacles, the region and the broader international community have a responsibility to stay the course. Maintaining a credible regional military presence on the ground is a *conditio sine qua non* for the political and possible other tracks to succeed. While the question of refugees needs to be addressed, the region should be weary of overloading the boat. The existing policies, mechanisms, and strategies developed within the EAC and ICGLR and at a continental level should be operationalized rather than re-invented. Kinshasa in particular will have to commit the necessary resources and refrain from excessive nationalist posturing. Another temporary solution that freezes the conflicts for another few years will not do. It would continue to cause daily harm to countless Congolese citizens, and it would structurally damage the regional and continental integration projects.

The current crisis should also serve as a wake-up call. While profound reform in the DRC is most certainly a necessity, sustainable stability in the country and the region cannot be achieved without addressing regional factors. They offer proof that regional integration, without the genuine commitment by all stakeholders, can have unintended consequences, particularly when they represent a threat for deeply rooted vested interests. Regional efforts at mediation and intervention also show that the political and regional dynamics and sensitivities on the continent need to be better understood. Regional states and regimes have different competing interest and second, 'regional solutions' are not necessarily perceived as more legitimate by local actors. These interests and sensitivities are not limited to the security and military domain, but also concern economic competition.

# Bibliography

- Carayannis, Tatiana. and Vlassenroot, Koen and Hoffman, Kasper and Pangburn, Aaron. 2018. Competing networks and political order in the Democratic Republic of Congo: a literature review on the logics of public authority and international intervention. Conflict Research Programme. LSE; at [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100161/1/Vlassenroot\\_Competing\\_networks\\_Published.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100161/1/Vlassenroot_Competing_networks_Published.pdf).
- Donelli F. 2022. Rwanda's New Military Diplomacy. Paris: IFRI – DGRIS, at <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/dgris/Note%2031%20RWANDA%27S%20NEW%20MILITARY%20DIPLOMACY.pdf>.
- Gower, Melanie and Butchard, Patrick and McKinney, C.J.. 2022. The UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership. London: House of Commons Library Research Briefing, at <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9568/CBP-9568.pdf>.
- Handy, Paul-Simon. 2021. Rwanda: the emergence of an African smart power. ISS Today, at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/rwanda-the-emergence-of-an-african-smart-power>.
- Handy, Paul-Simon and Estime Antoine-Prosper. 2022. Burundi and Rwanda on a reconciliation path. Pretoria, ISS Today, at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/burundi-and-rwanda-on-a-reconciliation-path>.
- Henning Tamm. 2018. "Status Competition in Africa: Explaining the Rwandan-Ugandan clashes in the Democratic Republic of Congo" *African Affairs* 118(472), 509-530.
- Hoebeke, Hans and Chiza, Christian and Mukungilwa, Bienvenu. 2022. L'ancien se meurt et le nouveau ne veut (encore) naître – La réforme du secteur de la sécurité en République Démocratique du Congo. GIC, Série Insecure Livelihoods, at <https://www.gicnetwork.be/lancien-se-meurt-et-le-nouveau-ne-veut-encore-naître/>.
- Hoebeke, Hans and Sematumba Onesphore. 2023. The Democratic Republic of Congo's Chairmanship of the African Union. In *Yearbook on the African Union 2021 Vol. 2*. Edited by Engel, Ulf. Brill.
- Johnson, Dominic and Schindwein, Simone and Schmolze, Bianca. 2019. *Les FDLR, histoire d'une malice rwandaise: des forêts du Kivu aux tribunaux de l'Allemagne*. Ch.Links 2019.
- Mathani, Dino. 2021. The Kampala Attacks and Their Regional Implications. Q&A, International Crisis Group, at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/great-lakes/uganda/kampala-attacks-and-their-regional-implications>.
- Matthysen, Ken and Gobbers, Erik. 2022. Armed conflict, insecurity and mining in eastern DRC – Reflections on the nexus between natural resources and armed conflict. Antwerp. IPIS, at [https://ipisresearch.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/20221208\\_ILRG\\_IPIS\\_Armed-conflict-insecurity-and-mining-in-eastern-DRC.pdf](https://ipisresearch.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/20221208_ILRG_IPIS_Armed-conflict-insecurity-and-mining-in-eastern-DRC.pdf).

- Murithi, Mutiga. 2021. Uganda's Museveni Clings to Power – But Trouble Lies Ahead. International Crisis Group, Q&A, at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/uganda/ugandas-museveni-clings-power-trouble-lies-ahead>.
- Shepherd, Ben. 2018. Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Democratic Republic of Congo (M23) Case Study. Stabilisation Unit, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, United Kingdom, at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/766018/DRC\\_case\\_study.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766018/DRC_case_study.pdf).
- Muzalia, Godefroid and Rukata Thierry. 2022. The “Balkanization” of the Democratic Republic of Congo – Heated debates and conspiracy theories in Greater Kivu area; The Insecure Livelihoods Series, GIC. December, at [https://www.gicnetwork.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/16\\_GIC\\_The-Balkanization-of-the-Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo.pdf](https://www.gicnetwork.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/16_GIC_The-Balkanization-of-the-Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo.pdf).
- Titeca Kristof. 2022. “Total Success”? The real goals of Uganda's Operation Shujaa in DRC. African Arguments, at <https://africanarguments.org/2022/06/total-success-the-real-goals-of-uganda-operation-shujaa-in-drc/>.

# The Insecure Livelihoods Series

