
The M23: A Fractious, Entrenched Rebellion

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About the Congo Research Group

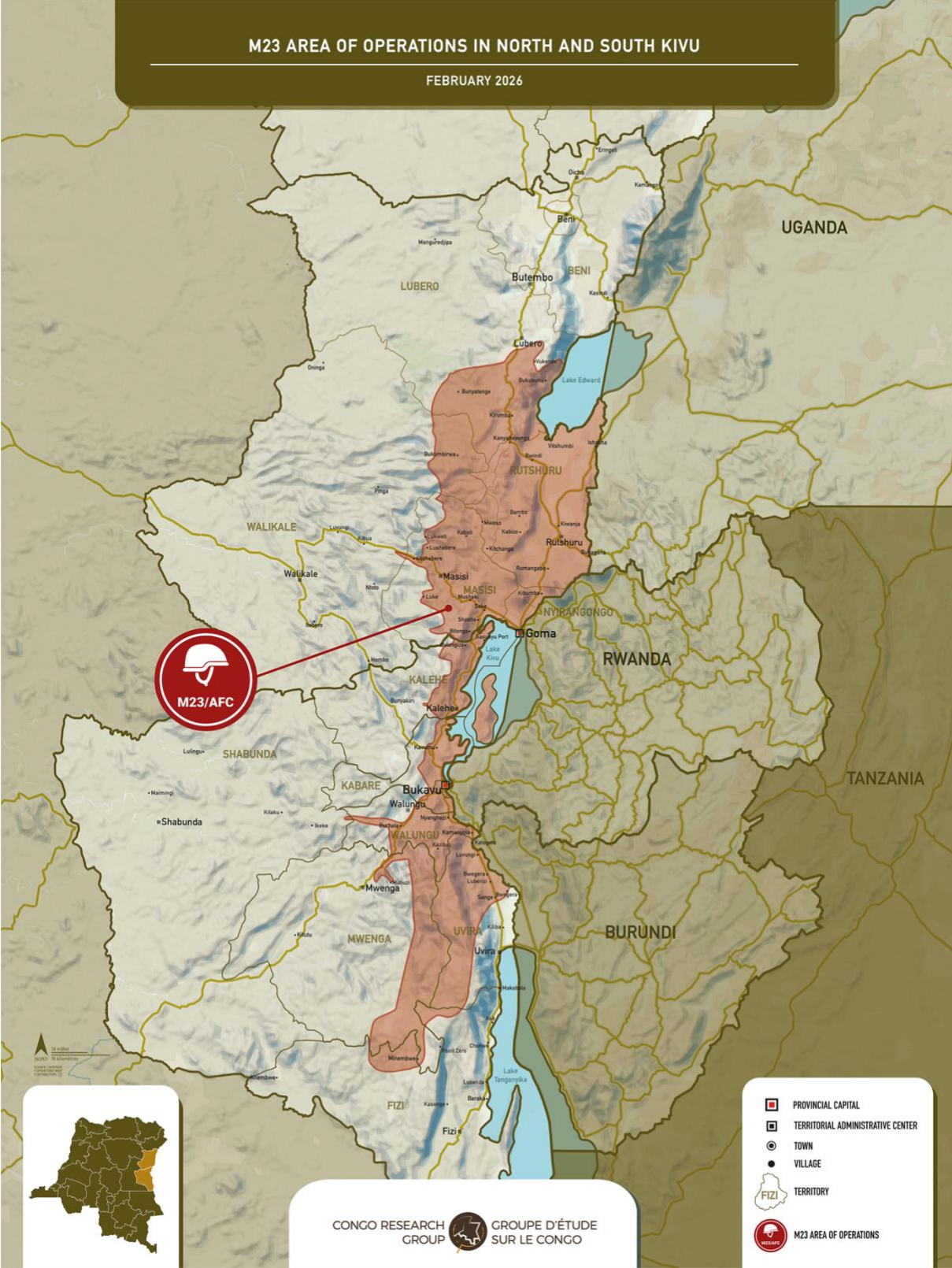
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M23 area of operations in North and South Kivu, February 2026. Photo Credit: Giovanni Salvaggio

Glossary

ADCVI	<i>Auto-défense des communautés victimes de l'Ituri</i> (Self-Defense of the Communities Victimized in Ituri), also known as Zaïre
AFC	<i>Alliance Fleuve Congo</i> (Congo River Alliance)
AFDL	<i>Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre</i> (Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire)
ARC	<i>Armée révolutionnaire du Congo</i> (Revolutionary Army of Congo)
ASP	<i>Alliance pour le salut du peuple</i> (Alliance for the Salvation of the People)
CNDP	<i>Congrès national pour la défense du peuple</i> (National Congress for the Defence of the People)
CRP	<i>Convention pour la révolution populaire</i> (Convention for the Popular Revolution)
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FARDC	<i>Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo</i> (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo)
FDLR	<i>Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda</i> (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda)
FDNB	<i>Forces de défense nationale du Burundi</i> (Burundi National Defence Force)
ICC	International Criminal Court
JOC	Joint Oversight Committee
JSCM	Joint Security Coordination Mechanism
M23	<i>Mouvement du 23 mars</i> (March 23rd Movement)
MINEMA	Rwandan Ministry in Charge of Emergency Management
MONUSCO	<i>Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo</i> (United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo)
PPRD	<i>Parti du peuple pour la reconstruction et la démocratie</i> (People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy)
RCD	<i>Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie</i> (Rally for Congolese Democracy)
RDF	Rwandan Defence Force
RED-Tabara	<i>Résistance pour un État de droit au Burundi</i> (Resistance for the Rule of Law in Burundi)
REIF	Regional Economic Integration Framework Between the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Government of the Republic of Rwanda
RPA	Rwandan Patriotic Army
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
UN	United Nations
UPC	<i>Union des Patriotes Congolais</i> (Union of Congolese Patriots)
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Force

1. Introduction: An X-Ray of the M23

It has now been four years since the March 23rd Movement (*Mouvement du 23 mars*, M23) rebellion emerged, eventually seizing control over a large swath of North and South Kivu provinces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The armed group is currently engaged in stalled negotiations with the Congolese government led by the state of Qatar over a potential peace deal. At the same time, a new initiative for national political dialogue that could potentially address some of the M23's demands regarding governance appears to be taking shape. Yet comparatively little about the M23's internal organization and objectives is known to the public—Rwandan support to the M23, crucial though it may be, is perhaps the best-known feature of this rebel movement to the casual observer of Great Lakes geopolitics.

This policy brief seeks to fill in the gaps: we describe the movement's return to DRC; its alliances with other armed groups and recruitment strategies; and internal tensions between the M23 and the Congo River Alliance (*Alliance Fleuve Congo*, AFC), the M23's political umbrella created in late 2023. Our goal is to provide policymakers and members of the public with an understanding of the movement's internal dynamics, structure, and objectives, as well as its evolution over recent years.

The content herein is based on a combination of public sources, interviews with select key informants and the work the Congo Research Group has done in the region since 2014.

2. The Return of the M23

The M23 is the latest in a succession of Rwanda-backed armed groups that has emerged in the eastern DRC since 1996. The first two such rebellions had national ambitions: in 1996, a coalition of countries backed ended Mobutu Sese Seko's 32-year rule; in 1998, the new government fell out with its former Rwandan and Ugandan allies, prompting new rebellions that conquered over half of the country.

Then came the democratic transition (2003-2006), which unified the country, but also led Rwanda and its Congolese rebel allies to fear that they would lose power. In response, they backed the National Congress for the Defense of the People (*Congrès national pour la défense du peuple*, CNDP), a much smaller group that was limited to controlling a small part of the Kivu region between 2006 and 2009. That rebellion was integrated into the Congolese army under very favorable terms; when the Congolese government tried to redeploy the core network of CNDP officers outside of the Kivus, it triggered a new rebellion in 2012, the M23. It was arguably the least successful in this succession, confined to a much smaller strip of land next to the Rwandan border, and only lasting for 18 months.¹

Following its military defeat in 2013, the M23 splintered into two factions. One group took refuge in Rwanda, while the other—composed of the majority of fighters—was housed in a Ugandan army camp in southwestern Uganda. The Rwandan faction, led by Jean-Marie Runiga, had previously been close to Bosco Ntaganda, the movement's overall commander, who eventually surrendered at the US Embassy in Kigali, Rwanda, on March 18, 2013, before being transferred to the International Criminal Court (ICC).² Many of Runiga's followers were demobilized, though some remained in Rwandan refugee and army camps.

After failed peace negotiations with Kinshasa in 2013, M23 commanders and combatants languished in exile. Over the following four years, they had few sources of revenue or activities to sustain themselves. Several senior figures faced international and Congolese sanctions or indictments.³ In 2017, Sultani Makenga, the M23 military chief, left Uganda and relocated to the slopes of Mount Sabyinyo, just inside the DRC, where the borders of Uganda, Rwanda, and the DRC meet. According to an internal M23 document, Makenga had 324 people and five guns at the time; another source places the number of troops at several hundred.⁴

According to a source close to Makenga, their departure was quietly facilitated by senior Ugandan military officers, who provided limited resources.⁵ The group endured harsh conditions in the mountains, engaging only sporadically in clashes with Congolese forces. Multiple sources suggest that their return to Congolese territory was not part of a deliberate plan to resume hostilities, but rather a desperate move by fighters with no prospects in Uganda. This is confirmed by what followed: for four years, these fighters endured in austere conditions.

It was not until November 2021 that the M23 received a significant influx of recruits and renewed external backing. Rwanda's support, documented in detail elsewhere, was largely driven by its concern over Ugandan military deployments in Ituri, the northeastern DRC province bordering Uganda, and road construction projects near the Rwandan border.⁶ Relations between Kigali and Kampala were at a low point, and Rwandan leaders feared Uganda could use Congolese territory to destabilize its southern neighbor. In addition, Burundi had deployed troops into South Kivu, the eastern DRC province on its western border, where it was waging a low-level proxy conflict with RED-Tabara, a Burundian rebellion with links to Kigali.

Historically, ties between Rwanda and Makenga had been fraught. Makenga had fought alongside Rwandan forces since the mid-1990s but clashed repeatedly with their commanders, who considered him insubordinate, while he accused them of trying to micromanage their Congolese partners. By 2020, however, Rwanda began reaching out to Makenga through intermediaries whom he trusted. Kigali sought to ensure that military entrepreneurs like him could not be co-opted by rival powers.

Intermittent clashes broke out in early 2022, but the M23 initially lacked the manpower and equipment to challenge the defenses of the *Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* (FARDC, the DRC army). To rebuild its strength, the group recruited heavily from the Bihanga camp in Uganda, approximately 300km southwest of the capital, Kampala, where it had been based, and from refugee camps in Rwanda, home to tens of thousands of Congolese Tutsi—some in exile for over three decades. This recruitment benefited from the complicity of both governments. The M23 set up a training camp in Tchanzu, beneath Mount Sabyinyo in the DRC near the borders with Rwanda and Uganda, where it trained officers and new recruits.

The military balance shifted dramatically in June 2022 when the M23, with extensive Rwandan backing, captured the strategic border town of Bunagana.⁷ At this point, Kigali deployed a liaison officer, known as “Santos,” to coordinate

operations. Between mid-2022 and 2024, the M23 doubled the territory under its control each year—securing much of Rutshuru territory by late 2023 and Masisi territory by the end of 2024. Around this time, the M23 also made an effort to rebrand to bolster its legitimacy and be seen as more than a Rwanda-backed, Tutsi-led rebellion. It allied with a new political movement, the AFC, led by former Congolese election commissioner Corneille Nangaa, that included members of Joseph Kabila’s former ruling party, the People’s Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (*Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction et la Démocratie*, PPRD).⁸ It also rebranded its military wing as the *Armée Révolutionnaire du Congo* (ARC), although it is also still known as the M23.

In January and February 2025, after the collapse of Rwanda–DRC peace talks in Angola in December 2024, the M23 and the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF) rapidly seized Goma and Bukavu—two major urban centers with a combined population of roughly three million in North and South Kivu, respectively.⁹ This marked the most serious escalation in eastern DRC since the end of the Second Congo War in 2003.

Following the capture of the two cities, and under heavy international pressure, the M23 and Rwanda agreed to a ceasefire and peace talks, mediated by the United States. Regional talks between the Rwandan and Congolese governments were hosted by the US government in Washington, DC, while the Qatari government stepped in to moderate talks between the M23 and the DRC government. In June 2025, a deal was signed between the DRC and Rwanda along the lines of similar past agreements: the DRC would launch operations against the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (*Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda*, FDLR) and Rwanda would withdraw its troops. Talks between the M23 and the DRC in Doha reached a framework agreement in November 2025, but the most important issues—the future of the M23, refugee resettlement, and justice for past crimes—remained outstanding.

Table 1: Chronology of Peace Negotiations between DRC and Rwanda and DRC and M23 (2025-2026)

DRC-Rwanda talks in Washington, DC	DRC-M23 talks in Doha, Qatar
<p>April 25, 2025: A “Declaration of Principles” was agreed upon by the parties and the US, establishing a commitment to coordinate on an initial draft peace agreement.</p>	<p>March 18, 2025: Trilateral summit in Doha (DRC–Rwanda–Qatar). Presidents Tshisekedi and Kagame meet in Doha with the Emir/Qatari leadership.</p>
<p>June 19, 2025: A preliminary peace deal was reached in Washington, DC, after three days of talks, brokered by the United States.</p>	<p>April 2025: First direct Doha talks in early April, followed by a joint statement committing to an immediate ceasefire and a pledge to work towards a broader settlement on April 23.</p>
<p>June 27, 2025: The “Peace Agreement Between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of Rwanda” was formally signed by the countries’ foreign ministers in Washington, DC</p>	<p>July 19, 2025: Doha Declaration of Principles (DRC–M23): reaffirms commitment to a peaceful settlement and DRC’s sovereignty, declares an immediate ceasefire and ban on new territorial gains, and sets up a joint monitoring mechanism.</p>
<p>July 31, 2025: The inaugural meeting of the Joint Oversight Committee (JOC) was held to establish a forum for the agreement’s implementation and dispute resolution.</p>	<p>September 18, 2025: An exchange of prisoners agreement is signed.</p>
<p>August 1, 2025: The parties agreed to a “Regional Economic Integration Framework (REIF) Between the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Government of the Republic of Rwanda,” which links the peace process to economic cooperation and US investment in critical minerals.</p>	<p>October 14, 2025: The DRC and M23 sign an agreement on monitoring an eventual “permanent ceasefire” in Doha, Qatar.</p>
<p>September 24, 2025: The second meeting of the Joint Security Coordination Mechanism (JSCM) occurred, where an Operational Order (OPORD) was agreed to, with implementation scheduled to begin on October 1.</p>	<p>November 15, 2025: Doha Framework for Peace Agreement. Eight protocols in total, as of signing, only two are agreed upon: Monitoring/de-escalation mechanism (ceasefire monitoring). Detainee exchange/prisoner issues.</p>
<p>December 4, 2025: DRC President Félix Tshisekedi and Rwandan President Paul Kagame formally signed the comprehensive “Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity” at the White House in Washington, DC, which includes the original peace agreement from June 2025, as well as the REIF.</p>	
<p>March 17-18, 2026: Bilateral meetings (US-DRC, US-Rwanda) and a trilateral meeting among all parties in Washington, DC, where parties agreed on steps to de-escalate tensions and advance progress on the ground.</p>	<p>April 2026: The Doha process is set to reconvene. Due to conflict in the Gulf, it will temporarily be relocated to Switzerland.</p>

Table 1 provides a timeline of the two parallel negotiation tracks. Following months of engagement, Qatari negotiators brokered the “Doha Framework for Peace Agreement between the M23 and the Congolese government” on November 15, 2025, which included only an agreement on a ceasefire and an exchange of prisoners mechanism.¹⁰ The ceasefire mechanism had little success, as the M23 did not attend two of the three meetings held during this period. And the ceasefire was short-lived: by December 1, the M23 was pushing southwest towards Mwenga along the National Road 2 and southwards towards Uvira along the National Road 5, constituting the largest offensive since the fall of Bukavu to the rebels in February.

On December 10, the strategic town of Uvira fell to the rebels and their RDF backers.¹¹ It effectively cut off the Burundian government from the frontlines; until then, around 12,000-15,000 Burundi National Defence Force (*Forces de défense nationale du Burundi*, FDNB) had been deployed alongside the Congolese army against the M23/Rwanda alliance. Following the fall of Uvira, on the border with Burundi, fighting also broke out between the Congolese Wazalendo militia—a group of existing rebel groups present in the Eastern Congo mobilized by the DRC government against the M23/RDF¹²—and the national army. The former accused their backers and funders of fleeing the front lines. On December 15, AFC coordinator Corneille Nangaa announced a unilateral withdrawal from Uvira—but not the surrounding areas—as a trust-building measure, ostensibly following a request by the US mediation.¹³

According to a US government source, no formal request for withdrawal had been made. However, US President Donald Trump and others within the US administration were reportedly infuriated that the seizure of Uvira had happened just days after the Washington peace agreement signing ceremony. An unusually forceful rebuke of Rwanda and the M23 by US ambassador to the United Nations, Mike Waltz, during a UN Security Council meeting on December 12 was followed by posts on the social media platform X by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Deputy Secretary Christopher Landau on December 13.¹⁴ Nearly a week later, following a vote to renew the mandate of the UN mission in the DRC, the United States demanded that the M23 withdraw to at least 75 kilometers from Uvira.¹⁵ On January 15, 2026, the AFC/M23 announced its unilateral withdrawal from Uvira, urging that the city be controlled by the UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC (*Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo*, MONUSCO) or a neutral force, despite the fact that the

UN mission is no longer present in South Kivu. On January 18, the Congolese army announced it had retaken control of the city.¹⁶

The fall of Uvira threw the peace process into disarray. Since November, there have been no meetings of the JSCM, the military coordination cell between Rwanda and the DRC, and scheduled meetings between the M23 and the DRC government in Doha were canceled.

While the peace process has lagged, Kinshasa has escalated drone attacks on M23-occupied areas. On February 24, 2026, M23 spokesperson Willy Ngoma was killed in a drone attack near the Rubaya coltan mining site in North Kivu.¹⁷ The drone was likely piloted by one of the private military companies working for the DRC—a symbolically significant victory for Kinshasa. And on March 11, 2026, a drone strike in the city of Goma killed a French UNICEF worker; many suspect the real target to have been AFC/M23 leadership or former president Joseph Kabila.¹⁸

In an attempt to revive the peace process, and respond to Rwanda's escalation in December, the US published new sanctions designations on March 2, 2026. The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control announced sanctions on four senior RDF officers and, most importantly, the RDF as an entity.¹⁹ By sanctioning the entire Rwandan national army (a rarely used sanctions tool), the US dramatically raised the stakes for Rwanda's continued participation in the conflict in eastern Congo. The sanctions will make it more difficult for the RDF to purchase weapons and equipment, and are expected to have an impact on the various companies owned by the Ministry of Defense, such as Horizon Group (a construction company), and Agro-Processing Trust Corporation (APTC), which is a major player in the agricultural sector. It is unclear what impact sanction will have on companies that are widely believed to be linked to the military, but whose shareholder structure is not publicly known.

The US, together with Qatar, has convened a new round of talks between the M23 and the Congolese government, set to begin mid-April in Switzerland. With mounting US pressure on Rwanda, a DRC force emboldened by the success of its drone strikes, and the success of these talks uncertain, the conflict has entered a new phase. It is in this context that we examine the M23 rebellion, which aims to consolidate control in the Kivus and remain there for the foreseeable future.

3. Alliances

The M23 has used alliances with armed groups to project power and influence beyond its core zone of control. There have been two major axes of M23/AFC alliance-building with Congolese armed groups: (1) Ituri networks built through the *Auto-défense des communautés victimes de l'Ituri* (Self-Defense of the Communities Victimized in Ituri, ADCVI), also known as Zaïre, and Thomas Lubanga's *Convention pour la révolution populaire* (Convention for the Popular Revolution, CRP); and (2) South Kivu networks centered on the Twirwaneho, an armed group that recruits in the Banyamulenge community.

In Ituri province, the M23/AFC appears to have established ties with armed groups, in part due to the historic links between some of its commanders. For example, in mid-2023, Logo Marine, one of the commanders of Zaïre who has ties with M23 leaders, sent around 50 troops to be trained in the M23 Bunagana camp.²⁰ In March 2024, Corneille Nangaa traveled to Uganda to meet with Zaïre leaders, including Logo Marine. He later also met with Thomas Lubanga. Innocent Kaina, an influential former M23 commander with deep networks in Ituri, was also important in facilitating these ties. By October 2024, the UN Group of Experts estimated that 1,000 combatants from Ituri had been trained in M23 camps.²¹ By 2025, attacks in Djugu territory included fighters recently returned from M23 training camps in Tchanzu, reinforcing that the Ituri-M23 alliance had evolved into an operational partnership.

In South Kivu, M23's alliance-making was more contested and fluid, but nonetheless significant. Beginning in 2023, the M23 sought to build alliances with Twirwaneho, the RED-Tabara, and other local groups to open a second front in South Kivu. Key intermediaries included Charles Sematama, a former aide to Laurent Nkunda (the leader of the CNDP, the M23's predecessor) and later a Twirwaneho cadre, who served as the direct liaison to Sultani Makenga. Twirwaneho was initially divided: Michel Rukunda (also known as Makanika), the group's then leader, remained skeptical, partly due to local legitimacy concerns and the group's dependence on Banyamulenge constituencies. Nonetheless, by 2024, lobbying by some members of the Banyamulenge diaspora, coupled with attacks against the community from other Congolese armed groups, pushed the Twirwaneho into a formal alliance with the M23.

This is an important development. Since the rebellion of the Rally for Congolese Democracy (*Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie*, RCD) in 1998-2003, armed groups from the Banyamulenge community have been divided over Rwanda. Prominent Banyamulenge commanders—Pacifique Masunzu, Makanika, and Richard Tawimbi—had been hostile toward Kigali in the past, feeling that Rwanda had instrumentalized their community during successive wars, which in turn had dramatically exacerbated their relations with other Congolese. However, unrest and violence in the High Plateaus of South Kivu had progressively led some Banyamulenge leaders to feel abandoned by Kinshasa. By 2023, ties with the M23 had become tighter—the Twirwaheno began sending recruits to M23 camps for training. By 2024, the AFC/M23 had included as a core course in their ideological curriculum, the “History of the Twirwaneho struggle,” alongside modules on “History of M23/ARC” and “Political philosophy of the AFC/M23/ARC revolution,” which effectively inscribes Twirwaneho into the AFC/M23 ideological universe.²²

4. Recruitment

The M23's ambitions are perhaps best illustrated by their massive recruitment campaigns, especially since the fall of Goma in January 2025. When Makenga returned to the DRC in 2017, he was accompanied only by a handful of senior officers, including Yusuf Mboneza, Jimmy Nzamuye, and Léon Kanyamibwa—still among the group's top commanders today. The first wave of new recruits came from the Bihanga camp in Uganda, where M23 had resided for years. Due to Makenga's strained relations with Kigali, fighters based in Rwanda did not join him until 2020, when Rwanda sought reconciliation.

The M23's dramatic expansion of territory, from a few square kilometers in 2021 to over ten thousand in 2025, created a sudden need for recruits. The rebellion succeeded in doing so. Diplomatic and UN estimates suggest that there were around 200 combatants in November 2021; by early 2025, there were at least 5,000 active M23 combatants deployed. The rebels claim that they then graduated a further 16,000 "commandos" from their training camps in September and October 2025, many of whom were FARDC and Wazalendo fighters captured during the fall of Goma.²³ In February 2026, another 7,500 combatants allegedly finished their induction training.²⁴ These numbers have not been independently confirmed, but it is evident that their size has grown rapidly.

Most recruits in the early days were Congolese Tutsi from North Kivu, many of whom had grown up in refugee camps in Rwanda. According to the Rwandan Ministry in Charge of Emergency Management (MINEMA), there are around 82,000 Congolese refugees in Rwanda, most of whom are probably from the Tutsi community that fled there after 1994.²⁵

The M23 then also began recruiting locally—many of these recruits, some of whom were forced to join the rebellion, were from the majority Hutu community in Rutshuru and Masisi territories. Erasto Ntibaturama, an influential Hutu leader—he calls himself a customary chief—from Busumba in Masisi territory, helped with this recruitment, while Colonel Semikobe Gafishi has been in charge of mobilization since at least 2022. Erasto has collaborated with the CNDP and the previous M23 rebellion. While he now lives in Rwanda, three of his sons have senior positions

within the rebellion—Bahati is the governor of North Kivu, Gacheri is a brigade commander, and Gaji is the quartermaster of the M23, in charge of logistics.

In October 2022, another group of senior officers joined Makenga, who had been arrested at the beginning of the first M23 rebellion in 2012 and imprisoned in Kinshasa. They benefitted from a presidential pardon when Felix Tshisekedi came to office in 2019, finally leaving the capital in 2022.²⁶ This group included Bernard Byamungu (also known as “Tiger/Taiga One”), who became the deputy M23 commander; Samuel Nsabimana; and Josué Biyoyo (also known as “Buffle”), who became a senior commander in Masisi territory.

Around the same time, Rwanda was able to broker a reconciliation between the M23 leaders who had sought refuge in Rwanda in 2013—in particular the influential commander Baudouin Ngaruye—and Sultani Makenga. They then joined the rebellion, along with combatants who had been part of the first M23 movement (2012-2013) and had fled to Rwanda with a wing of that movement led by Bosco Ntaganda. Ngaruye became the commander of operations before being sent to command the northern sector.

Finally, after the fall of Goma and Bukavu in early 2025, a new mobilization wave was launched. Members of the diaspora joined the movement, as well as between 600 and 800 Congolese who had been members of the RDF. While many have joined the rebellion voluntarily, a significant portion of recruitment is by force. In areas under M23 control in North Kivu, for example, commanders convened local meetings, set household or village quotas for youth, and used local authorities to mobilize recruits; non-compliance often led to abduction and forced enlistment, including of minors.²⁷ In parallel, M23 continued to recruit abroad, especially in refugee camps in Rwanda (Mahama, Gisagara, Kizimba, Gihembe), where recruitment was “conducted predominantly through false promises of remuneration or employment by RDF officers,”²⁸ using financial incentives and indoctrination. Children as young as twelve have been lured from refugee camps and marched on foot across the border to the M23 training camp in Tchanzu. For the first time since Rwanda-backed insurgencies began in the DRC, recruitment among the Congolese Tutsi diaspora has taken place. According to the UN Group of Experts, Congolese youth from Belgium, Poland, the United Kingdom, Norway, and Germany have attended M23 trainings; some of them were then told to return to their home countries to mobilize other youths.²⁹

Military instruction has been led by Colonel Léon Kanyamibwa, seconded by Colonel Moïse Byinshi and Captain Ernest Sebagenzi. Recruits have reported the presence of Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) and RDF officers assisting with these training sessions.³⁰

In early 2026, some diplomats put their overall size—including the *Armée révolutionnaire congolaise* (ARC, their military wing), the *Police révolutionnaire congolaise* (PRC, their police), and the *autodéfense* (local village militia) at 38,000.³¹ The bulk of M23 troops have little training and morale.³² This includes around 2,000 Congolese soldiers and Wazalendo combatants who had been captured in Goma and were taken to the Rumangabo military camp to be retrained as M23 combatants. Many other combatants are forcefully recruited. In their December 2025 report, the UN Group of Experts wrote:

“High rates of desertion reflected persistent challenges faced by the AFC/M23 in consolidating loyalty among its ranks, compelling it to ensure command and control primarily through coercive means. Attempted desertion or refusal to comply with orders, particularly at training sites such as Rumangabo and Tchanzu, led to inhumane punishments and summary executions. Escapees reported recruits being forced to endure hunger, untreated illnesses, physical abuse, and torture.”³³

Box 1: Examples of Rwandan support to M23 (documented by UN Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo)

Safe haven and remobilization of M23 ex-combatants in Rwanda: After its 2013 defeat, M23 split into ARC and the Alliance for the Salvation of the People (*Alliance pour le salut du peuple*, ASP); most combatants left DRC and were cantoned in camps in Uganda and Rwanda. The Group recalls that ex-combatants remained in those Rwandan and Ugandan camps for years and that this rear base was a precondition for the group's later remobilization.³⁴

Recruitment of M23 fighters in Rwanda: From mid-2022, the Group reports that M23 “strengthened recruitment drives” not only in North Kivu territories but also “in Uganda and Rwanda,” increasing its manpower for new offensives.³⁵

RDF training of the M23: In the 2023 midterm report, the Group states that between early May and early June 2023, M23 combatants were trained at the RDF Military Academy in Gako, Rwanda, based on surrendered M23 combatants, an RDF officer, and security/intelligence sources.³⁶ By late 2024, RDF trainers and Congolese officers (in addition to UPDF trainers) are delivering both military and ideological courses to thousands of recruits in Tchanzu in DRC.³⁷

Direct RDF combat deployments: Since 2022, there have been allegations of entire Rwandan units deployed into the DRC. From 2023, the evidence becomes clearer—the Group no longer speaks only in terms of allegations: it “obtained further evidence – including documentary and photographic evidence and aerial footage – of military operations by soldiers clearly attired in RDF military uniform in Rutshuru, Masisi and Nyiragongo territories.”³⁸ They document mixed M23/RDF camps and equipment in Mushaki (Masisi territory).³⁹ In 2024–2025, the RDF is described as “positioning at front lines” in AFC/M23's expansion, including the operations to conquer Goma and Bukavu.⁴⁰

Provision of weapons, ammunition, uniforms and military technology: M23 and/or RDF combatants are equipped with new matching uniforms, Kevlar helmets, bulletproof vests, VHF radios, night-vision equipment, vehicles and a wide array of recently manufactured ammunition and grenades. In 2023, the M23 used high-precision 120 mm guided mortar systems and other advanced weaponry, requiring external technical support and likely supplied/operated by RDF units.⁴¹ By 2024, the RDF used advanced equipment, including electronic warfare/jamming systems, short-range air defense (SHORAD) and armed drones deployed in AFC/M23's interest.⁴²

5. Internal Tensions

As the M23 has expanded, tensions have emerged within the group and with its main backer, the Rwandan government. Scholars have argued that organizational cohesion is critical for rebellions to negotiate hard compromises in peace processes and then implement them.⁴³ In 2012-2013, similar internal rifts led the M23 to split into two factions—led respectively by Bosco Ntaganda and Sultani Makenga—making it easier for the government to defeat them but also making a comprehensive peace settlement more challenging.

Here we outline three such rifts: between the M23 and Rwanda, between a wing aligned with Makenga and another with Baudouin Ngaruye, and between the M23 and the AFC.

Relations with Rwanda

UN Group of Experts reports have extensively documented Rwanda's support to the M23 (see Box 1 above), which included training, the supply of equipment, and, most decisively, the deployment of specialized RDF units. These units—equipped with drones, GPS spoofing technology, and even surface-to-air missiles—did much of the frontline fighting, with M23 forces consolidating control behind them.

Although the two forces coordinated closely, they remained distinct. The “friends”—as the M23 call them (even in French and Swahili)—have the final say in military strategy and deployments, taking the lead in all major offensives, including the capture of Goma and Bukavu.

Despite Rwandan support, relations between the M23 and Kigali have often been fraught. Although Sultani Makenga once served in the Rwandan army and later fought in successive Rwandan-backed rebel groups in the DRC, his ties with Rwanda have frequently been strained. He has been arrested at least on one occasion, and many Rwandan officers view him as insubordinate and recalcitrant.⁴⁴

While many Congolese view the M23 as little more than an extension of Rwanda's ambitions in their country, Makenga represents the latest in a line of Congolese Tutsi rebel leaders who have had deeply ambivalent and often conflictual

relationships with Kigali. Their interests frequently align with Rwanda's, but they also diverge in significant and sometimes destabilizing ways.

Several examples illustrate this trend. In 1998, when Laurent Désiré Kabila asked the Rwandan army to leave the country, James Kabarebe—then commander of the Congolese army and now Senior Security Advisor to the Rwandan president—ordered all their troops to return home. Many Congolese Tutsi who had fought in the Rwandan army refused, saying they had only joined the Rwandans to liberate their own country. They launched mutinies in Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira—Makenga himself was one of these mutineers, as was Baudouin Ngaruye, and was arrested.

Makenga later became a brigade commander in the CNDP rebellion led by Laurent Nkunda between 2004 and 2009, backed by the Rwandan government. When Kigali struck a peace deal with Kinshasa in 2009 and arrested Nkunda, Makenga threatened to mount a rebellion against Rwanda and had to be talked down by fellow commanders. Finally, when the first M23 rebellion lost support from Rwanda in 2013, following intense diplomatic and financial pressure from donors, Makenga's forces collapsed, forcing him to seek exile in Uganda.

All of these experiences appear to have made clear to the senior M23 leadership, and in particular to Makenga himself, that Rwanda is a circumstantial ally that can turn on them if its interests shift. Rwanda has considered replacing Makenga but has struggled to find an alternative—a FARDC officer they contacted in this regard turned them down—and is worried about the repercussions on troop cohesion and morale if it should do so.⁴⁵

Frictions are also visible in their day-to-day interactions. Makenga has kept significant leeway in appointing people to administrative positions, an important and potentially lucrative power. Makenga has named many senior cadres in the M23's governments in North and South Kivu. When Rwanda attempted to impose Jean-Marie Runiga, a former ally of Bosco Ntaganda, Makenga reportedly refused, and Rwanda eventually put forward Manu Birato, who himself only had a short tenure as governor. Diplomats have also said that Rwandans have been frustrated that their troops have to do much of the fighting, leading to extensive casualties for them, given the relatively weak M23.⁴⁶

The main fault line between the two actors will be over the outcome of the conflict. In 2009, Rwanda cut a deal with Kinshasa, arresting Nkunda and then integrating the CNDP into the Congolese army. While many CNDP officers received important positions as a result—Makenga became commander of South Kivu province, for

example—there was no consultation with the rebels, and many of them chafed at feeling instrumentalized and disposable. Similarly, in 2013, Rwanda pulled its support from the M23 and allowed it to collapse, splitting into two factions. As pressure mounts on Rwanda to strike a deal, many M23 leaders fear they will once again be betrayed.

Makenga-Baudouin strife

Sultani Makenga and Baudouin Ngaruye share a long history. Both are Tutsi from North Kivu who joined the Rwandan army in the mid-1990s and have fought together in successive rebellions since then. Their rift dates back to the first M23 rebellion in 2013, when the movement's two main commanders, Sultani Makenga and Bosco Ntaganda, fell out. The conflict was rooted less in ideology than in personal rivalries, revolving around nominations, revenue streams, and influence within the movement. These tensions culminated in armed clashes between their factions and, eventually, in Ntaganda's flight with his allies to Rwanda in March 2013.

Baudouin, a close ally of Ntaganda, fled with him. Although he later reconciled with Makenga and joined the reconstituted M23 in 2022, frictions have remained. He was reassigned from his position as commander of operations in Goma to leading the northern sector based in Rutshuru. More recently, the two have clashed again over revenue collection. Their rivalry now extends to their spouses, who are reportedly competing for control over lucrative customs revenues and trade.

Baudouin is seen as a more dependable ally of Rwanda, as are several other M23 commanders close to him, including Bernard Byamungu (“Tiger/Taiga One”) and Innocent Zimurinda.

AFC-M23 rift

The M23 has long been seen as a narrow movement dominated by members of the Rwandophone community from North Kivu. It has also been delegitimized due to its close association with Rwanda and its record of human rights abuses. To counter this perception, Rwanda encouraged the M23 to merge with a political formation led by members of the Congolese opposition, the AFC.

The AFC was created on December 15, 2023, by Corneille Nangaa, the former head of the Congolese election commission. It includes several members of Joseph Kabila's PPRD party—such as Adam Chalwe (former PPRD national secretary),

Yannick Tshisola (former PPRD deputy head of youth wing), and Henry Maggie Walifetu (former PPRD head of communications for youth wing)—as well as other opposition figures. Created in 2023, the AFC initially wielded considerable influence within the movement. Over the past year, however, Nangaa has allegedly fallen out with Sultani Makenga. A central source of these tensions lies in diverging aims: while Nangaa has clearly stated his ambition to overthrow the government in Kinshasa, the M23 and its leaders are primarily focused on consolidating control in eastern DRC.

These strains were further exacerbated in April 2025, when Joseph Kabila, now in exile, appeared to throw his weight behind the rebellion, though the former president did not officially endorse the M23. A source close to the M23 and AFC recounted that when Kabila arrived in Goma in May 2025, Makenga went to visit him but was disarmed by Kabila's guards and made to wait for several hours in the courtyard, while Nangaa was granted immediate access. This anecdote highlights the rivalries and mistrust among the different factions within the rebellion.

6. Setting Up an Administration

One of the most troubling aspects of the M23 rebellion is its effort to reshape local administrative structures—and, to some extent, local society itself.⁴⁷ This, along with many statements by M23 officials and commanders in private, signals that they intend to occupy these areas for a long period of time.⁴⁸ Since 2022, when the group began seizing large parts of North Kivu province, it has systematically replaced state-appointed officials with its own cadres. These include intelligence officers, customs agents, village and territorial administrators, and—perhaps most alarmingly—customary chiefs.

This not only signals M23's intention to govern the territory for an extended period and extract resources, but also risks creating deep, long-lasting conflicts, particularly among customary elites. Past rebel movements in eastern Congo, most notably the RCD between 1998 and 2003, sparked bitter and sometimes violent disputes by deposing chiefs and installing their rivals. Because customary chiefs play a central role in managing local disputes—especially over land tenure—M23's interventions could prove profoundly destabilizing. According to a tally by the government in Kinshasa, more than 20 traditional leaders have been replaced by the M23 and replaced with their own nominees, often from within rival wings of the customary elite.⁴⁹ This included at least three *chefferie* chiefs (Bashali, Bukumu, and Bwisha), the highest-level administrative divisions governed by customary chiefs, and three *groupement* chiefs (Bukumu, Muja, and Jomba), the second-highest level.⁵⁰

Examples of this include the naming of Patrick Ndeze as customary chief of Bwisha *chefferie*, one of the largest customary entities in eastern DRC. The reigning chief, Jean-Baptiste Ndeze, is a vice-minister in Tshisekedi's government and is thus not present. Makenga has also named Isaac Butsitsi as chief of the Bukumu *chefferie*, which also corresponds to the territory of Nyiragongo to the north of Goma. Here, a customary conflict has opposed two branches of the Kahembe ruling family since the 1960s. Since the First Congo War, successive Rwandan-backed rebellions have backed the Butsitsi lineage against the descendants of Bigaruka. Makenga has followed this trend, replacing Lebon Bazima Bakungu from the Bigaruka lineage with Isaac Butsitsi, who some allege is related to Makenga.

The M23 have set up several centers for training political cadres and administrative officials and have required most local leaders to attend. The most important such center is in Nyongera, at the site of a former prison. According to the UN Group of Experts, during a three-week training in March 2025, 875 people received training in Congolese history, the AFC/M23 ideology, and basic military tactics and strategy.⁵¹

Perhaps the most important area of administrative control has been in the mining sector. One report suggests that the M23 has seized 45 mining sites across North and South Kivu as of September 2025, producing coltan, cassiterite, and gold.

Sources suggest that the M23 is struggling to govern.⁵² They have had to replace a large number of administrators, judges, and bureaucrats with M23 cadres, some of whom have little experience in governing. They have to pay or at least feed tens of thousands of soldiers, administrators, and cadres; one senior M23 leader said their revenues are around \$10 million per month. Many administrative systems have been disrupted because they depended on data, software, and other inputs managed by Kinshasa. Perhaps most importantly, the M23 does not have access to international financial and banking networks. As M23's access to formal financial channels was deliberately restricted—the Kinshasa government blocked transactions, and businesses refused to engage with the sanctioned entity—the group faced cash shortfalls. In response, M23 began constructing parallel fiscal and financial systems.

Paradoxically, this has deepened local society and businesses' dependence on the Rwandan economy and the M23. Tourism has almost completely stopped, while humanitarian workers—a key source of revenue for the real estate, grocery, and hospitality sectors—have withdrawn some of their staff. The M23 is increasingly a major source of employment, and the Rwandan economic presence can increasingly be felt in the occupied territories. Sources in Goma, for example, report the increasing presence of Rwandan companies and products throughout the town.

7. The Objectives of the M23

In our analysis, the rebellion's interests have shifted over time. At the outset, in November 2021, the movement largely framed its demands around the settlement of the 2012–2013 conflict, insisting that the agreement signed then be implemented. This meant the release of political prisoners, amnesty for war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the return of refugees to Congo. Since then, however, its rhetoric and demands have evolved. Beginning in 2023 in particular, the group increasingly emphasized the alleged genocide against the Congolese Tutsi population and the broader governance crisis in the Congo, while also demanding that the Tshisekedi government step down, portraying it as illegitimate.⁵³ These demands escalated as the rebellion advanced and expanded its territorial control, culminating in the capture of Goma and Bukavu in January and February 2025.

It is clear that the M23 harbors many competing demands and represents several different constituencies. The Rwandan government largely sees the M23 as a means of projecting power and influence into eastern DRC: safeguarding its security interests, creating a buffer zone for resource extraction and political leverage, and catering to domestic constituencies that view such control as necessary to preserve the dominance of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and Rwanda's internal stability. The Rwandan government has reportedly chastised Nangaa, for example, for saying they will go all the way to Kinshasa and that he will be the next president.⁵⁴

From a security perspective, Rwanda has incorporated the notion of “strategic depth” into its military doctrine since at least 2020. Then, in a speech to his troops, General Mugangu Mubarak—who is now the overall RDF commander and sanctioned by the United States on March 2, 2026—said: “If you want us to start in Mont-Kigali, Rebero, Jali [neighborhoods of Kigali], that would be like fighting in your own living room. Children and women could suffer. Pray that your army can carry out its duties over there [in the Congo].”⁵⁵ Along similar lines, the Rwandan Minister of Foreign Affairs Olivier Nduhungirehe has said: “Rwanda will not wait for the threat to materialize; this is why we will maintain defensive measures at the border to prevent any spillover and respond appropriately. These measures shall be maintained so long as the threat posed by this coalition continues to exist.”⁵⁶ In

perhaps the most candid public remarks since the beginning of the conflict, Rwandan ambassador to the United States Mathilde Makuntabana admitted that Rwanda engages in “security coordination” with AFC/M23 in a statement to the US House Foreign Affairs Committee on January 22, 2026.⁵⁷

There are also obvious material interests. According to official figures, Rwanda exported USD 1.5 billion in gold in 2024, almost doubling its exports from the previous year. That figure is expected to rise to over USD 2 billion in 2025, even though domestic production is steady at around USD 20-30 million, or around 350 kilograms of gold.⁵⁸ Many reports indicate that a significant amount of Rwanda’s minerals exports are smuggled in from the DRC.⁵⁹ Much of the gold passed through the Gasabo Gold Refinery, which is owned by the Rwandan government. Together with tin, tungsten, and tantalum, total mineral exports amount to around USD 1.75 billion, around 54% of all goods exported.

Similarly, an industry body has warned that tantalum smuggling from the DRC to Rwanda increased dramatically in 2024 and 2025, following the M23’s takeover of the Rubaya mine. For example, according to international trade databases, Rwanda exported almost four times as much tantalum in the first half of 2025 as during that same period in 2024. That surge in tantalum exports was probably worth hundreds of millions of dollars.⁶⁰

Within the AFC and M23 themselves, interests also diverge. For some, rebellion is simply a matter of survival: many leaders have known little else for over thirty years. This includes Makenga himself, who likely sees few prospects in peacetime. The Congolese government has issued a warrant for his arrest, and he is under UN, US, and European Union (EU) sanctions.⁶¹ In interviews with UN officials, members of the M23 have been openly dismissive of any deal that would see them relinquish control of the territory they currently hold.⁶² One of them, a member of the Tutsi community, told a journalist they had fought in rebellions since 1996 and had learned that they could not trust Kinshasa; the only solution was autonomy.⁶³

Others among the M23 and AFC elite—such as Corneille Nangaa and members of Joseph Kabila’s political coalition—likely view rebellion as a means to pressure the Congolese state into granting them positions, as has happened repeatedly in recent Congolese history. They undoubtedly see the endgame as national negotiations leading to a power-sharing agreement at the national level. The Congolese government accuses Joseph Kabila, who was sentenced to death in absentia in September 2025 for his alleged alliance with the M23, of using the

rebellion to return to power, or at least to secure his many assets in the DRC.⁶⁴ In 2025, the government began expropriating some of his properties.

Given these overlapping and often contradictory interests, it will be difficult to find a satisfactory resolution to the M23's demands. Some are so maximalist that acceding to them would be politically suicidal for the Congolese government. For example, agreeing to a constitutional revision that would decentralize power to the Kivu provinces under a new federal system—as the M23 has demanded in the Doha negotiations—or granting senior political and military positions to the M23, would severely undermine the DRC government's domestic legitimacy. Other demands, however, are arguably more politically feasible: notably, the return of refugees—not only Congolese Tutsi but all communities displaced by conflict—as well as clarifying the citizenship status of Congolese Tutsi and Banyamulenge populations.

8. Conclusion

A few conclusions can be drawn from this analysis of the M23. First, the movement intends to remain in the region for the long term. Its efforts to establish a parallel administration, raise revenues, and train and indoctrinate a new class of administrators and local elites all point in this direction, as do their interviews with researchers. During their occupation they have dramatically transformed local society, leaving a lasting legacy. Second, in a similar vein, the group has made significant progress in recruiting and training thousands of combatants and cadres, enabling it to become a stronger fighting force and more self-sufficient in both funding and administration, although in all major offensives it has remained deeply dependent on Rwandan support. Finally, despite these advances in professionalization, the M23 remains riven by internal conflicts as well as tensions with its principal external sponsor, the Rwandan government. It would be a mistake to conflate the interests of the M23 with those of Rwanda, or to see the M23 and AFC as in lockstep.

What does this mean for the ongoing negotiations and the long-term prospects for peace in eastern DRC? At the time of writing, the peace process is at an impasse, although talks between the M23 and DRC are due to resume mid-April 2026 in Switzerland. The M23 rebellion has presented maximalist demands, including sweeping governance reforms in the DRC and, potentially, the resignation of the current Congolese government. It has also called for a restructuring of the Congolese state to create a more federal, decentralized system of governance—something that can only be legitimately determined through an inclusive national process, not a deal struck between one rebel movement and the government it is fighting. The Congolese government, for its part, considers both these demands and the rebellion itself illegitimate, viewing them largely as the product of Rwandan intervention. The troubling escalation in early December, when the M23 and RDF pushed southwards to capture the town of Uvira, is a further illustration of this impasse.

US sanctions on the RDF in March 2026 appear to have emboldened those surrounding President Tshisekedi to continue to seek a military victory through extensive use of drones—the one area where Kinshasa now appears to have an advantage over the M23 and RDF. They have also, however, provided some leverage that the US intends to use on Rwanda and the M23 in the next round of talks.

After over four years of fighting, it is clear that a military solution is unattainable. A compromise between the Congolese and Rwandan governments and the M23 remains distant. Nevertheless, any durable peace deal will have to address several critical issues: the fate of over 80,000 Congolese refugees who have lived in Rwanda for more than three decades; accountability for crimes committed by all sides; initiatives to promote reconciliation among divided communities; and the future of M23 leaders and combatants.⁶⁵ This last issue may prove the most intractable. It is difficult to imagine commanders such as Makenga, Ngaruye, or Byamungu being integrated into the Congolese army, just as it is difficult to see the M23 and the AFC playing a legitimate role in the Congolese political system—both because of their rebellion and, more importantly, because of their lack of popularity and legitimacy among the broader Congolese population. Nonetheless, the core of any peace deal is likely to be some kind of political and military integration of the rebellion. The sooner an agreement can be reached in that regard, the faster the conflict will come to an end.

For these reasons, the ultimate fate of the rebellion likely lies less in the hands of the rebels themselves than in those of the governments in Kigali and Kinshasa. If those governments cannot make compromises and the US mediation does not wield leverage on the various parties, while marshaling coordinated influence by allies in the International Contact Group for the Great Lakes, fighting will continue.

Annex: M23 Military and Political Structure (as of December 2025)

A. Military High Command

Position	Name / Rank	Notes
Chief of Staff	General Sultani Makenga (“Bravo Five”)	Fought in Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) under General Kayitare, <i>Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre</i> (Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaïre, AFDL), RCD, CNDP, and M23 (2012-2013). Fled to Uganda in 2013. Under UN sanctions since 2012.
Deputy Chief of Staff	General Byamungu Bernard (“Taiga/Tiger One”)	Mai-Mai in Bunyakiri. Then fought in AFDL (bodyguard of General Kabarebe), RCD, and CNDP. Was arrested in first M23 rebellion, released in 2020. Fled to Uganda in 2013. Under UN sanctions since 2023.
Headquarters Commander (based in Rubare, Rutshuru)	Colonel Innocent Zimulinda	Fought briefly in RPA, then in UPC, CNDP, then M23. Fled to Rwanda in 2013. Entered M23 II in 2023. Under UN sanctions since 2010.
Deputy HQ commander	Colonel Moïse Byinshi	
G1: Administration	Colonel Josué Biyoyo (“Buffle”)	Fought in AFDL, then RCD, Mudundu 40, CNDP. Arrested in Kinshasa during M23 I rebellion, then released in 2019. Joined M23 II in 2023.
G2: Military Intelligence	Colonel John Imani Nzenze	Was a teacher in refugee camps in Rwanda. Then joined CNDP, was aide de camp of Makenga in M23 I. Then he went to Finland in 2014. Joined M23 II around 2019.
G3: Operations	Vacant (was previously Baudouin Ngaruye)	
G4: Logistics	Colonel Jeff Kabayiza (“Sauce Tomate”)	Fought in RPA, then AFDL, CNDP, M23, went to Uganda in 2013. Was among Makenga’s commanders in Sabinyo in 2017.
G5: Political-Military Relations	Colonel Ernest Sebagenzi	Fought in AFDL, then RCD, CNDP, M23 I and M23 II. Fled to Uganda in 2013, but then went to live in Rwanda.
Military Training & Political-Military Cadres	Colonel Kanyamibwa Léon	Joined RPA, then became a teacher in military schools in RPA. Then joined CNDP, M23 I and M23 II. Fled to Uganda in Makenga in 2013. Was among Makenga’s commanders in Sabinyo in 2017.
Quartermaster & Production	Captain Gaji Erasto	Son of Erasto Ntiburama, this is his first rebellion.
Headquarters Regiment (now deployed to South Kivu)	Colonel Kamanzi Rubens (Romeo Kilo)	
HQ regiment 1st battalion (deployed in Uvira operation)	Lt Col “Romeo Delta”	
HQ regiment 2nd battalion (deployed to Minembwe)	Lt Col Badege	
Military prisons	Colonel Antoine Manzi	Was in CNDP and M23 I, was close to Laurent Nkunda.

B. Operational Sectors

1st Operational Sector (Nyiragongo → Lubero, headquarters in Rutshuru town)

Position	Name / Rank	Notes
Sector Commander	Brigadier General Baudouin Ngaruye	RPA, then became instructor in RPA. RCD, CNDP, M23 I and M23 II. Fled to Rwanda in 2013 with Bosco Ntaganda. Fell out with Makenga
T1: Administration	Colonel Seraphin Mirindi	Political commissioner of General Obedi in RCD. Then joined CNDP, M23 I, then fled to Rwanda with Bosco in 2013. Joined M23 II in 2023 with Baudouin's group.
T2: Intelligence	Colonel Ndagije	Fought in RPA, then CNDP and M23 I and M23 II. Fled to Rwanda in 2013 with Baudouin.
T3: Operations	Colonel Bisamaza Richard	RPA under General Kayitare. AFDL, RCD, CNDP. Didn't join M23 I, defected from FARDC in 2014, fled to Uganda. Joined M23 II in 2023.
T4: Logistics	Lt Col Bahati Gahizi	
T5: Political-Military Relations	Lt Col Rugabisha Clément	
1st Brigade Commander (HQ in Nyongera)	Colonel Emmanuel Kabundi	CNDP, M23 I, M23 II. Fled to Rwanda in 2013.
1st Brigade Dpty Comm	Colonel Rigobert Manga	
2nd Brigade Commander (HQ in Bambu)	Colonel Mapenzi Lihue	This brigade was formed largely out of a wing of the Nduma Defence for Congo (NDC) faction led by Colonel Mapenzi.
2nd Brigade Dpty Comm	Colonel Gakufe Jafet	

2nd Operational Sector (Masisi–Walikale and South Kivu, headquarters in Mushaki)

Position	Name / Rank	Notes
Sector Commander	Brigadier General Gacheri Eraston	Son of Erasto Ntiburama, CNDP, then M23 I and M23 II. Fled to Uganda in 2013.
T1: Administration	Colonel Gilbert Bwira	Was a leader of the NDC armed group before joining M23.
T2: Intelligence	Lt Col Muhire	
T3: Operations	Col Jimmy Nzamuye	Fought in RPA, AFDL, CNDP, M23 I and M23 II. Fled to Uganda in Makenga in 2013. Was among Makenga's commanders in Sabinyo in 2017.
T4: Logistics	Major Kalengay	
T5: Political-Military Relations	Lt Col Damascène	
1st Brigade Commander	Colonel Samuel Nsabimana	Was in PARECO, then in Serufuli's Local Defense, RCD, FARDC, CNDP, then M23. Arrested in Kinshasa, then released in 2019.
2nd Brigade Commander (now gone as a liaison to Minembwe)	Colonel Justin ("Zero Three")	Fought in RPA, the AFDL, RCD, M23 I and M23 II. Fled to Uganda in 2013 with Makenga.

Political leadership: AFC

Position	Name / Rank	Notes
Coordinator	Corneille Nangaa	Former election commissioner. Under US sanctions due to the rigging of the 2018 elections (even though the beneficiaries of that rigging were not sanctioned).
Deputy Coordinator	Bernard Bisimwa, President of M23	Was CNDP spokesperson 2006-2009, then President of M23 I and now M23 II. Fled to Uganda in 2013 with Makenga. Under EU sanctions. Is also president of the M23.
Deputy Coordinator	Freddy Kanyiki	A member of the Banyamulenge Diaspora, formerly based in the United States. Is also president of the Movement of Republicans for the Dignity of Peoples (MRDP), a Banyamulenge armed group also known as Twirwaneho.
Secretary General	Benjamin Mbonimpa	Was a territorial administrator and commissioner for foreign affairs in the M23 I, now in M23 II. Sanctioned by the EU. Married to Makenga's older sister.
Permanent Secretary	Delion Kimbulungu	Was at the election commission with Nangaa. Also presides over a commission in charge of reorganizing the justice sector in the occupied territories.
Chief of staff to coordinator	Yannick Tshisola	Former deputy head of PPRD youth wing and former deputy chief of staff of the governor of Lualaba province.
Spokesperson AFC	Lawrence Kanyuka	Was based in the United Kingdom before joining the M23.
Spokesperson M23	Oscar Balinda	Was in M23 administration during the 2012-2013 rebellion and was involved in the talks with the government then. Replaced Willy Ngoma, who was killed in drone strike on February 24, 2026.
Head of recruitment	Désiré Rukomera	Under EU sanctions.
North Kivu: Governor Vice Governor Vice Governor Finances Mines Family, Gender Politics & Diplomacy Administration and Custom Agriculture, Public service Economy Trade	Bahati Musanga Erasto Amani Bahati Shadrack Willy Manzi Ngarambe Patient Haba Lievin Mukingi Chantal Kayitaba Adrien Kambale Innocent Amani Crispin Mvano Aimable Muhawe Manu Birato	Son of Erasto Ntiburama Formerly based in Canada Former w/ Office Congolais de Contrôle Former researcher and civil society
South Kivu: Governor Vice Governor Vice Governor Finances Mines Economic Development, Infrastructure	Patrick Busu Bwa Ngwi Gadi Mukiza Nzabinesha Dunia Masumbuko Bwenge Jean Bosco Nzabonimpa Wilson Lutwamuzire Albert Tcheta	Was Manu Birato, moved to Goma Predecessor died in office Under EU sanctions Well-known lawyer from Bukavu University professor at the Université du Moyen Lualaba
Negotiation team in Doha: Head of delegation Advisor Advisor Advisor	Benjamin Mbonimpa René Abandi Yannick Tshisola Jean-Pierre Alumba Lukamba	Former territorial administrator for M23 I. Married to Makenga's sister, sanctioned by EU Veteran political leader of CNDP and M23. Former deputy head of PPRD youth wing and former deputy chief of staff of the governor of Lualaba province. Former CENI official under Corneille Nangaa

List of M23 leaders under international sanctions

Name	Role / Position	Who Sanctioned Them	Date of Sanction / Action	Reason for Sanction / Action
Sultani Makenga	Military commander / chief of staff of M23	United Nations, United States, European Union	United Nations: November 13, 2012 United States: November 13, 2012 European Union: December 20, 2012	Responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law.
Bertrand Bisimwa	President (political leader) of M23	European Union; United States	EU: March 17, 2025 US: July 25, 2024	Responsible for sustaining armed conflict, instability, and serious human rights abuses in eastern DRC.
Désiré Rukomera	Head of recruitment & propaganda	European Union	March 17, 2025	Contributing to violence and instability in eastern DRC.
John Imani Nzenze	Head of intelligence	European Union	March 17, 2025	Responsible for armed activities undermining peace and security in the DRC.
Jean-Bosco Nzabonimpa Mupenzi	Deputy finance chief	European Union	March 17, 2025	Providing financial support sustaining armed conflict.
Joseph (Jean) Musanga Bahati	Governor of North Kivu	European Union	March 17, 2025	Served in governance structures imposed by M23 in occupied areas, undermining DRC sovereignty.
Benjamin Mbonimpa	Secretary General	European Union	July 26, 2024	Involvement in armed activities destabilizing eastern DRC.
Justin Gacheri Musanga	Zone commander	European Union	July 26, 2024	Contributing to armed violence and instability.
Baudouin Ngaruye	Zone commander	United Nations; United States; European Union	UN: November 30, 2012 US: December 18, 2012 EU: December 20, 2012	Undermining peace and security in the DRC (travel ban and asset freeze).
Innocent Kaina	M23 leader	United Nations; United States; European Union	UN: November 30, 2012 US: December 18, 2012 EU: December 20, 2012	Involvement in armed activities destabilizing eastern DRC.
Willy Ngoma	Military commander & spokesperson	United Nations; European Union	UN: February 20, 2024 EU: April 29, 2024	Undermining peace and security in the DRC.
Innocent Zimurinda	Headquarters commander	United Nations; European Union; United States	UN: December 1, 2010 EU: December 22, 2010 US: January 3, 2013	Violations of international humanitarian law and destabilization in eastern DRC.
Corneille Nangaa	Coordinator, AFC	United States; European Union	US: March 21, 2019 (initial) ; July 25, 2024 EU: July 26, 2024	Undermining democratic processes (as CENI head); later designated for leading the AFC, contributing to armed violence and instability linked to M23.

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