



Supporting Dialogue and Demobilisation in the DR Congo

Rising violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has the Great Lakes region on edge. In this excerpt from the [Watch List 2022 – Autumn Update](#), Crisis Group explains what the EU and its member states can do to help bring stability to the area.

The eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is experiencing an alarming uptick of violence. Fighting between the Congolese military and the March 23 Movement (M23), which resurfaced in November 2021 after suffering defeat in 2013, has surged. So, too, have attacks on civilians and camps for internally displaced people by other armed groups. The bloodshed has the entire Great Lakes region on edge and is creating friction beyond the DRC's borders. Of greatest concern, the M23's attacks have opened a rift between the DRC and Rwanda, with Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi labelling the rebel commanders "terrorists" who receive financial and logistical support from Kigali.

Complicating matters is that the Congolese president has turned to some of his neighbours [for support](#) in tamping down insecurity in the east. Bent on rooting out the armed groups, in late 2021, Tshisekedi gave Ugandan and Burundian troops permission to carry out operations on Congolese soil. He then used the DRC's accession to the East African Community (EAC) in March 2022 as an opportunity to ask the bloc for help. By way of response, the EAC agreed in April to establish a joint force composed of regional troops to battle militias in the east. But

the force left out a key player: citing Rwanda's alleged interference in the DRC's affairs, Tshisekedi insisted that the country be excluded from the force, angering Kigali.

So far, plans to stabilise the eastern DRC remain a work in progress. The new force has yet to fully deploy and is likely to face funding challenges. Meanwhile, diplomatic and demobilisation efforts meant to complement the military track show some promise but have yet to make substantial progress.

The European Union (EU) and its member states should take the following steps in working to address instability in the eastern DRC:

- Refrain from providing financial support to the regional force – which some EAC states have already requested – pending greater clarity on its performance and the sufficiency of human rights safeguards.
- Building on talks between Kinshasa and a select number of armed groups that were held in Nairobi in the spring, work with the DRC's regional partners to develop plans for the next round of negotiations, focusing in particular on which militias should be

included and for what purpose; in addition, provide financial and technical support for those negotiations.

- Provide support for DRC demobilisation efforts by pressing for greater clarity on links between the Nairobi political track, the EAC regional force's mission and the DRC's nascent community-based national disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) program. Ideally, groups that participate in the dialogue and express interest in demobilising would be given an opportunity to do so through the program. The program also requires donor support, which the EU and member states should provide if satisfied with anti-corruption safeguards and other criteria.
- When evidence emerges that the DRC's neighbours have violated its sovereignty – as was the case when a UN confidential report recently reached findings of Rwandan involvement with the M23 rebels – condemn the violations through bilateral and multi-lateral channels and underscore the threat that instability in the DRC could grow into a regional conflagration.

Turmoil in the Great Lakes

M23 rebels have once again taken up arms in the eastern DRC, a resource-rich area that has long been the battleground for overlapping conflicts involving regional powers and armed groups. The M23 is principally fighting the Congolese army, with hostilities centred in North Kivu province. This conflict has driven more than 170,000 people from their homes since the rebels re-emerged in November 2021, having previously been defeated and signed a peace deal in 2013. At first, the M23 mainly targeted Congolese soldiers, but since June the group has also been making civilian victims. [MONUSCO](#), the UN peacekeeping mission in the country, has expressed its concern about the M23's sophisticated firepower and its own limited capacity to ward off the group. In a [September interview](#) with France 24 and RFI, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said “the M23 is a modern army with heavy weapons, more advanced than MONUSCO's equipment”.

Along with the M23 insurgency, other armed groups have also intensified attacks on both military and civilian targets. Notable among them is the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a Ugandan outfit whose biggest faction has sworn allegiance to the Islamic State and whose

members kill locals and loot or burn down villages. In late August, for instance, suspected ADF fighters killed at least 40 civilians in North Kivu. Meanwhile, the *Coopérative pour le Développement du Congo (CODECO)*, a loose association of militias of mostly Lendu ethnicity operating in Ituri, has killed dozens of civilians and terrorised many more since the year began in a spate of raids on camps sheltering displaced people.

The stakes are high for Tshisekedi, who plans to seek a second term in office in 2023 polls and has repeatedly pledged to end the turmoil in the east. He has sought outside assistance to make good on his promise. In late 2021, Tshisekedi permitted Ugandan and Burundian troops to enter the country to fight, respectively, the ADF and RED-Tabara, a Burundian rebel group based in the DRC. Tshisekedi pointedly did not seek Rwanda's assistance, at least partly because he believes that Rwanda is behind the M23's abrupt reappearance. Rwanda (along with Uganda) did indeed back the group from when it first emerged in 2012 until Congolese and UN forces defeated the movement a year later. As Crisis Group has noted [elsewhere](#), a confidential UN report

leaked in August included evidence of continuing ties, indicating that Rwanda has helped reinvigorate the M23.

Tshisekedi's decision to allow Ugandan and Burundian troops into the DRC but not Rwandans infuriated Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who has rejected Tshisekedi's accusations concerning Kigali's links to the M23. Kagame alleges that, to the contrary, it is Kinshasa that is cooperating with the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), a remnant of the Hutu militia responsible for the 1994 genocide. While some evidence suggests that the Congolese army works with the FDLR in some capacity – the leaked UN report says some army commanders cooperated with a coalition of armed groups, including FDLR members, in fighting the M23 – Kagame's frustration at being left out likely has other dimensions as well. He may be concerned that Rwanda will be boxed out of access to the eastern DRC's natural resources, in particular gold, and that the Ugandans will extend their sphere of influence in the region at Rwanda's expense.

The DRC-Rwanda dispute escalated further after Tshisekedi's decision to seek support from the EAC in April. The EAC answered that request by deciding to form a [joint force composed of regional troops](#) to battle armed groups in the eastern DRC. But Tshisekedi insisted that Rwandan soldiers be excluded from the force, riling Kagame further. Kagame's sense of grievance – coupled with his conviction that Kinshasa is aiding the FDLR and fuelled by economic interests – may tempt him to order a unilateral incursion to target the FDLR, which he still considers a threat, or to back another proxy.

Meanwhile, components of the regional force are beginning to deploy, but the full force has not yet taken the field. In August, the Congolese authorities reported that a Burundian contingent had entered the DRC under EAC auspices. In late September, the Kenyan defence forces started deploying materiel and troops. South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda are also to send contingents to fight alongside Congolese forces.

A Risky New Force

Aside from the costs of alienating Rwanda, the EAC deploying a regional force carries other significant risks. The force's draft battle plan says the bloc is to assemble between 6,500 and 12,000 soldiers with a mandate to “contain, defeat and eradicate negative forces”. The new forces will for the most part be joining forces from those countries that are already on the ground either by invitation of the Congolese (in the case of Burundi and Uganda) or as part of the UN peacekeeping mission that operates in the DRC with a civilian protection mandate (in the case of Kenya and Tanzania).

The presence of so many foreign forces in the eastern DRC could spell trouble. In the past, the DRC's neighbours have repeatedly undermined stability in the east by arming proxy fighters and helping themselves to mineral wealth, such as cobalt, coltan and gold. Some

– for example, Burundi and Uganda – may well continue to push their own agendas, even when their troops are placed under joint force command, as appears to be the plan. The force's deployment could also energise armed groups unhappy with an influx of foreign soldiers, escalating levels of violence, including against civilians. Nor is it clear how the new force will coordinate with MONUSCO, which has an overlapping territorial writ but a different mandate focused on civilian protection. Finally, the EAC has never before deployed a peacekeeping or enforcement operation, much less put in place safeguards for protecting civilians, raising considerable concerns about human rights violations by the troops themselves.

Funding shortfalls are one reason the joint force has not yet fully deployed. According to the draft battle plan, which outlines the force's

objectives and rules of engagement, each country is to pay for its own soldiers. Some governments will likely struggle to bear the costs, especially if the operation drags on. Kenya has reportedly already asked EU member states, as well as China and the U.S., for money for men and materiel.

But foreign powers have options beyond funding the EAC regional force to support stabilisation efforts in the eastern DRC, notably a recently initiated diplomatic track. Back when the bloc's seven leaders agreed to the joint force, they launched a round of Kenyan-mediated talks with Congolese militia leaders in Nairobi. The first round was scrambled hastily together by the Congolese and Kenyan authorities in April and involved only about twenty of roughly 120 armed groups, excluding among others the M23 branch loyal to its military commander Sultani Makenga (the most active of the group's two [factions](#)) and outfits considered

to be foreign such as the ADF and FDLR. The Congolese are discussing a second round but have not scheduled it.

The DRC's demobilisation strategy is another part of the picture. Launched in April but yet to hit its stride, it focuses on returning former fighters to their communities and helping them build livelihoods outside the military, rather than integrating them in the army or granting amnesties, as previous demobilisation programs did. This demobilisation effort is at least theoretically linked to the EAC's diplomatic and military tracks. According to the draft concept of operations, the joint force is mandated to support Tshisekedi's demobilisation efforts, suggesting that the EAC expects armed groups to either commit to demobilising through the Nairobi political track or become targets for the regional force. But the concept offers no detail about how this would play out in practice.

What the EU Can Do

Given all the uncertainty surrounding the EAC regional force, the EU and member states should hold off on providing its support through the European Peace Facility or other channels pending information about the force's performance, impact on the eastern DRC's stability and respect for human rights. On the whole, given the long record of proxy warfare in the area and its harm to the civilian population, the bar for funding the force should be relatively high. Instead, the EU and its member states should support Tshisekedi's and the EAC's non-military efforts to stabilise the east, including through dialogue and demobilisation.

As concerns dialogue, the EU should offer technical and financial support to a second round of Nairobi talks with armed groups active in the eastern DRC. As a threshold matter, EU and member states with strong relationships in the region should work with Kinshasa and EAC states to encourage progress toward a

second round and help develop a framework for a meaningful process beyond individual rounds of talks. Fundamental questions, such as which groups should be included and specific topics and goals of the process, still require fleshing out. The EU could also support efforts to establish the Office of the Inter-Congolese Peace Dialogue, which will support the Nairobi talks and oversee implementation of the EAC heads of state agreements on peace and security in the DRC.

The EU and member states should also help Congolese authorities breathe life into Kinshasa's disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration strategy, which although promising is still in the very early stages of implementation. This line of effort should be of particular interest to Brussels given the EU's new [strategic approach in support of DDR](#). One way they can help is by encouraging greater clarity on how demobilisation efforts are linked to

both the joint force's mission and the Nairobi political track. There should be incentives for armed group members who wish to come off the battlefield to enter the demobilisation program, including the offer of an alternative to armed activity.

Financial and technical support will also be important. Donors have been reluctant to foot the bill because previous demobilisation efforts were largely donor-driven, lacking local buy-in, tainted by alleged embezzlement and unsuccessful in permanently dismantling any armed group. Government officials and military officers alike have treated the programs as sources of patronage. The new initiative, however, is designed to send former fighters home to civilian life and help them develop alternative livelihoods rather than integrating them in the army, as previous programs did; diverting them to unarmed vocations may help them sever their links to armed group chains of command. Against this backdrop, the EU should consider providing financial and technical support to the plan to the extent it is satisfied with the adequacy of anti-corruption safeguards and if, as the program rolls out, it assesses that it holds out sufficient hope of genuinely offering low-level insurgents a viable future.

Finally, the EU and its member states should more directly address the challenge to peace and security created by neighbouring countries'

support for DRC rebels. The findings of the confidential UN report regarding Rwandan involvement with the M23 and other sources addressing alleged Ugandan support, for instance, should be the basis for Brussels and member state governments to relay clear messages to Kigali and Kampala condemning violations of Congolese sovereignty and underscoring the threat that instability in the DRC could grow into a regional conflagration. Member states represented on the UN Security Council can urge the Council to reinforce these messages from New York. Standing visibly behind the principle of territorial integrity is particularly important at a time when European states are condemning Russia's transgressions in Ukraine. They should make clear that violations of this core principle of the UN Charter are to be condemned wherever they take place – in Europe, Africa or elsewhere.