



# Towards a people's peace in eastern DRC and the Great Lakes

## SITUATION BRIEF

**In June, with conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) escalating fast, regional leaders appeared to step back from the brink. However, in late July, people's frustrations at the ongoing failure by governments to address the conflict's root causes boiled over into widespread protests. Now, to forge longer-lasting peace, leaders must recommit, alongside diplomacy, to resolving the conflict's underlying dynamics and to enabling communities and civil society to build a 'people's peace'.**

This situation brief outlines three possible trajectories for what may happen next, sets out how regional and international actors can address the conflict's root causes and calls for urgent action supporting peacebuilders and people to de-escalate conflict.

International Alert has worked to support peacebuilding and conflict prevention in eastern DRC for the past two decades, and in Rwanda since 1996. We work with communities to understand the conflict dynamics they contend with, develop local solutions to build trust between community groups and prevent conflicts escalating, and communicate their vision for peace to high-level decision-makers. Our Mupaka Shamba Letu project,[1] for example, has successfully helped preserve peace and build connections between communities by working with women who are trading across the Burundi, DRC and Rwanda borders as well as with civil society organisations to hold open a space for dialogue.

The analysis and recommendations contained within this brief draw extensively on insights provided through our networks, partnerships and community presence in DRC, Rwanda and the wider Great Lakes region. In particular, the brief amplifies recommendations made by over 30 civil society and peacebuilding organisations[2] from across the region in June.

## A long-term conflict

In May 2021, DRC's President Tshisekedi declared a 'state of siege' in the eastern provinces of North Kivu and Ituri due to ongoing violent conflict. The human cost of violence is extreme: at least 1.9 million people are displaced in North Kivu alone and 5.6 million across DRC as a whole.[3] It is the most serious internal displacement crisis in Africa and, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council, the world's most neglected.[4] More than a year on from the state of siege's declaration, violence continues to worsen, abductions have more than doubled and the destruction of property has trebled.[5] Sexual violence against women and children is widespread. Some 20 years after the 2002 Sun City Agreement that ended the Second Congo War, the people of eastern DRC continue to face violence and are unable to access basic services or voice their needs to the state.

The conflict's underlying dynamics around how power, land and economic resources are shared are complex, challenging and long term. Eastern DRC's immense natural resources – crucial for global supply chains and a huge opportunity for positive investment – have long been the target of transnational exploitation, fuelling corruption among unaccountable political, security and business elites. Just 2% of eastern DRC's gold, for example, is exported legally.[6] With regional actors, elites and armed forces all benefiting directly, the better regulation of mineral extraction that would so help the Congolese people has not yet been implemented. Moreover, reform of the security and justice sectors and its governance institutions is needed for the government to truly provide security or justice.

Across the Great Lakes, leaders are widely suspected of sponsoring armed groups active in eastern DRC – including the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), different factions of the Cooperative for Development of the Congo (CODECO), M23 and the Mai-Mai – to protect their interests, in turn driving people in communities to join self-defence militias.

In early 2022, President Tshisekedi's decision to welcome military forces into DRC from across east Africa but not from Rwanda may, according to International Crisis Group, "have opened Pandora's box".[7]

## Escalation of the conflict

In May 2022, renewed advances by the M23 armed group dramatically increased tensions, displacing 214,000 people[8] and leading to shootings and missile launches across the DRC–Rwanda border. On 13 June, the M23 seized the border town of Bunagana.[9] Cross-border trade between DRC and Uganda was also interrupted, cutting off local economies. On 15 June, anti-Rwanda demonstrations in Goma threatened to erupt,[10] with civil society groups recording the targeting of Congolese and Rwandan Tutsis amid a climate of growing hate speech on social media.[11] On 17 June, the death of a DRC soldier on the border with Rwanda sparked further protests.[12] As DRC accused Rwanda of backing the resurgence of the M23 rebels, the latter counter-accused the former of working with the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR). With rhetoric worsening quickly on all sides, by late June military escalation between the two countries appeared a distinct possibility.

## Back from the brink?

On 6 July, in a breakthrough day of mediated talks in Angola, President Tshisekedi and Rwanda's President Kagame agreed to call for an immediate ceasefire that would see the retreat of M23 fighters from DRC and the revival of the Congo–Rwanda commission.[13] Although subsequent clashes with the M23 have continued,[14] the Angola talks initially suggested de-escalation between the governments of DRC and Rwanda was likely in the immediate near term. Indeed, some diplomatic sources reported a cooling of tensions. Political leaders from both countries underlined their willingness to solve the crisis through dialogue and DRC reopened its borders with Burundi and Rwanda, albeit with limitations. Nevertheless, real fears remain that the fragile ceasefire could quickly disintegrate, especially as clashes with the M23 continue.

In August, declarations made by the United Nation's (UN) Organization Stabilization Mission in DRC (MONUSCO) explaining the limitations of their current operations have been interpreted by some political commentators as the international community abandoning Congolese communities to their fate. This has led to fierce anti-MONUSCO protests, which provides important political capital for ultra-nationalist actors in the run-up to the elections in 2023. The partial leak of a confidential Group of Experts report confirming that evidence suggests the Rwandan state backs M23[15] could further escalate tensions in the region.

## What next?

International Alert assesses that there are now three broad trajectories for the coming weeks.

A worst-case trajectory would be towards the outbreak of war in the region. This is possible but unlikely given the limited resources and appetite for military mobilisation. Possible triggers could include: renewed activity or advances by M23; dynamics around the planned deployment of the East African Community's regional forces; limited oversight of forces in an increasingly militarised region; or popular protest, hate speech or direct action.

A second, more likely trajectory is that without a negotiated solution and with continued M23 activity, tensions will remain high or grow. In a 29 June speech to the UN Security Council,[16] the UN Secretary General's Special Representative in DRC and Head of MONUSCO highlighted that M23 is increasingly behaving like a conventional army, with sophisticated firepower and equipment. Rwanda has so far denied that they back M23 after the UN report was leaked.[17] Without a negotiated solution, stakes will remain high or even be raised in the region, creating conditions for further escalation.

A third, more positive trajectory would see regional leaders come to the table, address the conflict's underlying economic, political and social drivers, and successfully negotiate a regional peace. Channels for regional diplomacy and dialogue certainly exist, with DRC's membership and economic integration into the East African Community[18] one important opportunity for peaceful change. Meanwhile, the Kenya-led Nairobi Process to negotiate demobilisation of eastern DRC's armed groups could support peace.

Within these three broad trajectories, many different scenarios are of course possible. Yet whatever exact trajectory the conflict takes in the coming weeks, short-term diplomatic and security efforts will only succeed if regional leaders also make serious efforts to address the conflict's underlying dynamics and support peacebuilders to reduce violence at the community level.

## Addressing the conflict's underlying dynamics

To forge a longer-lasting peace, leaders in the region and internationally should:

1. **Protect civilians** by calling for an immediate ceasefire, condemning the displacement of and attacks on civilians wherever they take place, and ending the impunity of perpetrators.

2. **Reject military solutions** by openly acknowledging the conflict's root causes, respecting and implementing existing regional agreements,[19] and learning from previous experiences that the deployment of military forces will not work unless in support of diplomatic, economic and political solutions. Instead of pursuing 'islands' of stability, enforced by military power, leaders must shift the strategy towards a region of stability upheld by diplomatic, economic, political and social cooperation.

3. **Demobilise armed groups** by sincerely calling for those with influence or control over the groups to push them to de-escalate and demobilise; and by creating a stable environment for and respecting the red lines of the new Demobilisation, Disarmament, Community Recovery and Stabilisation Program (P-DDRCS).[20]

4. **Tackle corruption** by consistently supporting anti-corruption practices across the region, including on money laundering and financial transactions in artisanal mining supply chains, and by supporting the DRC government to address corruption in public administration, to end roadblocks and extortion, to return money meant for health, education and development to communities, and to strengthen the legitimacy of institutions in eastern DRC.

5. **Support the DRC government to reform its security sector**, by finalising and delivering the security sector reform (SSR) process and restoring confidence in the army, police and those responsible for providing security.[21] Donors considering support for the SSR process should ensure it is holistic, addressing accountability, oversight, abuses and justice alongside training for armed forces.

6. **Deliver on commitments to transitional justice** – a key missing element from peace processes in the region – to give communities a chance to deal with the past and treat trauma and psychological wounds.

7. **Agree and implement legal, just and peaceful processes for managing the extraction of natural resources** in the region, ensuring that conflict minerals do not enter the international market or fuel the cycle of conflict. With the global green transition making mineral extraction in DRC increasingly important, international leaders and multinational companies have a particular responsibility to ensure DRC's environmental resources are extracted fairly, sustainably and peacefully.

8. **Stop the spread of hate speech and disinformation** by de-escalating inflammatory rhetoric and supporting authorities, influencers and civil society to counter hate speech, especially on social media.

9. **Ensure free, fair, participatory and non-violent elections** in December 2023, when DRC is scheduled to hold presidential and parliamentary elections for the fourth time.

## Towards a people's peace

For many years, the actions of numerous regional leaders have in truth not done nearly enough to meet the needs of people for everyday peace. Instead, across eastern DRC and the Great Lakes, people, communities and their organisations are themselves left to work patiently, courageously and under-recognised to de-escalate conflicts and secure peace and justice.

In the toughest of circumstances, peacebuilders are making a difference, often working village by village to build from the ground up a clear narrative of hope, peace and justice.

Communities have come together to implement local security plans financed by their mining revenue. Dialogues have led to young recruits handing in their weapons and leaving armed groups, and to observable improvements in social cohesion, stability and reconciliation in various locations. The restoration of traditional leadership structures has provided communities with rallying points around which they can make the most of economic opportunities. Peacebuilding organisations have helped to successfully return and resettle displaced people. When hate speech escalated in May and June and again when protests broke out against MONUSCO in August, the rapid reaction of civil society and political and religious leaders was widely credited with calming the situation and avoiding the worst outcomes.

Whether or not regional and international leaders, elites and armed groups choose to step up in the coming weeks to address the conflict's root causes, it is certain that civil society and peacebuilders will continue to play an important and positive role in peace and stabilisation efforts across the Great Lakes. Without a people's peace on the ground, the diplomatic, security and governance efforts of leaders cannot succeed long term.

To establish a people's peace, leaders in the region and internationally should:

1. **Put people's needs first and include them in peace processes.** Peace processes – such as the Nairobi Process – must include, as participants and observers, civil society and peace actors rooted in communities. Peace processes should work with communities to identify solutions that will deliver for them. The national programme for disarmament and demobilisation should be designed to be bottom-up and community-led. Throughout, particular attention should be paid to bringing excluded groups that experience conflict differently – such as women, youth and minority groups – around the table.

2. **Support civil society to strengthen social cohesion.** Despite the recent escalation, many identity groups living across borders in the region have a long tradition of co-existing peacefully. Civil society, peacebuilders and community leaders are already playing a key role in

challenging hate speech, stereotypes and disinformation, as well as reinforcing shared cultures and traditions, strengthening traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and delivering peace education. With greater financial support from donor governments and new partnerships with the private sector and media, they could do more still to reduce hate speech and strengthen social cohesion.

**3. Hold open the space for trade and dialogue.** Peace projects like Mupaka Shamba Letu, which brings women trading across the borders of Burundi, DRC and Rwanda together, have shown that trade is an important space for dialogue and exchange between people. Leaders should strengthen trade links wherever possible – including, for example, by ensuring that the DRC's accession to the East African Community results in improvements to the infrastructure needed for trade growth. Dialogue is also important between the government, security forces, MONUSCO and civil society on what security and governance should become in eastern DRC.

**4. Protect the space for civil society.** Civil society and peacebuilding organisations operating in eastern DRC and the Great Lakes do so in the toughest of circumstances, often facing attacks and persecution or simply struggling to fund their essential work. By protecting and promoting the rights to freedom of association, expression and assembly, and by increasing long-term financial support to civil society organisations, regional and international actors can make an investment in long-term peace in the region.

## Endnotes

[1] See <https://www.international-alert.org/fr/publications/mupaka-shamba-letu-curriculum-genre/>

[2] Organisations include: Aide et Action pour la Paix; Actions des Communautés Unies pour le Développement Intégral; Action pour le Développement et la Paix Endogènes; Action pour le Développement des Milieux Ruraux; AIDPROFEN; Association Modeste et Innocent; Action Pour la Paix et la Concorde; Appui au Développement de l'Enfant en Détresse; Action Solidaire pour la Paix; Bénévolat Pour l'Enfance; Bureau pour le Volontariat au Service de l'Enfance et de la Santé; Collectif Alpha Ujuvi; Célébrons le Courage de la Femme; Dynamique des Femmes Juristes; Guichet d'Économie Locale du Sud Kivu; Justice Plus; Laissez l'Afrique Vivre; Life and Peace Institute; Observatoire Gouvernance et Paix; Pole Institute; Réseau des CCI; Réseau d'Innovation Organisationnelle; Réseau des Associations Congolaises des Jeunes; Save Communities in Conflicts; Search for Common Ground; Service Civil pour la Paix; Solidarité Féminine pour la Paix et le Développement Intégral; Solidarité des Volontaires pour l'Humanité; Service par, pour et avec les Femmes; Solidarité des Femmes de Fizi pour le Bien-Etre Familial; Umoja in Action; Union Paysanne pour un Développement Intégral

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