

REPORT



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VIOLENCE FOR SALE

The outsourcing of security
in the M23 conflict in the DRC

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CENTRAL AFRICA
OBSERVATORY
ON ORGANIZED CRIME AND VIOLENCE



SEPTEMBER 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was made possible through the collective efforts of many individuals and organizations committed to documenting and disrupting organized crime in Central Africa and beyond. Thank you to my colleagues at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC): to Elizabeth Krisher, for her tireless support in drafting this report, as well as to Ruben de Koning, Martin Davenas, Nathalia Dukhan and Sophia Pickles for their technical support, data collection and strategic input throughout the investigation. Thanks also to Lou Osborn and Nedra Cherif for their contributions. I extend my gratitude to the confidential sources, local informants, journalists and civil society partners who, despite significant personal and professional risks, shared information and insights essential to this work. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter and the potential for reprisals, their identities are withheld, but their contributions are central to the findings presented here.

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Contents

Acronyms and abbreviations	ii
Executive summary	1
Methodology	2
Key findings	2
Introduction	4
The expanding ecosystem of privatized violence	7
M23, an extension of Rwandan influence	7
The DRC's security partners	10
Security priorities, criminal profits	18
Elite capture	18
Parallel administrations	19
Coltan as Rwanda's de facto reward	20
Gold involving the Uganda People's Defence Force	23
Timber	23
Conclusion	25
Recommendations	26
Notes	29

Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF	Allied Democratic Forces
AFC	Congo River Alliance
CRP	Convention for the Popular Revolution
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FARDC	Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo
ICGLR	International Conference on the Great Lakes Region
M23	March 23 Movement
MONUSCO	UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
PMCs	Private military companies
RDF	Rwanda Defence Force
UAVs	Unmanned aerial vehicles
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Force





Executive summary

In the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the March 23 Movement (M23) conflict has fuelled a self-reinforcing criminal ecosystem in which the outsourcing of violence serves as cover for economic exploitation. State forces, foreign armies, private military companies (PMCs), proxy groups and militias benefit from the violence, operating under the cover of security in pursuit of their own interests in territorial control, resource capture, taxation, profiteering and patronage. By leveraging instability to generate profit, they blur the lines between public authority, private interests and criminal activity, weakening Congolese institutions and undermining prospects for peace.

Within this ecosystem of organized crime, M23 is a key player. Widely acknowledged as a proxy for the Rwandan state, M23's advances appear to be driven by economic considerations, including access to high-value minerals and the security and continuity of trade routes. The use by M23 and the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) of advanced military technology, including drones, anti-aircraft systems, electronic warfare tools and precision missiles, has highlighted the impact of Rwandan support for M23's actions and changed the balance of power in eastern DRC.

The DRC government, hampered by structural weaknesses within its military, has implemented a similar approach, outsourcing its security to several actors, including local Wazalendo armed groups, the Ugandan military and numerous PMCs for whom the emergence of a 'business-as-security' model has blurred the boundaries between private security, state authority and regional geopolitical interests, particularly in the context of evolving US–DRC cooperation on critical minerals. Like M23, many of the DRC's security partners have demonstrated economic motives, yet have nevertheless found themselves empowered to act on behalf of a state that has relinquished control.

In this context marked by weak governance, limited state presence, chronic insecurity and inadequate oversight, conflict actors are unrestrained. They are able to pursue their own ends, with security concerns being increasingly supplanted by geopolitical rivalries and illicit economic interests. M23 and the Wazalendo have established illegal parallel administrations with robust taxation systems. M23 has also secured control of key mining sites, including the lucrative Rubaya coltan mines, as well as vital transport corridors. The Ugandan military has worked to secure arteries necessary for the trafficking of gold – an

activity that some of its members have been alleged to participate in. Most of these groups, as well as Congolese troops, have sought to benefit from the illicit timber trade.

The deliberate outsourcing of the state's monopoly on coercive force in eastern DRC has enabled the entrenchment of conflict economies that have the potential to prolong instability and undermine state sovereignty and prospects for lasting peace. As it stands, many parties to the conflict have been accused of committing gross human rights violations; these have included torture, sexual violence, summary executions, child soldier recruitment and pillage.¹ The result is a shared criminal ecosystem that conflict actors are incentivized to maintain, with violence becoming the primary tool.

Methodology

This report is based on a mixed-methods research approach that combines quantitative and qualitative sources. The analysis draws on numerous field interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, including security actors, diplomats, civil society representatives, economic actors and mining operators, as well as members of armed groups and PMCs. Interviews were conducted in person and remotely, depending on access conditions and security considerations. The report also draws on trade data, open-source research and documentary analysis.

All information gathered through these channels was systematically cross-checked and triangulated to enhance the reliability of the findings. In the interest of fairness and accuracy, the individuals and entities critically cited in the report were, to the extent possible and where appropriate, given the opportunity to provide comment. Their responses and clarifications were taken into account and incorporated into the analysis where warranted.

This report deals with violence as a component of the state's claimed monopoly on the legitimate use of coercive force. The use of the term 'violence' should accordingly not be understood in an ordinary legal sense. Formally, many of the companies and persons mentioned in this report do not contravene any law when contracted by the DRC for the various roles as described below. But this does not put the systemic, downstream effect of their involvement in the conflict scenario beyond academic examination, which is what this report seeks to do. The inclusion of any party in this report should be seen in this light.

Key findings

- The privatization and outsourcing of security services is not a solution to the conflict but a driver of violence and instability. M23 and the armed actors supposed to contain it are part of the same criminal ecosystem, structured around the illegal exploitation of resources, corruption among elites and gradual state capture.
- Erik Prince, American businessman and founder of the PMC Blackwater, has established himself as a key player in the DRC's political-security economy. His multimillion-dollar contract with the Ministry of Finance, his deployment to Uvira in January 2026 alongside Congolese special forces, and his interest in recruiting Ukrainian special forces operatives mark the emergence of a 'business-as-security' model unprecedented in the region.
- The resurgence of M23 has introduced exceptional technological sophistication into the conduct of the war. This increase in capabilities – made possible by documented Rwandan support in violation of UN Security Council resolutions – is reshaping the balance of power on the ground, increasing the vulnerability of Congolese forces and strengthening M23's ability to consolidate areas under its control.

- Uganda is operating on several fronts. While serving as an official partner of the Congolese armed forces in the fight against M23 and the Allied Democratic Forces, it is also supporting armed groups – including Thomas Lubanga Dyilo’s Convention for the Popular Revolution – to secure its economic interests in North Kivu and Ituri. This dual strategy relies on the involvement of elements of the Ugandan army in illicit value chains for gold, timber and other commodities.
- The outsourcing of security services has become a mechanism for elite exploitation. PMC contracts are awarded through patronage networks at the highest levels of the Congolese state, with commissions estimated to be worth tens of millions of dollars redistributed throughout political networks.



Introduction

In November 2021, the March 23 Movement (M23) resumed its military operations in eastern DRC after a few years of relative inactivity.² The resurgence started with sporadic attacks targeting Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation eco-guards and members of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC), mainly in Rutshuru territory.³ These attacks intensified, escalating in June 2022 with the capture of Bunagana, a border town between the DRC and Uganda.⁴ In the months that followed, the Rwanda-backed M23 continued to expand its military presence across large swathes of North Kivu province, and just over a year after taking Bunagana, the area under M23's control had doubled in size.⁵

At the same time, M23 was broadening its network of alliances and contacts with armed groups and influential actors operating in other provinces of the DRC, notably South Kivu and Ituri. In December 2023, the group formalized its integration into a broader political-military coalition founded by Corneille Nangaa, the Congo River Alliance (AFC), of which it constitutes the main armed force.⁶ Today, M23 controls Goma and Bukavu, the respective capitals of North Kivu and South Kivu, as well as several towns, trade routes and strategic mining sites in those provinces.

Faced with the threat of M23, growing territorial losses and the fragility of its security forces and institutions,⁷ the DRC government has sought to reorganize its security response. This has resulted in increased military spending,⁸ the recruitment of private military companies (PMCs), the formalization of relations with local militias known as Wazalendo ('patriots' in Swahili), and calls for foreign military assistance from regional actors such as Burundi, Uganda and the East African Community.

This privatization of violence – defined here as the outsourcing of the state's legitimate right to use violence to non-state private actors – is not a new phenomenon in the context of the DRC conflict,⁹ but it comes with serious political and security risks. Actors contracted in a security capacity appear to be driven by their own private – often economic – interests. In contexts where state authority is limited, such actors consolidate their influence and may legitimize their control over entire segments of the economy. In doing so, they shift the focus from security objectives to the exploitation and control of natural resources and trade routes, transforming violence into an economic resource for armed actors.¹⁰

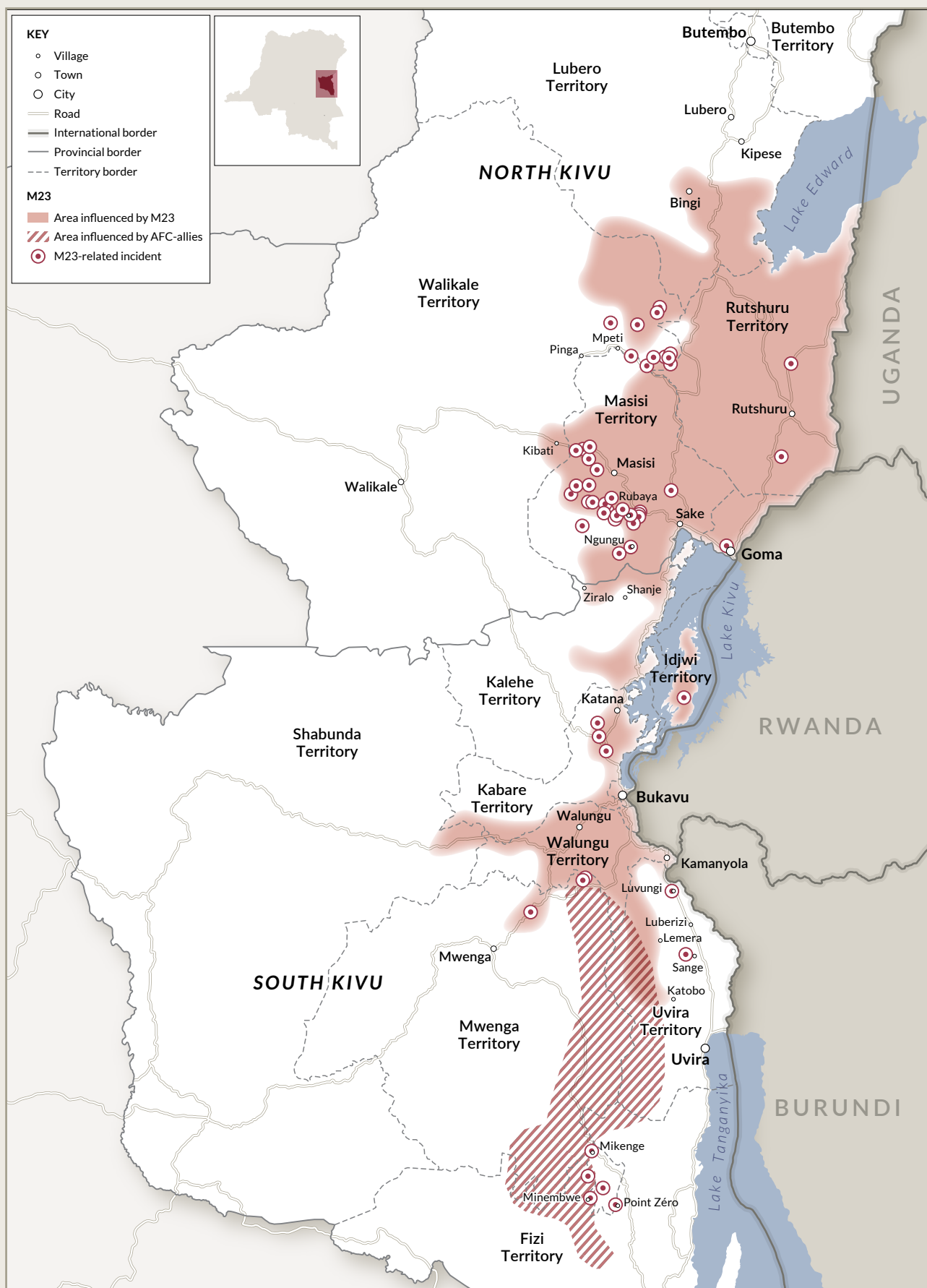


FIGURE 1 Areas under the influence of M23 and AFC as of 31 May 2026.

SOURCE: IPIS, Mapping the M23's territorial influence in eastern DRC, n.d., <https://ipisresearch.be/home/maps-data/maps-of-drc/mapping-the-m23s-territorial-influence-in-eastern-drc>

This is especially concerning when collaborating actors have been subject to international sanctions or have previously engaged in opaque practices. The recruitment of such actors has also resulted in the use of increasingly sophisticated military equipment, which has contributed to a shift in the balance of power and the violation of relevant international regulations.

On the ground, the conflict has had devastating humanitarian consequences for the civilian population. Approximately 10 million people have been displaced internally, and fighting has disrupted supply chains, agricultural production, health services and infrastructure.¹¹ Violence has been exploited as a tool for control by many of the major conflict actors, with several international organizations having documented instances of kidnapping, torture, sexual violence and arbitrary killings of civilians and humanitarian workers. ‘The alarming scale and frequency of abuses in eastern Congo should shock the world,’ Tigere Chagutah, Amnesty International’s regional director for East and Southern Africa, has said of the violence.¹²

In analyzing the forms and implications of the privatization of violence in eastern DRC since the resurgence of M23, this report first examines the actors involved and their modes of organization, then focuses on their interactions with criminal economies. It highlights the central role of organized crime in deploying violence to control illicit economies in the DRC, and it underscores the need to fully integrate this dimension into conflict resolution efforts.



The expanding ecosystem of privatized violence

The outsourcing of violence in the DRC is not a novel concept. The government has in the past called on non-state actors to exercise security-related functions that fall under the authority of the state, just as other countries in the region have used armed groups as proxies.¹³ The current conflict with M23, however, is notable for the extent to which non-state actors are involved in the violence. M23 is widely acknowledged as a proxy for Rwanda, and the DRC government has delegated its security to several actors, including private military companies, local armed groups and neighbouring state militaries.

The conflict has thus been defined by the reciprocal outsourcing of violence – the creation of parallel systems of diminished state authority that ultimately fuel a reinforcing criminal ecosystem. By authorizing third parties to oversee operations and act on security matters, the DRC and Rwanda have relinquished control, empowering actors who operate under their own motives and incentives and use violence as a tool for economic exploitation.

M23, an extension of Rwandan influence

Rwanda's support to, and involvement alongside, M23 has long been accepted as established fact. As of December 2025, between 6 000 and 7 000 soldiers from the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF) had been deployed to North Kivu and South Kivu in eastern DRC to support M23.¹⁴ UN experts also claim to have identified evidence of Rwandan support, notably through aerial photographs, videos, intercepts and combatant testimonies.¹⁵ An M23 combatant and two members of local communities described how Rwandan troops had, for example, participated in the capture of cities such as Goma, Bukavu and Uvira by using heavy weapons to slow the advance of the FARDC and its allies and by sending troops to take part in ground combat.¹⁶

While Rwandan authorities initially denied involvement,¹⁷ they have recently shown signs of acknowledging their role in the conflict. On 22 January 2026, for example, Rwanda's ambassador to the US issued a statement in which she acknowledged 'security coordination' between Rwanda and M23.¹⁸

Off the record, Rwandan officials are more outspoken, acknowledging that this is a project involving the highest levels of government.¹⁹ Officially, Rwanda frames its support to the UN-sanctioned M23 in security terms, citing the threat posed by the presence of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda – a Hutu armed rebel group that includes elements linked to the 1994 Rwandan genocide and opposes the Rwandan government – in eastern DRC.²⁰

However, Rwanda's sustained backing reflects economic considerations that sit at the heart of its regional strategy, notably access to high-value minerals and the maintenance of cross-border systems that facilitate the security and continuity of trade routes for mining and agricultural products, as well as for imported goods transiting through Rwanda to the DRC.²¹ M23's advances have enabled the group to establish control over key trade routes and lucrative mining towns – to the benefit of its state supporter.²² This posture has further reinforced Rwanda's ambition to position itself as a regional mineral trading hub, a role that depends on maintaining stable corridors and predictable commercial flows with eastern DRC and areas such as the Central African Republic.²³

Evidence of Rwanda's support for M23 has drawn international condemnation and has led to sanctions from international actors. In March 2025, the EU sanctioned several senior leaders of M23 and the RDF, as well as the Gasabo Gold Refinery in Rwanda, for 'sustaining the armed conflict, instability and insecurity in the DRC and exploiting the armed conflict through the illicit exploitation or trade of natural resources'.²⁴ A year later, the US also imposed sanctions on the RDF and four of its senior officials. According to US authorities, 'the RDF is actively supporting, training, and fighting alongside the March 23 Movement'.²⁵ In June 2026, the US also sanctioned Gasabo Gold Refinery and its network for 'working in coordination with the Rwandan-backed March 23 Movement (M23) to illegally smuggle minerals [...] to Rwanda'.²⁶

Modernization of warfare

The scale, consistency and technical sophistication of M23's capabilities exceed what is generally expected of a non-state armed group operating in the DRC and may be attributable to the support the group receives from Rwanda.²⁷ M23 has access to a range of advanced military equipment, including modern assault rifles, mortars, anti-aircraft systems, anti-tank systems, man-portable missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), as well as electronic warfare capabilities such as jamming and spoofing devices.²⁸ Two armed group experts and a member of M23 stated that much of this equipment is believed to have been diverted from Rwandan army stockpiles and then transferred to the DRC with the involvement of members of the Rwandan army.²⁹

The conditions under which this equipment circulates raise serious legal and regulatory issues. The transfer of arms to armed groups operating in the DRC has been prohibited since 2008 under UN Security Council Resolution 1807, and any transfer to M23 would be considered a violation.³⁰ Such transfers would also reflect shortcomings in the implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty, to which Rwanda is a state party, notably regarding provisions prohibiting the transfer of arms if they might be used in the commission of genocide, crimes against humanity, attacks against civilians or other war crimes.³¹

As it stands, M23's possession of such advanced weaponry has had a tangible impact on the conflict, shifting the local balance of power and enabling the group to conduct coordinated and sustained operations, including campaigns against civilians that the UN notes may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity.³² In a 2022 interview with French media, the UN secretary-general said M23 behaved like 'a modern army equipped with heavier and more sophisticated weaponry than MONUSCO [UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo]'.³³ Indeed, the current

phase of the conflict in eastern DRC stands out as one of the most technologically advanced in the past three decades.³⁴

This shift is particularly visible in the nature of the weaponry deployed. In February 2025, for example, during its entry into Kavumu in South Kivu, M23 deployed at least one armoured vehicle equipped with a Chinese short-range air defence system known as the Type 92 Yitian, designed to protect ground forces against airborne threats. M23 has also been observed operating portable, short-range, infrared-guided surface-to-air missiles. Among the models it operates is the SA-16 Gimlet (9K310 Igla-1), a Russian-manufactured missile that has not been observed in the DRC before.³⁵ UN experts have also noted M23's use of reconnaissance drones and heavy artillery fire during its advances, particularly in the capture of Sake.³⁶



The Type 92 Yitian short-range air defence system deployed by M23 in February 2025 has infrared-guided missiles capable of tracking their targets after launch. It features modern radars and sensors, including a thermal camera, a laser rangefinder and automatic tracking systems. *Photo: UN internal report*



A still from an NBC News investigation shows an RDF soldier alongside M23 in the DRC, carrying a very short-range, infrared-guided, portable surface-to-air (anti-aircraft) missile. *Photo: NBC News*

The DRC's security partners

With Rwanda's support, M23 rapidly captured key territories in eastern DRC while facing only limited resistance from the FARDC. Experts and observers have long pointed to persistent structural weaknesses within the FARDC, including ineffective leadership, corruption, poor coordination and inadequate logistical capacity.³⁷ In December 2025, President Félix Tshisekedi publicly acknowledged the scale of these institutional challenges, stating that he had inherited 'an army of vagabonds'.³⁸ Similar concerns were highlighted in two recent parliamentary reports that described the army as ill-equipped, sedentary and undermined by inflated troop numbers linked to corruption and mismanagement.³⁹

These shortcomings explain why the DRC government has sought out several non-state partners to help bolster its security in the face of M23 advances. Several PMCs have been tasked with training troops and maintaining equipment. The government has extended operational support to the Wazalendo, a loose coalition of local armed groups and militias. The DRC has also expanded joint military operations with Uganda in Ituri; while these operations originated as a response to another armed group, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), statements by the FARDC deputy chief of general staff, General Jacques Ychaligonza Nduru, have made clear that the operations are against 'all armed groups'.⁴⁰

Although each of these partners support the government militarily in different ways, the extensive outsourcing of security services nevertheless transfers authority from the state to its partners, diluting centralized control and opening the door for the establishment of economies and actors that operate independently. Moreover, many of these actors have demonstrated a clear interest in economic profiteering, suggesting that their involvement is driven not only by security objectives but also by opportunities for financial gain and resource exploitation.

Foreign private military companies

Although the DRC's use of PMCs did not begin with the M23 crisis, the conflict has nevertheless marked a decisive moment in the fragmentation of the DRC's security apparatus and the proliferation of foreign contractors. In response to the FARDC's operational and logistical collapse, Tshisekedi is said to have accelerated the externalization of security beginning in late 2022 and early 2023,⁴¹ when the fall of Goma became a possibility.⁴² Since then, the number of PMCs operating in the DRC has increased, and these groups appear to be a central pillar of the country's security response, with Tshisekedi reportedly saying that hiring them was a necessary action that he 'did not regret'.⁴³ His reliance on these groups apparently enabled him to affirm, before journalists, that Goma would never fall.⁴⁴

While the deployment of PMCs can be explained by institutional decay within the FARDC, the externalization of defensive capabilities has nevertheless opened the door for actors with documented ties to organized crime and arms proliferation. It has also raised questions about the exact scope of these companies and the delegation of responsibility for actions undertaken during the conflict – for instance, when members of these groups or elements of the national armed forces trained by them have participated in operations linked to serious human rights violations. These concerns are only amplified by the opacity surrounding PMCs' contracts and activities.

The PMCs brought in since 2021, as well as those whose contracts predate the M23 conflict, seem to have been hired to focus on specific aspects of security. The firms, which have ties to France, Romania, Israel and other countries, have been reported to focus variously on logistics, procurement, aircraft maintenance, military training, advisory support and electronic surveillance.⁴⁵ Only a few have had a

presence on the ground, and most of these have reportedly operated in an advisory or training capacity. Nevertheless, their impact on operations has been notable.⁴⁶

Agemira RDC was an early player in the DRC's outsourced security response to M23. The group was led by French national Olivier Bazin, who has been described by a Swiss prosecutor as an international arms dealer and has been convicted in France on unrelated charges of money laundering and gold smuggling.⁴⁷ Agemira was officially responsible for aircraft maintenance and management, having concluded an agreement with the Maison Militaire logistics corps, led by General Franck Ntumba, in July 2022.⁴⁸ It also reportedly established a military camp in Sake and acted as an intermediary for the FARDC in purchasing combat aircraft, Chinese drones and helicopters.⁴⁹ Agemira may have engaged in activities that fell outside its official mandate, including some that could be considered sanctions violations. For instance, in 2024, at the request of the Congolese authorities, one of Agemira's aircraft transported Guidon Shimiray Mwissa, who was then subject to UN sanctions.⁵⁰ Several reports also describe Agemira having participated in combat, particularly outside Sake.⁵¹ Bazin said, 'Agemira provided aircraft maintenance services in the DRC from 2022 to 2024 and was not involved in combat operations. The aircraft were operated by qualified FARDC personnel.'

In October 2024, Agemira was renamed Bulgaria Global Solutions, possibly to reduce media scrutiny of its activities in the DRC.⁵² It later became Congo Aviation after the fall of Goma,⁵³ shifting its activities towards providing air support to the Congolese armed forces. Operating from Kisangani, which the DRC made its hub for drone operations,⁵⁴ the company assumed an increasingly active role as its members operated CH-4 drones that carried out strikes against M23 and RDF positions in South Kivu in May and June 2025.⁵⁵ The group's contract was reportedly terminated in July 2025 after internal investigations began into the fall of Goma and the operations of the DRC's top military personnel.⁵⁶

Operating alongside Agemira was the Congolese private military company Congo Protection, which signed a contract with the Romanian company Association RALF – headed by Romanian legionnaire Horațiu Potra, nicknamed the 'Romanian Prigozhin' – in November 2022.⁵⁷ Congo Protection's mandate, according to the contract, was to train and instruct members of the FARDC, which RALF would presumably assist them with. But on the ground, their role reportedly went further. Potra's men were tasked with securing Goma and Bukavu airports,⁵⁸ and they notably joined the fighting alongside the FARDC,⁵⁹ taking casualties in Sake.⁶⁰ A former mercenary operating under Potra told the BBC that the group's actions went beyond what it was contracted for, noting, 'only a very small number of us were actually trainers'.⁶¹

Congo Protection's operations ended in disarray. In December 2024, Potra was arrested in Romania for his involvement in an attempted coup, with authorities discovering an arsenal of weapons and millions of euros in cash in his home.⁶² In the DRC, as Goma fell, Congo Protection's men retreated from the fighting to a UN base, where 288 Romanian mercenaries negotiated their surrender and evacuation via Rwanda.⁶³

The cases of Agemira and Congo Protection have been high profile and raise questions about reputable ties and reasonable scope, but they have not been the only private security companies to whom military capabilities have been outsourced and whose operations merit scrutiny. Security sources said that several Israeli actors have been embedded in the Congolese security apparatus since the Kabila era.⁶⁴ Africa Intelligence and an expert on Israeli private military companies in Africa identified the names of the companies involved.⁶⁵ Spurred on by questions surrounding the presence of some of these actors, the DRC's financial intelligence unit conducted an audit of the PMCs hired to counter M23.⁶⁶ The audit – the findings of which remain unpublished – flagged gaps in state oversight of PMCs in the DRC and urged senior authorities to strengthen regulatory controls.⁶⁷

The return of Erik Prince

Over the past few years, Erik Prince has emerged as a key figure in the DRC's competitive market of private security providers. Notorious for the scandals surrounding his Blackwater mercenary group in the early 2000s, Prince has recently made a comeback in several grey areas and conflict zones, including in Africa, where he has maintained a discreet footprint for more than a decade.⁶⁸ His companies have been expanding activities from logistics and mining to security provision, implementing a 'business-as-security' model in which military capabilities are packaged with civil infrastructure and revenue-generation services.⁶⁹ In the broader context of global competition over the DRC's strategic resources, this model illustrates how contracting security provision to foreign and private entities has become a structural pillar of the political and conflict economy.



Erik Prince, American founder of private military group Blackwater, has maintained a discreet footprint in Africa for decades, including in the DRC. © Getty Images

New opportunities

With the M23 conflict opening the field for PMCs in the DRC, Prince reportedly saw an opportunity. In early 2023, DRC authorities had planned to deploy 2 500 military contractors from Colombia, Mexico and Argentina to counter the M23 advance and secure mining areas, according to the UN Group of Experts.⁷⁰ The plan reportedly stemmed from an agreement between the DRC and the United Arab Emirates, brokered by Prince and engineered by an adviser to Tshisekedi. (The UAE denied the existence of such an agreement.)⁷¹ A UN report noted that 'around that time, Erik Prince was searching for evidence [...] that could be used against MONUSCO, so as to precipitate MONUSCO's departure in favour of the deployment of his military contractors'.⁷² While the deal did not result in a formal agreement, it raised alarm over risks of arms embargo violations and potential corruption.⁷³

Prince reportedly continued his efforts to break into the Congolese private security market, visiting Kinshasa to meet Congolese officials and eventually meeting Tshisekedi.⁷⁴ The collapse of the DRC's security architecture at the end of 2024 opened a path for Prince's business, and he signed a five-year contract with the Congolese Ministry of Finance that December.⁷⁵ The contract, which could be valued anywhere from US\$100 to US\$200 million, is aimed at assisting the authorities in securing mining sites, improving tax collection mechanisms and curbing cross-border smuggling of minerals.⁷⁶

Prince's interests are currently represented in the DRC by two legal entities: Vectus Global and Quantum Global Consulting.⁷⁷ His contract is generic in its terms but sustains Prince's promises to bring tax revenues back to the state treasury, notably by setting up a 'mining police' or 'financial brigade' responsible for collecting tax revenues from mining companies – and not necessarily politely.⁷⁸ Framed as 'a logistics and taxation reform initiative rather than a direct military operation',⁷⁹ the agreement reportedly allows for the deployment of security contractors to protect tax authorities, mining inspection units and other relevant law enforcement personnel.⁸⁰ The concerned parties emphasized that there were no plans to deploy security contractors to active conflict zones.⁸¹ However, sources interviewed by the UN Group of Experts said the contract included an offer from Prince to secure North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri through 'the training and deployment of ground troops and the operation of air assets, including armed drones', with the mining component meant to finance these military operations.⁸² Africa Intelligence reports that a recruiter linked to Prince has been recruiting French soldiers for a project in the DRC.⁸³

Beyond the contract's scope, its deployment areas have also been disputed. The initial plan to deploy advisers to Goma seemingly had to be put on hold after M23's capture of the city in January 2025, and focus was diverted to the southern province of Katanga instead. Other sources, however, maintain that focus on the mineral-rich south was there from the outset, as the government's strategic priority was to recover lost revenue caused by smuggling and tax evasion – estimated at up to US\$40 million monthly – in mining hubs such as Kolwezi, in Lualaba province.⁸⁴

While presented by the authorities as 'a pragmatic response to the state's limited capacity to secure remote mining sites and maintain revenue flows',⁸⁵ the initiative has triggered national criticism and raised questions about the DRC's reliance on foreign PMCs to manage its national resources, a move that could possibly run counter to Congolese sovereignty.

Signed against the backdrop of broader US–DRC negotiations to secure a minerals-for-security arrangement – a project that has raised similar concerns – it has been interpreted by various analysts as both linked to and separate from US interests in the DRC's critical mineral resources.⁸⁶

A subcontractor of the Trump deal?

Signed on 4 December 2025 alongside the Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity between the DRC and Rwanda, the Strategic Partnership Agreement was built on the claimed promise of a win-win partnership between the US and the DRC.⁸⁷ While the DRC would diversify its partnerships in the exploitation of mineral resources and benefit from American security cooperation and development sector support to curb illicit mineral trading, the US would gain preferential access to DRC's critical minerals, considered 'vital' to US economic and national security.⁸⁸

However, both the Washington Accords and the Strategic Partnership Agreement lack clarity on enforcement mechanisms and hardly detail how the US will contribute to security in the DRC beyond training, equipment and limited assistance to the FARDC.⁸⁹ Although the US administration disclaimed any intention to contract Prince's or other private security companies to ensure the implementation of the deal,⁹⁰ analysts have acknowledged that leaning on security contractors such as Prince could be considered as a parallel or interim measure to help bolster Congolese state control over its resources.⁹¹

The recapture of Uvira: Prince's men on the frontline

A number of allegations, many lacking formal evidence, have surrounded Prince's strengthened security presence in eastern DRC since the end of 2025.⁹² The first known instance of Prince's contractors being involved in frontline military activity, however, took place in January 2026 during operations to recapture and stabilize Uvira, South Kivu's second-largest city briefly seized by M23 in December 2025. Unlike other contractors that have reportedly fought against M23 combatants,⁹³ Prince's group is said to have supported Congolese special operations forces and army units with drone surveillance and other technical assistance.⁹⁴ It operated in coordination with Israeli advisers whose mandate was to train and build the capacities of two Congolese special forces battalions for day and night operations.⁹⁵

Deployment of the private contractors was reportedly at the request of the Congolese authorities, to bolster their efforts at a moment of crisis, and the team returned to its primary tax collection mission once the security situation in Uvira had stabilized.⁹⁶ In future, Prince's team may continue to deploy whenever requested by Kinshasa, according to a source interviewed by Reuters. It is unclear whether this involvement was endorsed by Washington, but a Congolese security official told Reuters that the operation was 'in line with the minerals-for-security deal' signed with the US administration.⁹⁷

Legal grounds for such interventions remain unclear. No public decree explicitly authorizes Prince's private contractors to operate in an overtly combat-oriented capacity on Congolese soil. Since Prince's contracts are negotiated through the finance and mining-related ministries rather than the Ministry of Defence, they are not governed by the tight regulations in Congolese law on the deployment of foreign combat forces in active war zones.⁹⁸ Instead, their activities are framed in economic security and tax enforcement terms. Prince's teams are described primarily as revenue security personnel operating in or near mining zones, despite their deployment to Uvira.⁹⁹ This, however, raises questions about oversight, accountability and the ability of Congolese authorities to investigate and sanction private contractors in cases of abuses.

The DRC's drone warfare and the Ukrainian connection

Reflecting the recent escalation of drone warfare in eastern DRC,¹⁰⁰ the Uvira operation also showcased what has now turned into one of Prince's hallmarks.

Prince has made drones a central focus of his business, describing them as 'the biggest battlefield innovation in a generation'.¹⁰¹ Drones have been notably operated in Haiti – a country plagued by gang insecurity – since March 2025 as part of an agreement between the Port-au-Prince authorities and Prince's Vectus Global.¹⁰² Replicating the same model as the one used in the DRC, the company was contracted to help restore security and secure tax collection – levying part of the customs revenues in exchange for its security 'expertise'. Within a few months, no fewer than 233 gang members had been killed by drone strikes.¹⁰³

Of particular interest to Prince and other PMCs operating in the DRC are battle-tested Ukrainian engines and operators.¹⁰⁴ Reports have highlighted Prince's repeated trips to Kyiv over the past years, aimed at expanding his network with defence-related companies and identifying drones and operators for use in the DRC.¹⁰⁵ He was recently recruited as non-executive chair by Swarmer, a battle-tested Ukrainian startup specializing in autonomous drone software.¹⁰⁶

Details of the specific engines and platforms used by Prince's contractors in the DRC are scarce, but reporting suggests they have access to small- or medium-range UAVs that can provide Congolese forces with real-time or near-real-time imagery to support targeting, force-protection decisions and route security.¹⁰⁷ Prince's teams operating alongside Congolese forces could reportedly include experienced personnel from Ukraine's Special Operations Forces, the Alpha Unit of the Security Service and the Artan special unit of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of Ukraine's Defence Ministry.¹⁰⁸

The integration of the Wazalendo

While cooperation between the national army and local armed groups has long been a practice in eastern DRC, it has historically been fragmented, opportunistic and shaped by shifting local alliances.¹⁰⁹ After the resurgence of M23, however, this collaboration appears to have shifted towards greater centralization and institutionalization, with civilian militias increasingly incorporated into broader territorial defence strategies. A notable example is the FARDC's partnership with the Wazalendo, a coalition of Congolese armed groups.

While most of the groups identifying as Wazalendo existed before the M23 crisis, many of them with established ties to the national armed forces, the conflict was a turning point in relations between the coalition and the FARDC. The UN reported that senior FARDC officers had been meeting with armed group leaders since at least June 2023, with a structured meeting on joint FARDC–Wazalendo operational

strategy reportedly taking place in September 2023.¹¹⁰ In November 2023, during an interview with French media outlets, Tshisekedi explicitly voiced support for the ‘civilian self-defence groups’ mobilized under the Wazalendo banner that had been resisting M23 in eastern DRC.¹¹¹ He called on the FARDC to extend operational support to these groups wherever feasible, publicly acknowledging and reinforcing a dynamic that had been observed since earlier in the year.¹¹²

Public reporting and interviews with members of the Wazalendo have identified the Congolese army as providing them with support,¹¹³ including through the provision of weapons and ammunition, financial incentives and care for those injured or killed during clashes.¹¹⁴ For instance, a member of the Wazalendo reported that in February 2026, the government paid US\$325 to each combatant operating in South Kivu’s Fizi and Uvira territories. They went on to describe how requests for weapons and ammunition are submitted to local FARDC commanders, who consolidate these needs with their regional hierarchy before facilitating delivery to the group.¹¹⁵

The Wazalendo coalition is not an unproblematic partner, however. Several of its armed groups have been documented as being responsible for serious war crimes and human rights violations, including sexual violence, summary executions, child soldier recruitment and pillage.¹¹⁶ In addition, key leaders of some of the coalition’s most prominent factions, including Guidon Shimiray Mwissa and William Amuri Yakutumba, are subject to UN sanctions for their involvement with armed groups that are alleged to have committed human rights violations and to have ‘undermined the peace and security of the DRC, including through illicit trade and exploitation of natural resources’.¹¹⁷

The DRC’s support to these groups and actors thus militarizes local society, entrenching conflict and opening the door to prolonged abuses against civilians and the plunder of national resources. This situation is all the more worrying because many of their leaders are not willing to give up the political, economic and security privileges that they derive from violence, even if stability emerges.¹¹⁸



Members of the Wazalendo near their weapons after surrendering to M23, December 2025.

© Daniel Buuma via Getty Images

Ugandan aid and agenda

The DRC's security partnership with Uganda, initially characterized by sporadic incursions and ad hoc cooperation, has progressively become institutionalized and was recently expanded to include areas in which M23 operates.¹¹⁹ In June 2025, the chiefs of staff of the two nations' armies, Ugandan General Muhoozi Kainerugaba – son of President Yoweri Museveni – and Congolese General Jules Banza Mwilambwe, signed an agreement to extend the operational scope of joint operations between the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) and the FARDC to include the territories of Lubero in North Kivu and Mambasa and Irumu in Ituri.¹²⁰ This agreement built on the November 2021 joint 'Shujaa' operation in the Beni territory of North Kivu, which aimed to neutralize the ADF, a rebel group originally formed in opposition to Museveni's regime.¹²¹

According to the June 2025 agreement, Ugandan troops will join FARDC operations against M23 in Lubero territory and support joint operations against other armed groups in other territories. The agreement also includes provisions on intelligence sharing, military training and the protection of road rehabilitation projects.¹²²

While the joint operation ostensibly serves the security interests of both countries, Uganda's deployment may serve a secondary purpose. Eastern DRC is an area of strategic economic importance for Uganda,¹²³ and General Felix Kulayigye, Uganda's military spokesperson, stated that the deployment of the UPDF in the DRC is linked to the protection of national economic interests, noting that 'the market for Uganda is actually eastern Congo'. Indeed, Uganda, like Rwanda, has a vested interest in securing its import and export trade routes, and diplomatic sources in Kampala describe this motivation as being an 'open secret'.¹²⁴

The DRC's security partnership with Uganda must also be understood within the broader history of regional interference, particularly during the Congo Wars (1996–2003). During that period, the Ugandan government maintained close ties with various local armed groups. Uganda's first intervention took place in 1996, when it joined Rwanda and Angola in supporting the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo rebels against the regime of Mobutu Sese Seko.¹²⁵ During the Second Congo War, which began in 1998, Uganda supported a number of Congolese rebel groups, including the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo, in their fight against the new government of Laurent-Désiré Kabila. This support led the International Court of Justice to condemn Uganda in December 2005 for violations of international law, including the illegal exploitation of the DRC's natural resources.¹²⁶

These dynamics appear to have persisted, especially after the resurgence of the M23 crisis. The UN reported that certain UPDF officials have actively supported M23 and that the Ugandan government has apparently not prevented M23 or RDF troops, vehicles or supplies from transiting its territory.¹²⁷

Uganda reportedly maintains ties with other armed groups as well, including the Convention for the Popular Revolution (CRP), whose aim is to unite armed groups in Ituri to overthrow the DRC government. According to the UN Group of Experts on the DRC, the movement reportedly received 'moral and passive endorsement' from authorities in Uganda,¹²⁸ where the group's founder, Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, resides. These dynamics are reinforced by transnational identity networks: the Hema community, which forms the core of the CRP, maintains close ties with the Banyankole community in Uganda, to which Museveni belongs and which is influential within the UPDF.¹²⁹

The CRP launched its first attacks on Congolese territory in July 2025, aiming to securing strategic access to Lake Albert, an area of major importance to Uganda in terms of oil exploitation.¹³⁰ This control was, according to sources within the group, a precondition set by Kampala for its continuing material support.¹³¹ Former members of the CRP, as well as FARDC officers involved in joint operations, reported active collaboration between Ugandan authorities, troops deployed in the DRC and the CRP. They specifically mentioned regular meetings between CRP leadership and the chief of staff of the UPDF in Kampala.¹³² During the July attack and subsequent operations, CRP fighters reportedly received intelligence and operational support from drones provided by UPDF elements present on Congolese soil.¹³³ CRP members and FARDC officers also indicated that during preparatory meetings in Kampala for the creation of the CRP, a person presented as the Ugandan presidency's special envoy was reportedly present.¹³⁴ Finally, Ugandan army vehicles were reportedly used to transport weapons intended for the CRP and to evacuate its wounded. Former leaders of the movement confirmed that they used these same vehicles to reach the fighters on the ground.¹³⁵ Furthermore, the GI-TOC reviewed documentation produced by the FARDC deployed in Ituri that suggests there may be cooperation between UPDF elements operating in the area and the CRP.



Security priorities, criminal profits

The dilution of oversight and control occasioned by the proliferation of private actors in the conflict landscape in eastern DRC is closely associated with illicit activities. State-embedded actors, militias, private military groups and other conflict actors have been able to actively benefit from the conflict. Operating within a criminogenic environment marked by weak governance, limited state presence, chronic insecurity and inadequate oversight, these actors are able to use stated security objectives as cover for economic interests, leveraging instability to generate profit and blurring the lines between public authority, private interests and criminal activity.

The illicit activities of these actors range from possible kickback schemes to the exploitation of natural resources and the creation of parallel governance systems. In some cases, the involvement or proximity of state representatives further strengthens these networks and allows them to operate with relative impunity. These dynamics show how security discourse and the privatization of violence can legitimize practices that entrench conflict economies and enable resource extraction for private gain.

Elite capture

In an attempt to address military weaknesses, the outsourcing of security has instead reinforced a rent-seeking system embedded in patronage networks at the highest levels of power. Access to state contracts depends on proximity to power, and PMCs systematically rely on politically connected intermediaries to secure deals. This reinforces elite dominance over the allocation of public resources and raises questions about the scale of national expenditures.¹³⁶ The scale of this capture is amplified by the macroeconomic context. As defence spending rises,¹³⁷ security outsourcing has contributed to war profiteering within the state apparatus, and emergency procurement has become an important channel for elite accumulation.¹³⁸

Several high-level political officials have been publicly linked to large security contracts. For example, in May 2024, Africa Intelligence reported that Deputy Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Bemba – at the time the minister of defence – had been negotiating a US\$500 million contract for Chinese combat drones with a small South African company, the owner of which had been accused of financial malpractice by South African authorities.¹³⁹ The company had reportedly proposed that the DRC pay part of the bill with oil or mining assets.¹⁴⁰ The deal was later shut down by advisers close to Tshisekedi, and Africa Intelligence noted that it ‘was not unconnected with Bemba’s departure from his ministry’.¹⁴¹ Guy Kabombo Muadiamvita, who took over from Bemba as minister of defence, has reportedly been connected to another security company through a Belgian diamond dealer, according to Africa Intelligence.¹⁴²

The broader patronage ecosystem extends beyond top-level government officials. Patrick Bologna, a former member of parliament and president of the political party Future of Congo, was reportedly part owner of private military company Congo Protection, which deployed combat personnel under the leadership of Romanian Horațiu Potra.¹⁴³ Bologna denied these claims.

According to two security sources, Olivier Chekinah, a religious adviser operating outside formal state structures, is said to have acted as a ‘gatekeeper’ between the presidency and foreign security providers.¹⁴⁴ Through his business OL Consult, Chekinah has facilitated the entry of several foreign companies, including security firms Fortress and SYN-RG-Ai.¹⁴⁵ The fees for arranging such connections and assisting in negotiations are potentially significant.¹⁴⁶ Sources suggest that Chekinah retained a share of contract values (about 10%) and controlled the redistribution of funds – reportedly tens of millions of dollars – across political networks.¹⁴⁷

Parallel administrations

Both the M23 and Wazalendo coalitions have established parallel governance systems that replicate core state functions in areas under their control, including administration, policing, permitting and taxation. These administrations operate illicitly, outside any legal framework, lacking accountability and increasing risks of coercive and arbitrary governance. In doing so, they have the potential to prolong conflict, exacerbate humanitarian crises and destabilize the country.

M23 operates a more formalized structure. In parts of North Kivu and South Kivu, it has sought to replicate state institutions, appointing governors and deputy governors and replacing local customary authorities – at times violently.¹⁴⁸ It has also introduced rudimentary judicial and policing functions through various commissions and local security bodies.¹⁴⁹ These include the deployment of an armed private security company, New Vision Security, to protect economic actors.¹⁵⁰

A recent report indicates that by September 2025, M23 had established control over 45 major mining sites producing gold, coltan and cassiterite.¹⁵¹ Among the most significant is the mining hub of Rubaya, which accounts for an estimated 15% of global coltan supply and was seized by the group in April 2024.¹⁵² Securing control over this locality was a central component of the movement’s strategy, according to two local researchers and a source inside the movement, as it enabled the consolidation of a substantial revenue stream and the facilitation of mineral flows to the Rwandan market.¹⁵³

For M23, the financial benefits of controlling Rubaya are significant. UN estimates suggest that M23 has generated at least US\$800 000 per month by taxing coltan production and trade at the site,¹⁵⁴ and sources on the ground reported that M23 imposes taxes at various stages of extraction and trade.¹⁵⁵

TERRITORY: MWENGA			TERRITORY: UVIRA			TERRITORY: FIZI		
SECTOR / ACTIVITY	AMOUNT (USD) / FREQUENCY	ACTORS INVOLVED	SECTOR / ACTIVITY	AMOUNT (USD) / FREQUENCY	ACTORS INVOLVED	SECTOR / ACTIVITY	AMOUNT (USD) / FREQUENCY	ACTORS INVOLVED
Bars	5 weekly (Saturday)	Wazalendo	Individuals (Ruzizi Plain)	0.25 per checkpoint	Wazalendo + FARDC	Trucks	125 per entry	Wazalendo
Motorcycle passengers	0.25 per passenger, per checkpoint	Wazalendo	Buses from Bukavu	100 per entry	Wazalendo + FARDC	Checkpoints	1.25 per barrier	Wazalendo
Fuel stations	Amount not specified; Regular payments	Wazalendo	Trucks from Bukavu	1 500 per entry	Wazalendo + FARDC	Government revenues (Baraka)	50% revenue share, continuous	Wazalendo
Markets	Amount not specified; Market taxation	Wazalendo	Fuel sector	In kind payments (fuel); Managed via provincial authorities	Provincial government + Wazalendo	Mining sites	1 000 monthly	Wazalendo
Mining sites	22 weekly	Wazalendo				Misisi mining area (all revenues)	50% revenue share; Systematic split	Government + Wazalendo

FIGURE 2 Taxation systems in South Kivu.

SOURCE: Interviews with civil society actors in Bukavu and Uvira, local researchers and economic actors, April 2026

During a March 2025 visit by Reuters, M23 officials acknowledged the imposition of a 15% tax on mineral traders purchasing coltan from artisanal miners in the area.¹⁵⁶ Local sources told the GI-TOC that buyers in Rubaya pay a tax of US\$7 per kilogram, and that each person who enters a mining pit to collect purchased minerals also pays 10 000 Congolese francs (about US\$3.50) per day.¹⁵⁷ Every Friday, diggers pay M23 representatives a flat fee of 20 000 (about US\$7) without receiving a receipt. M23 sells new mining pits to diggers for between US\$500 and US\$1 000; previously, mining areas – either pits or groups of pits – were obtained for between US\$200 and US\$250.¹⁵⁸

Wazalendo groups, by contrast, operate a more decentralized and locally embedded system of control across areas such as Walikale, Masisi, Rutshuru, Kalehe, Mwenga and Fizi.¹⁵⁹ Governance is primarily exercised through checkpoints along key transport routes, where systematic taxes are imposed on goods and transportation, including agricultural produce and motorcycle transit.¹⁶⁰ In certain regions such as Uvira and Misisi, taxation practices reflect a form of hybrid governance in which armed groups and state structures either collaborate or coexist in managing and extracting resources.¹⁶¹

Coltan as Rwanda's de facto reward

M23's control over local economies, and over Rubaya in particular, allows the group to dominate the coltan trade in the region. More than that, its relationship with Rwanda means the country is in a prime position to benefit economically from the group's illicit control.¹⁶² Not only is Rwanda a primary destination for coltan originating in Rubaya, there is evidence of coordination between M23 and Rwandan authorities in setting prices, collecting taxes and moving shipments across the border.

M23 has ‘ensured a monopoly for the export of coltan from Rubaya to Rwanda’, according to the UN Group of Experts on the DRC.¹⁶³ Indeed, UN and media reports indicate that large volumes of coltan extracted from Rubaya are being smuggled into Rwanda, where it is mixed with domestic production to conceal its origin.¹⁶⁴ In December 2024, the UN reported that M23 was overseeing the trade and transport of about 120 tons of coltan monthly from Rubaya; in July 2025, it suggested that the volume of coltan being smuggled from Rubaya into Rwanda had likely increased, noting that in one week in March 2025, an estimated 195 tons of 3T minerals (tantalum, tin and tungsten, derived from the ores coltan, cassiterite and wolframite) were moved.¹⁶⁵

M23 control begins on site in Rubaya, where the group oversees taxes and trading, likely coordinating with Rwandan authorities. An economic actor in Kigali who buys minerals from traders in Rubaya stated that paying taxes to M23 is a sine qua non condition for selling minerals in Rwanda. When such taxes have not been paid within DRC territory, they are deducted after the sale of coltan in Rwanda and subsequently deposited at the Savings Bank of Congo (CADECO) in Goma.¹⁶⁶ M23 is also directly involved in the commercialization of coltan through a trader who operates from Goma. He previously managed the sale of mineral stockpiles looted during M23’s takeover of Goma in January 2025. Today, he reportedly receives minerals from several actors and organizes their transport to Rwanda.¹⁶⁷

Regarding payments in Rubaya, field research conducted in July 2025 suggests that although trading centres are officially managed by Congolese traders, in practice they are controlled by Rwandan traders who provide capital, weigh minerals and set prices. Payments to Congolese négociants are made in the presence of Rwandan traders, sometimes using Rwandan banknotes. The price of a kilogram of coltan in July 2025 ranged from US\$35 to US\$40, with miners reporting low revenues and alleging manipulation of weighing scales to underestimate quantities. Miners also stated that the dominance of Rwandan traders severely reduced their bargaining power. Some local actors reported the presence of Rwandan intelligence agents in Rubaya.¹⁶⁸



M23 soldiers patrol near the scene of a landslide at an open-pit coltan mine in Rubaya, 30 January 2026. © AFP via Getty Images



Miners gather during an M23 rally at the Rubaya coltan mine, March 2025. © Camille Laffont/AFP via Getty Images

From Rubaya, the coltan moves by road to Rwanda, with M23 controlling the transport corridor from the mine to the border.¹⁶⁹ Witnesses in Rubaya reported that in July 2025, with M23 in control of Goma, motorcycles, trucks and Toyota Land Cruisers were regularly observed on the Rubaya–Goma route transporting large volumes of minerals.¹⁷⁰ This increase in traffic reportedly prompted M23 authorities to invest in maintaining the road.¹⁷¹ The rehabilitation works were entrusted to a Rwandan company, Delta Two Construction, which began operations in April 2025 in Kihira, in the Kamuronza area of Sake. A Kivu Morning Post video indicated that the roadworks were financed by M23.¹⁷²

Once the coltan passes into Rwanda, often through main border crossings at night,¹⁷³ it may be mixed with Rwandan production.¹⁷⁴ Some Kigali companies reportedly participate in this trade with full awareness of the origin of the minerals and in coordination with mining authorities linked to M23, making



A sign announcing a road rehabilitation project funded by M23 in May 2025. Photo: Social media

transport arrangements and confirming that taxes have been paid. These companies are also involved in assessing the tantalum content in collaboration with an international assay company. At this stage, a levy of about 3% is applied and transferred to the Rwanda Revenue Authority.¹⁷⁵ This system appears to generate significant economic benefits for Rwanda. National Bank of Rwanda data shows a steady rise in declared volumes, from 1 304 tonnes in 2022 to 2 070 tonnes in 2023, 2 306 tonnes in 2024 and 2 743 tonnes in 2025. The 110.4% increase between 2022 and 2025 occurred despite the absence of new mining operations, raising questions about the drivers behind the sustained growth in reported production.

In 2024, Rwanda's coltan exports were channelled through trading companies in the UAE and Hong Kong that supplied a Kazakhstan smelter. A separate Rwanda-based exporter directly supplied Chinese smelters, bypassing intermediary traders. The refining of tantalum is mainly carried out in China, though Kazakhstan has a notable smelting facility.¹⁷⁶

Gold involving the Uganda People's Defence Force

Uganda has emerged as a central node in the regional political economy of gold, functioning as a transit and transformation hub within the broader conflict-affected supply chain linking eastern DRC to global markets.¹⁷⁷ A large portion of Uganda's gold exports – valued in 2025 at US\$6.4 billion, nearly double the 2024 total – are believed to originate from the DRC, largely sustained by systematic smuggling from eastern DRC, particularly from Ituri and the Grand Nord region of North Kivu.¹⁷⁸

Within this system, the UPDF plays an important role that blurs the boundaries between security provision, economic facilitation and political influence. Its presence in eastern DRC has contributed to the consolidation of cross-border trade networks by securing key transit corridors from Ituri to Uganda, providing protection to certain business actors – particularly within the Nande community – and facilitating engagement with local armed groups.¹⁷⁹

An economic actor operating in Lubero territory and an FARDC officer told the GI-TOC that UPDF elements were involved in buying illicit gold at their bases, occasionally paying above market rates. The same sources said they had witnessed regular gold purchases by elements stationed in Mangureijipa. UPDF personnel consistently offered US\$5 above the market price per gram and subsequently transported the gold to Kampala for resale, they said.¹⁸⁰

Information also points to the involvement of senior Ugandan military officers, including colonels and generals, in smuggling gold. According to economic actors and a former armed group leader, senior officers provide advance funding to Congolese and Ugandan actors tasked with collecting gold in Ituri. The gold acquired in this manner is then transported to Kampala in Ugandan military vehicles, evading oversight.¹⁸¹

The involvement of senior officers in the illicit gold trade is part of a broader context. *The Monitor* reported that a UPDF colonel who had participated in Operation Shujaa in the DRC had been arrested, along with his guards, for attempting to rob and abduct a gold dealer in Uganda in 2025. The article noted that 'cases of soldiers and security personnel getting involved in illegal gold deals and robbery has [sic] become common in Uganda'.¹⁸²

Timber

Timber served to finance several armed groups during the Congo Wars of the 1990s-2000s,¹⁸³ and the resurgence of armed conflict over the past few years has further amplified the illicit trade, with deforestation and illegal logging on the rise in a number of protected areas of North Kivu, South Kivu and nearby localities. M23, various Wazalendo groups and UPDF members have sought to benefit from the illegal timber business, occupying prime territories for logging – especially those with high-value species such as mahogany (*libuyu*) and teak (*iroko*) – exerting influence over local actors and implementing illegal taxes. The involvement of these groups has resulted in a 40–50% increase in final timber prices in Goma, a significant economic impact for local communities.¹⁸⁴

Since its return, M23 has taken control of large swathes of Virunga National Park and is reportedly in control of illegal logging activities in the park's Mikenno sector. According to the UN, M23 logs about 40 tons of timber per week in Mikenno, bringing in between US\$2.08 million and US\$2.6 million annually.¹⁸⁵ M23 has also occupied illegal logging areas in the Rutshuru – in particular along the Kalengera–Tonbo road – and Masisi territories, where it has the potential to bring in similar revenues, notably through the levying of heavy taxes on wooden plank transporters.¹⁸⁶ Some M23 officers have also been involved in illegal logging activities in Kahuzi-Biega National Park, according to local sources.¹⁸⁷

Legitimized by their alliance with the Congolese government, several Wazalendo groups have started diversifying their sources of income through the exploitation of timber. Wazalendo groups are reportedly involved in the illicit timber trade in Nyiragongo, assisted at times by FARDC members.¹⁸⁸ In addition, they are notably active in and around Masisi, where they have imposed illegal taxes on trucks transporting planks to Goma – often in addition to taxes already imposed by M23.¹⁸⁹ The UN estimates that Wazalendo groups average about US\$44 000 per year in taxes from Masisi, with another US\$1.95 million annually from timber in Rutshuru territory.¹⁹⁰

Also active in Rutshuru are members of the UPDF, sometimes with the collaboration or support of FARDC elements.¹⁹¹ Local NGOs have reported that UPDF members escort transport trucks towards the border with Uganda, where there is a burgeoning trade in smuggled timber.¹⁹² The timber crosses mainly via Kasindi to Uganda, or through Goma into Rwanda.¹⁹³ To cross the border, paperwork can be facilitated by timber traders with concessions or by corrupt government officials, who list the wood as harvested within those traders' concessions. This enables illegally produced timber to be licensed as legal and laundered into regional and international markets.¹⁹⁴ In Lia, at the official border crossing between the DRC and Uganda, shipments of timber are not scanned or weighed, and the Uganda Revenue Authority office in charge of clearing goods is severely understaffed, as are the Congolese officials. The Africa Report noted that Ugandan officials 'don't care' about taxes or documents because they 'merely facilitate' the timber's movement to markets in Kenya, Europe and beyond.¹⁹⁵



Conclusion

The resurgence of M23 in eastern DRC has served to highlight how the outsourcing of state security to private actors, proxies, armed groups and foreign forces has accelerated in recent years. More significantly, it has emphasized how the acceleration of this practice has actively enabled the development and entrenchment of conflict actors and criminal economic activities, adding new layers of complexity to an already fragile environment and probably prolonging instability.

While reducing the conflict in eastern DRC to purely economic drivers would be inaccurate and simplistic, the pursuit of profits from illicit economies has nevertheless become a structuring element. As long as criminal activities remain accessible, profitable and low risk, they will continue to sustain opportunistic alliances, cycles of violence and the proliferation of armed actors. They will also continue to draw in local and regional actors for whom there are few other options.

Beyond the economic interests documented in this report, field investigations revealed how individual trajectories were shaped by socio-economic pressures. Several interlocutors described joining armed groups because they sought employment or better incomes that were unavailable elsewhere. A Rwandan M23 member stationed at the Bunagana border post explained that he joined after his uncle, already in the movement, told him he could earn a regular salary. A Congolese recruit based in Goma said he had joined after years of unemployment. Similar objectives motivated the mobilization of foreign PMC personnel, who were offered monthly payments of several thousand dollars. These accounts are another illustration of the need to integrate socio-economic dimensions into any analysis of this multi-decade conflict and into the search for sustainable solutions.

The reality of these economic and socio-economic drivers, and of the further entrenchment of a reinforcing criminal ecosystem, calls for a reassessment of current policy responses. Given the weakness of state institutions and the agility of criminal networks, strategies that rely solely on strengthening the rule of law will address only part of the problem. Priority should instead be given to innovative, incentive-based approaches rooted in a nuanced understanding of the conflict's political economy and aligned with efforts to combat organized crime. Rather than assuming that legal enforcement alone can dismantle entrenched criminal systems, approaches should seek to reshape the incentives that sustain them, making participation in the formal economy more attractive and less costly than involvement in illicit activities.

The need for this shift is reinforced by the number of peace initiatives that have seen limited results so far. Mediation and peace processes – including the Washington process, the Doha negotiations between the Congolese government and M23, the Montreux talks conceived as a follow-up track to Doha, the Lomé consultations, the Angolan mediation led by President João Lourenço, the African Union’s high-level mediation, and regional mechanisms such as the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and the Expanded Joint Verification Mechanism Plus – reflect an unprecedented level of international and regional engagement. Yet despite their different formats and sponsors, these initiatives have largely converged around familiar priorities: ceasefires, political dialogue, military de-escalation, confidence-building measures, sanctions and questions of territorial control. While these objectives are indispensable, far less attention has been paid to the economic structures that sustain violence.

Among these initiatives, the Washington process did recognize the centrality of the war economy. Signed in December 2025, the Washington Accords are aiming to transform economic potential into a lever for stabilization, but they fail to challenge the existing power relations and predatory economies upstream. As a result, they risk promoting the economic normalization of illegal activity, benefiting actors capable of operating in unstable environments that have been politically ‘stabilized’ by diplomacy. The promise of new investment flows, security assistance and economic partnerships could strengthen conflict actors without requiring a clear break with cross-border predatory circuits. Rather than a tool for transformation, the desired stabilization would thus become a mechanism that enables accumulation, with severe consequences for civilians.

Evidence of the limits of existing peace initiatives is already visible. Despite ceasefire agreements signed under frameworks such as Doha and Washington, hostilities have continued, illustrating the gap between current policy responses and the reality on the ground.

Recommendations

Ensure that the main ongoing peace and mediation processes systematically incorporate conflict-related economic interests into their mediation frameworks, enabling more inclusive negotiations that address the incentives, grievances and political economy drivers of all relevant stakeholders.

Integrating conflict-related economic interests into ongoing peace processes requires a fundamental rethinking of how mediation frameworks are designed and implemented. It means mediation teams must embed political economy expertise at every stage of the process, including by conducting detailed mapping of resource extraction networks, identifying the actors who profit from illicit activities, and analyzing how informal taxation systems function at roadblocks, mining sites and border crossings, and how local communities then interact with them. Equally important is analyzing how political and military elites derive financial benefits from the continuation of conflict, as well as the mechanisms through which these revenues are concealed, laundered and reinvested. Negotiators should incorporate these findings into agenda setting so that discussions on power sharing, demobilization, territorial control and punitive measures are grounded in a clear understanding of all economic stakes and actors involved.

Moreover, peace processes must become more inclusive, bringing in actors who are typically excluded from formal negotiations but who play decisive roles in the conflict economy. These include regional countries such as Uganda and other transit and destination markets. Attention should also be paid to identifying and engaging key actors from local, regional and international business communities whose activities influence conflict-related economic networks. Their participation can help identify realistic

pathways for transforming conflict economies into regulated and transparent systems that can benefit communities. Without such inclusion, peace agreements risk being disconnected from the realities that shape everyday life in conflict-affected areas, reducing their chances of successful implementation.

Strengthen mechanisms to improve the implementation and enforcement of international frameworks governing arms control and the trade in natural resources and other commodities originating from conflict-affected areas.

Strengthening international frameworks on arms control and natural resource governance requires not only improved enforcement but also a deep understanding of how illicit flows operate across borders. Current mechanisms – such as mineral certification schemes, embargo monitoring and arms trade treaties – often fail to capture the complexity of smuggling networks that adapt quickly to regulatory pressure. These networks exploit porous borders, weak state institutions and corruption within security forces to move weapons and commodities with relative ease.

A deeper approach involves enhancing the technical capacity of states and regional organizations to monitor, verify and disrupt these flows. This includes investing in advanced mineral traceability technologies, which can significantly reduce opportunities for smuggling activities. It also requires strengthening the ability of customs authorities to detect illicit shipments through improved risk-profiling tools, joint border operations and shared intelligence platforms. Effective and comprehensive implementation of the Regional Certification Mechanism of the ICGLR is essential, as it implies that resources whose origin cannot be verified should not be allowed onto the market. Such an outcome will only be possible if transit and consumer countries apply – and ensure that their economic actors fully apply – the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Due Diligence Guidance, as well as all similar legislation in Europe, Asia and the US.

Arms control mechanisms must also be deepened by improving enduser verification processes, enhancing transparency in armstransfer reporting and strengthening oversight of private security companies that may act as intermediaries in weapons procurement. States should consider using international instruments, such as the Arms Trade Treaty, to review their policies on exporting military equipment to Rwanda.

Strengthen international cooperation to support comprehensive security sector reform in the DRC, with a particular focus on the FARDC, to address the structural weaknesses that undermine their effectiveness, accountability and resilience.

A deeper and more transformative approach to security sector reform in the DRC requires confronting the structural issues that have long undermined the FARDC’s effectiveness, accountability and resilience. These issues originate from decades of fragmented command structures, poor treatment of troops and chronic underinvestment in logistics and infrastructure. They are further exacerbated by corruption, weak oversight mechanisms and the limited capacity of military justice institutions to address abuses and enforce discipline.

Meaningful reform demands a long-term, coordinated strategy that goes far beyond training programmes and equipment provision. It must begin with a comprehensive restructuring of command-and-control systems to ensure clarity of authority, operational coherence and insulation from political interference.

International partners, including the EU through the European Peace Facility, should prioritize support for robust military justice institutions capable of investigating and prosecuting abuses, corruption and violations of international humanitarian law. This entails strengthening the skills of military prosecutors,

improving case-management systems and guaranteeing that judicial processes remain independent from political pressures.

Deepening reform also requires aligning external military assistance with governance objectives. International support should be conditional on measurable progress in accountability, transparency, institutional strengthening and improved payment systems for troops.

Establish clear legal and operational frameworks for security partnerships in the DRC.

A deeper approach demands the development of a unified legal architecture that governs all forms of security cooperation. This architecture should define the scope, objectives and duration of partnerships, specify the roles and responsibilities of each actor, and establish clear rules of engagement that align with national priorities and international norms. It should also include robust mechanisms for civilian oversight, such as parliamentary review processes, independent monitoring bodies and mandatory reporting requirements that ensure transparency in budgeting.

Operational frameworks must clarify command structures, delineate chains of responsibility and establish protocols for coordination between national forces and external partners. They should also include detailed provisions on the protection of civilians, compliance with international humanitarian law and the prevention of human rights violations. Transparency is essential: agreements should be publicly accessible, enabling civil society and oversight institutions to monitor implementation and hold actors accountable.

Deepening these frameworks also requires addressing the risks associated with private security actors and ensuring that their activities are regulated through licensing systems, oversight mechanisms and clear contractual obligations. By establishing comprehensive legal and operational frameworks, the DRC can reduce the risks associated with opaque or informal arrangements, improve coordination among partners and ensure that external support contributes to longterm stabilization.



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