

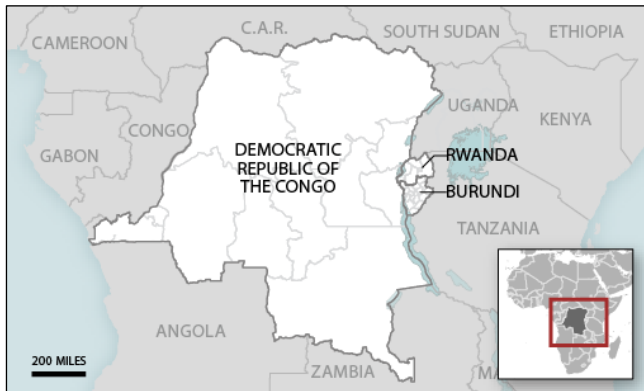


## Instability in Africa's Great Lakes Region: Current Issues

### Overview

U.S. policy toward Central Africa's Great Lakes region has long sought a number of objectives, including: (1) to prevent large-scale regional conflict in the wake of the "Second Congo War" (1998-2003), (2) to preclude ethnic massacres such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide, (3) to support multilateral efforts to demobilize non-state armed groups, (4) to respond to humanitarian needs, (5) to advance economic development, and (6) to promote fair and nonviolent business practices in the minerals sector. The Obama Administration has emphasized the prevention of mass atrocities and the encouragement of peaceful political transitions amid attempts by the region's incumbent leaders to extend their time in office. Now, a budding electoral crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and a violent political impasse in Burundi threaten the limited, but real, security gains the region has achieved over the past decade.

Figure 1. Map



### Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Since the mid-1990s, cyclical conflict in eastern DRC has destabilized the Great Lakes region and inhibited development, consuming substantial domestic and donor resources. A particularly formidable, Rwandan-backed rebel movement known as the M23 was defeated in 2013 in U.N.-backed military operations, but a range of other armed groups (both Congolese- and foreign-led) remain active. Concern about armed groups' involvement in illicit mineral exports led Congress to pass "conflict minerals" legislation in 2010, and Members have expressed serious concern with the scale of conflict-related human rights abuses in DRC. DRC is also affected by wildlife poaching, which Congress and the Administration have sought to counter.

DRC's 2016 election cycle has also become a potential flashpoint for instability. President Joseph Kabila, in office since 2001, is constitutionally prohibited from reelection when his term expires in December 2016, but most observers expect him to try to stay in office by postponing the vote. Over the past year, skepticism about his intent has

led to protests, brutal repression of activists by the security forces, and high-profile defections from the ruling party. Tensions seemed to edge higher in May 2016, when the government issued an arrest warrant for a top opposition politician, former Katanga governor Moïse Katumbi, accusing him of hiring mercenaries. A U.S. citizen who was advising Katumbi has also been detained.

### U.S. Policy: Current Focus

**Diplomatic Outreach.** The Administration has engaged in high-level regional diplomacy aimed at convincing Kabila to step down at the end of his current term. U.S. diplomacy also aims to convince DRC's neighbors to adhere to a U.N.-backed 2013 "framework accord," in which countries committed to refrain from backing rebel movements in each others' territories. U.S. diplomats have also focused on urging DRC leaders to issue exit permits for adopted children. The issuance of these permits, which was largely suspended in 2013, resumed to a limited extent in 2016.

**Sanctions.** The U.N. Security Council maintains an arms embargo on non-state groups in DRC and a related sanctions regime. The Obama Administration has regularly extended Executive Order 13413 (2006) and expanded it through Executive Order 13671 (2014), authorizing targeted financial sanctions on those who foment conflict, impede democracy, or commit gross human rights abuses in DRC. DRC opposition leaders have called for sanctioning members of Kabila's inner circle in connection with electoral process missteps and the abuse of protesters—which could potentially mean, for the first time, designating government officials. U.S. policymakers have debated the justification, timing, and potential unintended consequences of such an action.

**MONUSCO Mandate.** As a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, the United States has helped shape the mandate and size of the U.N. peacekeeping operation in DRC. The DRC government has pushed for a reduction in MONUSCO's force in the lead-up to the 2016 elections, and operational coordination between U.N. and DRC troops has largely ceased since 2015 due to U.N. criticism of political tensions and the poor human rights record of specific Congolese commanders. The Security Council has endorsed a slight troop drawdown but has not lowered the authorized troop ceiling (22,016 uniformed personnel), leaving room for a plus-up if security conditions deteriorate. MONUSCO's mandate prioritizes protecting civilians but includes a number of other tasks, including, under certain conditions, electoral support. Observers debate whether MONUSCO—most of whose troops are in the east—is prepared to respond to political violence in areas such as the capital, Kinshasa (in the west), and Katanga (in the southeast).

## Burundi

Burundi's current political crisis stems from President Pierre Nkurunziza's reelection to a third term in July 2015. Opponents view his reelection as unconstitutional and a violation of the landmark Arusha Accords, which were signed in 2000 and are credited with ending a decade-long ethnic conflict. The current standoff has caused growing ethnic polarization, although opposition to Nkurunziza also spans the ethnic divide. Like neighboring Rwanda, Burundi is majority ethnic Hutu, with minority Tutsi and Twa communities. During the 1990s conflict, Nkurunziza, a Hutu, led a predominantly Hutu rebel movement known as the CNDD-FDD, which has been the ruling party since he was first elected in 2005. Previously, the government and military elite were dominated by Tutsis, but the Arusha Accords mandated the ethnic integration of both.

Over the past year, Burundi has seen large urban protests; a failed coup attempt by senior military officers (including former comrades-in-arms of Nkurunziza); a violent government crackdown on the opposition, media, and civil society; hundreds of extrajudicial killings, including high-profile assassinations; and the flight of at least 260,000 refugees into neighboring countries. Opponents of Nkurunziza—including several former members of the president's inner circle and the army—have organized outside the country, and some have announced their intention to oust the president by force.

The political impasse could lead to renewed war and/or large-scale ethnic reprisals, possibly dragging in neighboring DRC and Rwanda. So far, a full-scale armed conflict has not emerged, but international efforts to forge a peace process have been halting, including an attempted mediation by the East African Community, an inter-governmental body. The government and the main exiled opposition coalition, known as the CNARED, have placed mutually-exclusive conditions on their participation in peace talks. The government also accuses Rwanda's Tutsi-led government—which criticized Nkurunziza's third-term—of backing rebels.

### U.S. Policy: Current Focus

**Support for Peace Talks.** U.S. officials condemned Nkurunziza's third term bid as a violation of the Arusha Accords. The Administration has called for talks among "all Burundian stakeholders" and "without preconditions." U.S. officials welcomed the latest attempt to start talks in Tanzania on May 21, despite protests from the CNARED and civil society groups that they were not included.

**Multilateral Contingency Planning.** In 2015, the Administration expressed support for African Union (AU) plans for a military intervention to protect civilians. The Burundian government objected to the idea, and the AU tacitly abandoned the concept in early 2016. The Administration has since urged the AU to deploy more human rights monitors (several dozen are on the ground, with plans for more, but their activities are reportedly constrained by Burundian government restrictions) and to engage in "contingency planning to counter potential mass atrocities." In the U.N. Security Council, U.S. diplomats have supported consideration of a U.N. police deployment. Some observers have called for MONUSCO to play a role in responding to Burundi's crisis.

**Sanctions and Aid Restrictions.** Executive Order 13712 (2015) authorizes financial sanctions against persons threatening peace and security or abusing human rights in Burundi. Eight individuals have been designated to date, from both the government and opposition. The Administration has suspended in-country security assistance programs, but Burundian troops deployed in U.S.-supported regional military operations in Somalia continue to receive U.S. equipment and support. The European Union also has imposed sanctions and has suspended all non-humanitarian aid; the AU announced its intention to impose sanctions in 2015 but has yet to do so.

## Rwanda

Rwanda has achieved political stability and substantial economic progress under the authoritarian leadership of President Paul Kagame. Political opposition and independent civil society activities are extremely limited, however, and some analysts question whether stability is sustainable in the absence of peaceful avenues for opposition. In January 2016, Kagame stated he would seek a third term in 2017—following a constitutional referendum in December 2015 that altered term limits. Concerns about Rwanda's regional activities have heightened in recent years due to Rwandan support for the M23 in DRC in 2012-2013 (prior to the group's defeat), reports that its security services have targeted exiled dissidents for assassination, and recent reports of Burundian rebel recruitment from refugee camps in Rwanda.

### U.S. Policy: Current Focus

**Domestic Political Conditions.** The Administration has expressed growing concern with political conditions in Rwanda since Kagame's reelection in 2010. U.S. officials criticized the conditions under which the 2015 referendum took place, expressed "disappointment" with Kagame's subsequent decision to seek a third term in office, and have urged Kagame to transfer power to "the next generation."

**Role in Regional Instability.** U.S. officials strongly criticized Rwanda's support for the M23 rebellion in eastern DRC. Between FY2012 and FY2014, the Administration suspended some bilateral security assistance, consistent with laws enacted by Congress restricting aid to Rwanda if it were found to be supporting DRC-based rebel groups, and restricting aid to any country supporting the use of child soldiers (citing the M23's use of child soldiers). After the M23's defeat, these restrictions were lifted. In Senate testimony in February 2016, U.S. Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Tom Perriello expressed concern regarding reports that Rwanda is "engaging in destabilizing behavior" in Burundi.

### Further CRS Reading

CRS Report R43166, *Democratic Republic of Congo: Background and U.S. Relations*; CRS Report R44018, *Burundi's Political Crisis*; and CRS Report R44402, *Rwanda: In Brief*.

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Alexis Arieff, Specialist in African Affairs

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