



Conflict Surge in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: Issues for Congress

January 28, 2025

A regional conflict and humanitarian emergency are escalating in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where the M23 rebel group has reportedly taken Goma (**Figure 1**), eastern DRC's largest city and a hub for humanitarian relief and UN peacekeeping. DRC's government called the assault on Goma a “[declaration of war](#)” by neighboring Rwanda, which has reportedly provided [extensive support to the M23](#). The leader of an M23-affiliated alliance has [asserted](#) plans to take DRC's capital, Kinshasa.

The rebel advance has [shuttered](#) Goma's international airport and displaced [hundreds of thousands of people](#); [nearly 2 million](#) Congolese were internally displaced due to the M23 conflict as of late 2024. [UN peacekeepers and soldiers from a regional stabilization mission](#) have been killed in the battle for Goma, along with the [military governor of North Kivu province](#).

Protests and looting erupted in Kinshasa (~1,000 miles away) on January 28, with protesters targeting UN sites and [foreign embassies](#) they accused of complicity with the M23. Protesters [set fires and attacked vehicles outside the U.S. embassy](#), and reportedly [breached the site](#) of a new U.S. embassy compound under construction.

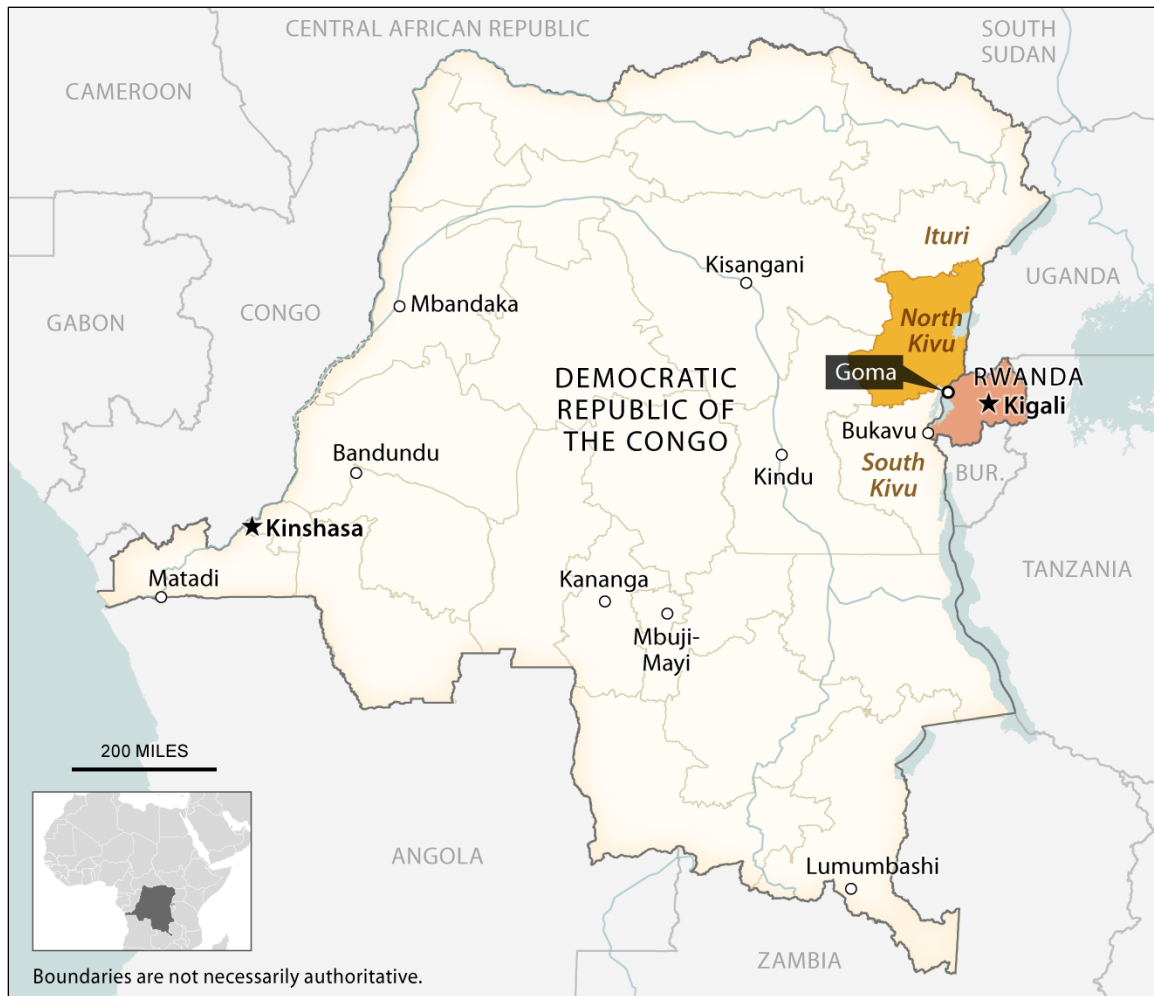
Secretary of State Marco Rubio called DRC's President Felix Tshisekedi on January 27 and “[condemned the assault on Goma by the Rwanda-backed M23](#),” calling for reviving Angolan-led peace talks between DRC and Rwanda. Several Members of Congress have issued statements, including the Senate Foreign Relations Committee [Chair](#) and [Ranking Member](#) and House Foreign Affairs Committee [Chair](#) and [Ranking Member](#).

Developments raise potential issues for Congress with regard to oversight and authorization and appropriation of funds for U.S. diplomatic security and engagement, sanctions, foreign assistance, and UN peacekeeping. The M23 crisis has more broadly posed complex dilemmas for U.S. policymakers balancing interests related to regional stability, humanitarian responses, DRC's [mineral wealth](#), development and security cooperation with Rwanda, and strategic competition.

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Figure 1. Map of DRC and the Sub-Region

Source: CRS Map Resources.

A Regional Conflict

UN investigators [reported](#) as of late 2024 that “at least” 3,000 to 4,000 Rwandan soldiers were deployed in eastern DRC and that “every M23 unit was supervised and supported” by Rwandan special forces. A U.S. representative to the UN [stated](#) on January 26 that Rwanda’s use of “advanced weaponry” and GPS jamming had “interfered with the humanitarian response, endangered [the UN peacekeeping operation] MONUSCO, and continued to endanger those fleeing the violence.” DRC officials have [likened](#) Rwanda’s involvement to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, [urging similar international sanctions](#).

Rwanda denies supporting the M23, which it characterizes as a “[Congolese problem](#)” spurred by DRC’s repression of its ethnic Tutsi minority and collusion with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a militia founded by perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Rwanda says its military maintains a “[sustained defensive posture](#)” due to fighting in DRC and FDLR threats.

The M23 and allied groups have reportedly asserted control over mining areas and trade. [Per UN experts](#), coltan (columbium-tantalum, a U.S.-designated “[conflict mineral](#)” and [critical mineral](#)) has been “fraudulently exported to Rwanda and mixed with Rwandan production” at a large scale over the past year.

Other African military forces are deployed in eastern DRC at the request of the Congolese government, raising the prospect of regional escalation:

- [SAMIDRC](#), a regional force with troops from South Africa, Malawi, and Tanzania, has deployed in and around Goma since late 2023 to help counter the M23.
- Burundi has reportedly [sent troops](#) to help fight the M23, under a bilateral agreement.
- [Uganda](#) and DRC are conducting joint operations against a [DRC-based affiliate of the Islamic State](#) (IS-DRC).

Context

Eastern DRC has been a nexus of conflicts and instability for decades. Among dozens of armed groups active in the area, the M23 appears to be the most [militarily capable](#), and IS-DRC (aka the Allied Democratic Forces, ADF) the [deadliest for civilians](#). The M23 conflict has [surged](#) since late 2024, when Angolan-mediated DRC-Rwanda talks [faltered](#), in part over Rwanda's demand that DRC engage in direct talks with the M23, which President Tshisekedi has [rejected](#).

Rwanda was a leading player in past conflicts in DRC, and tensions between the two countries run deep. The M23 first emerged in 2012, with [reported Rwandan support](#), and [briefly occupied Goma](#) before withdrawing under regional and international pressure. The group was nominally defeated in 2013 but reemerged in 2021-2022. In response, President Tshisekedi has imposed martial law in North Kivu and Ituri, acquired new weaponry, and hired [French and Romanian private military contractors](#). DRC's military has also reportedly [allied with local militias](#), including the FDLR.

Issues for Congress

Congress has [shaped U.S. approaches](#) to DRC and Rwanda through appropriations and other legislation, oversight, and engagement. Current events raise several potential issues:

Oversight of Diplomatic Security and Engagement. The Trump Administration, like its predecessor, has [criticized](#) M23 advances and Rwandan military support, and backed Angolan-mediated talks. The Biden Administration provided [diplomatic](#) and [intelligence](#) support to talks, and [brokered a 2023 ceasefire](#) and a mid-2024 "[humanitarian truce](#)" that led to an [Angolan-mediated ceasefire](#). Congress may oversee such engagement, along with U.S. diplomatic staffing and related security measures.

U.S. Sanctions. The M23 and FDLR are under U.S. sanctions, as are various linked entities and individuals, including a [Rwandan general and Congolese colonel](#). The Treasury Department issued additional sanctions designations [in July 2024](#). The State Department has [designated Rwanda](#) under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 (CSPA, Title IV of P.L. 110-457) for supporting the M23, triggering [security assistance restrictions](#).

U.S. Assistance. The M23 conflict has aggravated DRC's humanitarian emergency, among the [world's worst](#). The United States has been the [leading humanitarian donor](#), providing [over \\$916 million](#) in humanitarian assistance in FY2024. Separate U.S. bilateral aid for DRC totaled [\\$359 million in FY2023](#) (latest available). The FY2024 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act made funds available "to support security, stabilization, development, and democracy in Eastern DRC" (§7042[d] of Division F, P.L. 118-47). The United States allocated [\\$150 million](#) in bilateral aid for Rwanda in FY2023. The Trump Administration's foreign assistance "[pause](#)" may affect U.S. programs.

UN Peacekeeping. MONUSCO has [supported DRC's military in defending Goma](#), as part of its civilian protection [mandate](#). MONUSCO also is [authorized](#) to provide limited support to the SAMIDRC regional

operation. MONUSCO has [about 12,000](#) troops and police operating in North Kivu and Ituri provinces, and [suspended](#) a planned troop drawdown in mid-2024 due to the M23 conflict. The mission withdrew in 2024 from South Kivu province, where the M23 has since [moved to expand](#). The United States has been the [top contributor](#) to MONUSCO's budget, allocating an [estimated \\$287 million in FY2024](#).

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