

A terrifying escalation in Goma

by Will Devine

26 February 2025



Before M23 rebels took over the city, the population of Bukavu, in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, protested against the stance of foreign resources companies during the conflict.

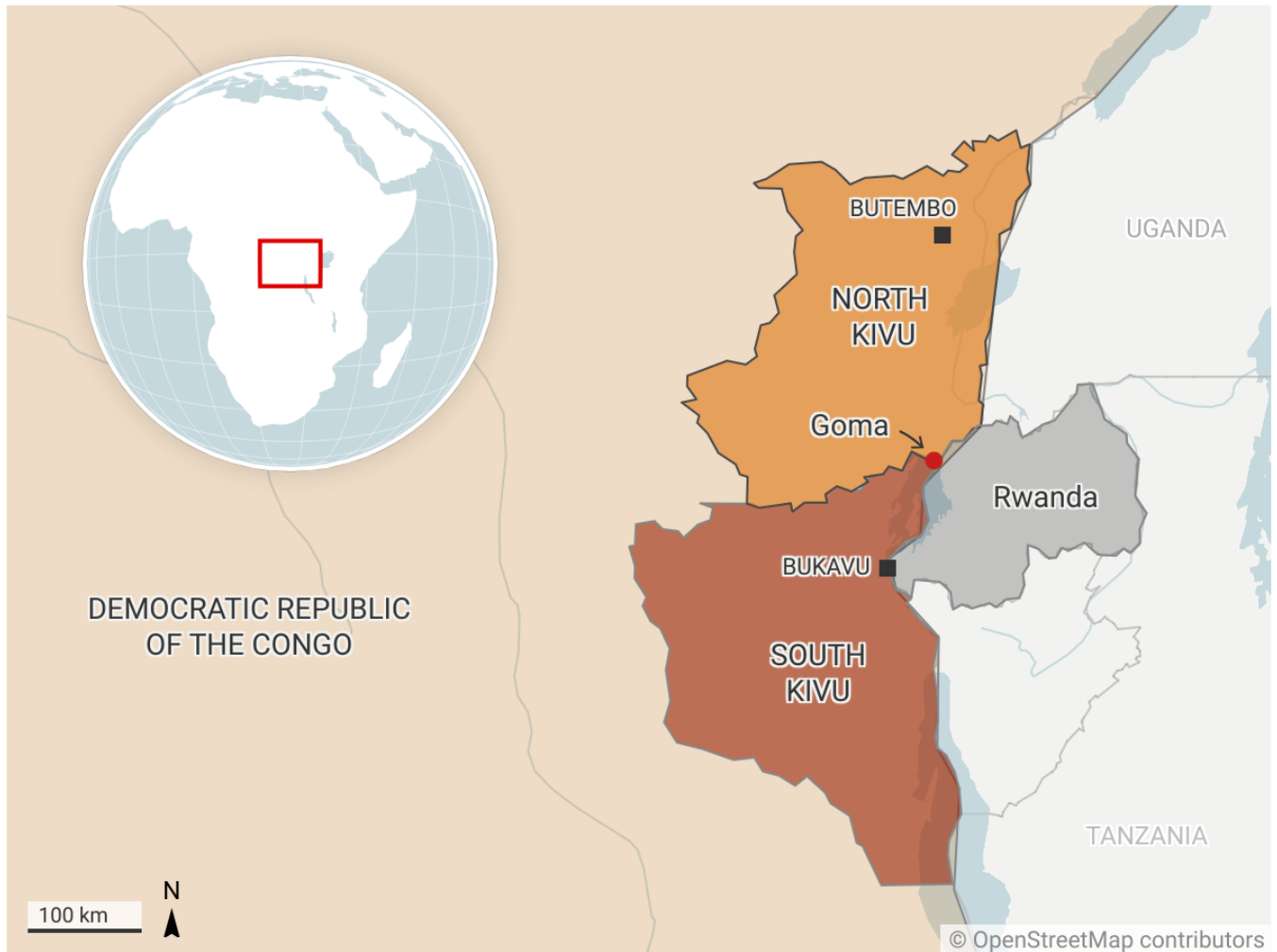
Photo Credit: [United Nations/Radio Okapi](#)

On the morning of 26 January 2025, rebels from the March 23 movement (known as M23) swept into the city of Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), further escalating a decades-long conflict. The fighting has been horrific, displacing 480,000 people and exacerbating an already catastrophic humanitarian situation. The United Nations Security Council has now **unanimously condemned** M23 for their advances into the eastern region of the DRC.

Thousands have also been killed, including 13 peacekeepers from the long- running United Nations Organization Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). The International Criminal Court is closely following events on the ground since the launch of a probe into **alleged war crimes** in October 2024.

Bodies are strewn across the city. Increasing violence and subsequent displacement are occurring in North and South Kivu provinces. The city of Goma sits on the northern end of Lake Kivu, close to the border of the two provinces and Rwanda. The situation is pushing the humanitarian response to the brink of collapse and civilians are paying the price. For example, recent outbreaks of monkeypox (Mpox) continue across the DRC, exacerbated by conditions including poor sanitation, a lack of access to healthcare and inadequate shelter.

In a matter of months, M23 rebels have advanced through new segments of North and South Kivu, recently capturing the **capital city of South Kivu, Bukavu**, located at the southern end of Lake Kivu, roughly 200km from Goma. In the last week, the fighting has expanded to come close to **Butembo in the north**.

Figure 1: Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Severe shortages of food, water and electricity have been experienced in the region. On 7 February, the United Nations [established a fact-finding mission](#) to detail the current situation following reports of conflict-related sexual violence and gender-based violence, summary executions, abductions, enforced disappearances, targeted attacks against human rights defenders, journalists, other civil society actors and peacekeepers, and the bombing of sites for displaced persons, hospitals and schools.

The latest escalation in the conflict has also disrupted key supply routes, cutting off flows of humanitarian assistance including food and medical supplies. According to the [United Nations](#), “heavy artillery shelling” has destroyed 70,000 emergency shelters around Goma, leaving some 250,000 internally displaced people without a roof over their heads.

A resources boom for rare-earth minerals is fueling the conflict. [A 2024 report](#) from the United Nations claimed that Rwanda had approximately 4,000 troops across the

DRC and profited from the vast deposits of minerals including coltan, diamonds, lithium, gold, copper, lithium and cobalt. That's why the European Union is facing pressure from both activists and Belgian members of the European parliament to scrap a **\$1.4 billion mineral resources** deal with Rwanda. However, with geopolitical competition from China and other countries, some experts have indicated that a suspension of the deal may not be that effective as other actors are ready to fill any void.

Previous efforts at peace have either failed or only resulted in short-term agreements. The DRC Government and M23 did sign **a peace treaty** in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2013 which initially promised hope. The group did cease hostilities temporarily, but in 2021 it returned with new attacks.

There have been two other major peace initiatives, led by regional players across Africa. The former **President of Kenya Uhuru Kenyatta** brought the parties together in 2022. The most recent process is known as the "**Luanda Roadmap**", led by Angola's President Joao Lourenco, and was supported by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Union, the US and the EU. Regrettably, Rwanda walked away from this process.

Rwanda's continued support for M23 (which is consistently denied) has rendered efforts to resolve the conflict futile. Rwanda has relied on plausible deniability when ceasefires are violated.

The international response to date has produced a **meeting on 8 February** with African heads of state in Dar-es Salaam, Tanzania, organised by the SADC and the East African Community. The final statement from the summit did affirm support for the territorial integrity of the DRC, and called for humanitarian access and corridors, but made no explicit reference to Rwanda or its complicity in the conflict.

Outside Africa, the US Treasury Department, when announcing **financial sanctions** on 20 February, said Rwanda's Minister of State for Regional Integration James Kabarebe, a former army chief, was central to his country's support for the M23 rebel group. However Rwanda's foreign ministry said the sanctions would not resolve the conflict, terming them "**unjustified and unfounded**". The following day the UK said there would be "consequences" for Rwanda over its role.

Meanwhile, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the G20 meeting said: "[China] firmly supports the African people in independently resolving African problems and opposes external interference in the internal affairs of African countries."

The risk of **wider regional conflict** is something not to be dismissed, given strategic competition for influence and resources, as well as the **high levels of involvement**

from the SADC states that contribute troops to MONUSCO.

According to the International Crisis Group's **analysis**, the risk that the fighting will become regional (reminiscent of the First and Second Congo War) is high. The Second Congo War, from 1998 to 2003, drew in multiple African countries and resulted in millions of deaths from violence, disease and starvation. This analysis is plausible, as it is the **stated aim** of the M23 rebels to march as far as the DRC capital, Kinshasa.

The fundamental question before mediators is what the international community can do, given the consistent breakdown in peace talks.

A multifaceted approach is needed to end hostilities in the region from numerous actors, including western states and regional players across Africa. There is an urgent need to address the role of Rwanda as an essential step towards lasting peace. The US, EU and Britain — which all have strong ties with Rwanda — must lead on this.

Additionally, the international community must increase its humanitarian assistance to fragile states, given recent pauses or reductions in funding from large bilateral donors to the DRC such as the United States. Without sustained diplomacy and peacebuilding alongside continuing development and humanitarian assistance, the security of millions is at stake. Furthermore, all parties to the conflict must allow the safe and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian assistance, the protection of civilians and the protection of aid workers.

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