

Western Aid and Agreements Allow Rwandan Forces and M23 to Invade, Occupy and Pillage Minerals in DR Congo

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The war in eastern DRC

The most significant armed conflict in the Eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) since the Congo Wars of 1996-2003 is being waged by a militia known as M23. This Tutsi-led armed rebel group presents itself as a group of disgruntled Congolese soldiers who were treated poorly during the reintegration of armed militias into the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) in 2009. While this is true, more importantly it is becoming apparent that they are part of a long-term plan by Rwanda and allied forces to take control of the DRC and its resources, threatening to turn their grievances and ambitions into a major regional war.

M23 began operating in the mineral-rich province of Nord-Kivu Province in 2012, and managed to take the large city of Goma in November 2012. The Congolese government subsequently agreed to negotiate with M23 concerning their grievances about the reintegration process, and international actors put pressure on Rwanda to call off the invasion. Soon thereafter M23 announced a ceasefire, and the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) and UN troops took back the city before the end of the year. Nothing much was heard from M23 for almost a decade.

In November of 2021, after the reintegration process had once again stalled out, M23 began attacking the FARDC in what appeared at first to be a repeat of the 2012 scenario. This time, however, their objectives, allies and supporters became much more clear. They moved from mine site to mine site in various territories of North Kivu Province, terrorizing and driving out the local populations (who fled to IDP camps) and taking over control of the mines. Furthermore, the timing of the attacks by M23 against the Congolese army appear to be linked to agreements by the DRC to collaborate with Uganda in fighting another militia operating inside northeastern DRC (the Allied Democratic Forces or ADF), and to collaborate with Burundi in fighting the Tutsi-led RED-Tabara rebel group in Burundi and southeastern DRC.¹ Both of these agreements threatened Rwanda's ability to control the geopolitical situation on the ground in these neighboring countries of the African Great Lakes region.

¹ <https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/The-Resurgence-of-the-M23-EN.pdf>

The United Nations Security Council's Group of Experts on the DRC have documented beyond a doubt that Rwanda is funding and participating in the incursions by M23.^{2,3,4,5,6,7} Worse yet, the US, UK and countries in the EU have been providing massive amounts of aid to Rwanda, which has made it possible for them to keep the M23 supported and well-armed. See sections below (in this report) for details on Western aid to Rwanda.

At the same time, the DRC's armed forces have been unable to stop the M23 for at least two apparent reasons. First, the FARDC are disorganized, unmotivated, corrupt, filled with competing factions, and rely on military assistance from an equally disorganized group of volunteer militias and citizens called the Wazalendo. Second, the M23 has been well-equipped and supplied, and well-trained and organized this time around, thanks to Rwanda.

The primary actors inside DRC

M23 (Mouvement du 23 Mars): a rebel force of Tutsis currently living in DRC but allied with Rwanda, fighting alongside the Rwandan regular army to take over parts of DRC; they formed in 2009 when they felt that a reintegration process (bringing former militia members into the DRC's army) didn't treat them fairly. They took over Goma briefly in late 2012, but left when the international community pressured Rwanda to stop supporting them – something that has not happened effectively this time.

AFC (Congo River Alliance): an alliance which claims to have 17 members (many unnamed militias), the most notable of which is the M23 rebel group. M23 is under the public leadership of Corneille Nangaa, the former head of the DRC's electoral commission under Joseph Kabila. He was charged with embezzling funds and rigging the DRC's national elections in 2018, giving the presidency to Felix Tshisekedi in return for sharing power with Kabila's party. President Tshisekedi has alleged that Joseph Kabila is the covert leader of the AFC group. After forming the AFC and announcing their goal as taking over the government of DRC, Nangaa was tried in absentia and sentenced to death for treason in August of 2024. (He has not been detained as of this writing.)

RDF (Rwandan Defense Forces): the national army of Rwanda, under the leadership of President Paul Kagame

RED-Tabara: Tutsi rebels in Burundi who are allied with M23 and Rwanda; they are trying to take over parts of Burundi as well as South Kivu Province, DRC (south of Bukavu)

² <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2022/479>

³ <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2022/967>

⁴ <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2023/431>

⁵ <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2023/990>

⁶ <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2024/432>

⁷ <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2024/969>

Banyamulenge: Tutsis who live in DRC (primarily in South Kivu Province) and are allied with Rwanda and the M23

FARDC (Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo): the Congolese regular army, made up of a conglomeration of many previous militia members, some of whom do not have a strong allegiance to the current national government of the DRC

Wazalendo (Patriots): a term used to refer to the various small militias and other unorganized individuals who join with the FARDC to fight against the M23

FDLR (Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda): a rebel force of Hutus originally from Rwanda, who are currently allied with the FARDC against the M23 and Rwanda

FDNB (Force de Défense Nationale du Burundi): the regular army of Burundi, who are fighting fiercely alongside the FARDC because Burundi fears Rwanda will invade them, too

Uganda: Uganda's government and army are playing a double role. On the one hand, they are formally collaborating with the FARDC to fend off an Islamist militia called the ADF that is killing villagers and taking over mine sites in both northeastern DRC (Ituri and Nord-Kivu provinces) and western Uganda. On the other hand, Ugandan President Museveni and his son, a military commander, have strong ties to Rwanda's President Kagame, and are currently giving speeches in support of Rwanda's actions inside the DRC. It is likely they would fight against the FARDC if called on to do so by Rwandan President Kagame.

The Invasion of Goma

After two years of taking territory in North Kivu Province, in January of 2025 the M23 encircled and then took control of Goma. Goma is a city of nearly 2 million people, in addition to at least 500,000 recently displaced people, and is the administrative head of the province and the de facto commercial and military hub of the northeastern region of DRC. The FARDC and allied militias, mercenaries and UN troops fought back briefly, then laid down their arms and ran. Some 3,000 or more people are estimated to have been killed in the process of taking control of the city, based on the count of bodies requiring burial. The M23 has set up administrative controls over the city, and has assured the population that they will be well cared for. The truth is that the city is dysfunctional, with food shortages and exorbitant prices, water and electricity outages, half-a-million internally displaced people living with host families or in crowded informal camps, overflowing hospitals, a non-functional airport, continual surveillance and

extra-judicial arrests, no free press or freedom of speech, and a mass atrocity in which some 165 women in prison were first raped and then burned alive.^{8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14}

The invasion of Bukavu

After solidifying their hold on Goma, the M23 and AFC next headed south into South Kivu Province. During the first two weeks of February, 2025, people in Bukavu followed the situation closely on local news channels and were very scared, believing that an invasion was imminent. Nobel Prize Laureate Denis Mukwege, who has been outspoken against the actions of M23 and Rwanda, reportedly left town for his own safety. Rumors of M23 spies infiltrating the city prevented people from speaking and planning openly. Disinformation was rampant on social media. Many people stocked up on food and water so they could stay inside when the armed invaders entered the city – a process made more difficult by the fact that many shopkeepers closed their shops against looting, and even moved their provisions to hidden locations.¹⁵

On 03 February, the Congo River Alliance announced a ceasefire and said that they had “no intention of taking control of Bukavu or other localities”.¹⁶ But after taking a couple of days to regroup, the M23 resumed fighting their way south along National Route 2, heading south from Goma towards the city of Bukavu, a major regional hub in Sud-Kivu Province. Despite facing armed resistance from the FARDC, the volunteer militia Wazalendo, and the regular army of neighboring Burundi, they were able to take a series of towns as they headed south, including Kinyezire, Mukwinja, the mining town of Nyabibwe, Ihusi, and the territorial seat, Kalehe Centre.^{17, 18} They were also seen in the eastern highlands of Kahuzi Biega National Park, which has many lucrative mine sites.¹⁹

⁸ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/great-lakes/democratic-republic-congo/fall-drcs-goma-urgent-action-needed-avert-regional-war>

⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/rwandas-kagame-says-he-agrees-with-us-need-ceasefire-congo-2025-01-29/>

¹⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/29/rwanda-backed-m23-strengthens-its-control-over-drcs-goma>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/05/democratic-republic-congo-goma-women-raped-burned-death-prison-m23-rebels-rwanda>

¹² <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-deaths-near-3-000-in-fighting-for-drc--goma/7964371.html>

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/06/a-crying-need-goma-hospitals-plead-for-blood-donors-after-m23-assault>

¹⁴ <https://actualite.cd/2025/02/05/guerre-du-m23rdf-goma-lunpc-sinquiete-de-la-securite-des-journalistes-et-de-la-violation>

¹⁵ Information in this paragraph are from personal communications with people in Bukavu over several days.

¹⁶ <https://x.com/LawrenceKanyuka/status/1886488350393049173>

¹⁷ <https://actualite.cd/2025/02/05/rdc-le-m23-prend-le-controle-de-la-cite-de-nyabibwe-au-sud-kivu>

¹⁸ <https://www.theafricareport.com/375539/are-the-rwanda-backed-m23-rebels-heading-south/>

¹⁹ <https://www.corrienteshoy.com/internacionales/la-guerrilla-del-m-23-toma-un-aeropuerto-clave-del-congo-mientras-su-presidente-busca-ayuda-exterior.htm>

Eventually the M23 captured the military base and airport at Kavumu, just north of Bukavu. From there it was a march straight into Bukavu, which they invaded on 16 February.^{20,21,22} Soldiers in the FARDC and Wazalendo fled Bukavu in advance of M23's entry into the city, supposedly to prevent civilians from the type of urban warfare that caused so many deaths in Goma. As of this writing, there is a tense calm in Bukavu, following several days of chaos and looting. Citizens are staying home; they are exhausted, and just hope that the fighting will stop and the city will be administered in a way that protects security and commerce.

What will M23, AFC and Rwanda do next?

Burundi's president has said he fears that Rwanda will invade Burundi shortly²³, and thus is interested in establishing a close coalition with DRC to stop them. He had already closed Burundi's land border with Rwanda in January of 2024, accusing Rwanda of supporting the RED-Tabara militia in Burundi.²⁴ On 25 December 2024, Rwanda's foreign minister accused Burundi of collaborating with "genocidal forces" in the eastern DRC (by which he means the Hutu militia, FDLR). Some analysts believe that there is a real risk that Rwanda will attempt to topple the Hutu-dominated government of Burundi.²⁵

Related to this possibility, there are Rwandan allies that operate to the east and south of Bukavu. The Banyamulenge population living in South Kivu Province south of Bukavu are Tutsis who feel marginalized by other Congolese, and are supportive of the Rwandan and M23 invasion. In addition, RED-Tabara, a Tutsi rebel group operating across the border to destabilize Burundi's Hutu-led government, but taking refuge in DRC, is said to be prepared to link up with M23 as they come down from the north.²⁶ Working together, it is not out of the question that Rwanda, M23, RED-Tabara and interested members of the Banyamulenge population could take over Burundi, much as Kagame's forces did to Rwanda's Hutu-led government in 1994.

The Congo River Alliance – the political alliance including M23 and other militias, led by a Congolese politician who wants to see DRC President Felix Tshisekedi ousted – have announced that they plan to march across the DRC and take the national capital, Kinshasa.^{27,28} At first

²⁰ <https://www.theafricareport.com/375539/are-the-rwanda-backed-m23-rebels-heading-south/>

²¹ <https://actualite.cd/2025/02/05/rdc-le-m23-prend-le-controle-de-la-cite-de-nyabibwe-au-sud-kivu>

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=og3rc1NCLY>

²³ <https://actualite.cd/2025/02/01/burundi-ndayishimiye-accuse-le-rwanda-de-destabiliser-la-region-et-evoque-lechec-de-son>

²⁴ <https://actualite.cd/2025/02/01/burundi-le-rwanda-prepare-quelque-chose-contre-nous-nous-ne-nous-laisserons-pas-faire>

²⁵ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/great-lakes/democratic-republic-congo/fall-drcs-goma-urgent-action-needed-avert-regional-war>

²⁶ Radio Maendeleo broadcast from Bukavu, 20 January 2025

²⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/rebels-enter-centre-congos-goma-after-claiming-capture-city-2025-01-27/>

²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/30/drc-leader-calls-for-military-recruits-rwanda-backed-rebels-advance>

glance, this seems preposterous, given how large the Congo is and how small Rwanda is. But could it be that they are following a playbook that has already succeeded once before?

An estimated six million people died in the large wars which followed on the heels of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. In the First Congo War (October 1996 to May 1997), Rwandan and Ugandan forces joined with Congolese rebels, forming the *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre* (AFDL), and marched from the eastern border all the way across the country to the capital, Kinshasa, in the west. They deposed the ruler Mobutu Sese Seko and replaced him with the Congolese rebel leader, Laurent Kabila. The Second Congo War (August 1998 to July 2003) erupted soon thereafter when Kabila ordered the armed forces of Rwanda and Uganda, his former allies, to leave the Congo. They then organized rebel groups to try to overthrow Kabila. The Second Congo War eventually drew in nine African nations. In 2001, during the war, Laurent Kabila was assassinated by his bodyguard, and replaced by his son, Joseph Kabila. This war was finally ended with a negotiated peace treaty (2002) and the establishment of a Transitional Government (2003).

Following the same playbook?

This is not ancient history. Joseph Kabila, the son, continued to rule until recently. In 2019 he was finally replaced by Felix Tshisekedi after an election widely viewed as rigged. A deal was cut in which Tshisekedi was allowed to take office (although opposition leader Martin Fayulu received an estimated 65% of the votes), as long as he would continue to collaborate with Joseph Kabila. Tshisekedi agreed, but later backed out of the deal – and is currently looking for a way to change the Congolese constitution so he can remain in office after his second term ends in 2028. Meanwhile, Corneille Nangaa – the head of the Congolese national electoral commission (CENI) under Kabila, who helped broker this deal between Kabila and Tshisekedi – is now the chief Congolese political spokesman for the Congo River Alliance which is working with M23 and Rwanda, against the Congolese government currently in power. If we replace the names of the various actors, we could have a scenario similar to that of 1996-1997 in which Rwanda and Congolese rebel allies fought their way across the entire country, took the capital, Kinshasa, and installed the head of the Congolese rebels (Laurent Kabila then; either Corneille Nangaa or more likely Joseph Kabila now) as president. In fact, current President Tshisekedi has said publicly that he believes Joseph Kabila is behind the current power grab.

Is Rwanda behind the invasion and occupation of eastern DRC or not?

Rwanda continuously denies that they are supporting the M23 or invading the DRC. Rwandan President Kagame says that the war with M23 is an internal (domestic) DRC matter that must be resolved between the two parties to the conflict (M23 and DRC). He claims that DRC must enter into dialogue with M23 (and not Rwanda) if they want to negotiate a peaceful resolution of their differences.

At the same time, President Kagame and other Rwandan government spokespersons also explain that the reason for the war is to protect ethnic Tutsis living in DRC from maltreatment,

and to defend Rwanda against any possible incursions by the FDLR, a rebel force composed of Hutus who fled Rwanda after the Rwandan Patriotic Front (a Tutsi rebel group led by current Rwandan President Paul Kagame) toppled the elected government and took over Rwanda in 1994.

These contradictory claims have been thoroughly refuted by eyewitness accounts and other credible sources, most importantly the UN Security Council's Group of Experts on the DRC. Their reports to the Security Council in 2022²⁹, 2023³⁰ and 2024³¹ and Briefings in January 2025³² document the arms, other military equipment, supplies, training, coordination and troops on the ground that have been coming across the border from Rwanda to support the M23's efforts.

More recently, documentation of deaths of Rwandan military personnel has further showed that Rwanda has boots on the ground in DRC. According to an article in The Guardian, "Satellite imagery of one military cemetery in the Rwandan capital of Kigali indicates at least 600 graves have been dug since the M23 – backed by RDF troops – restarted operations within DRC three years ago" while "Two high-ranking intelligence officials with knowledge of the RDF say the true losses sustained by Rwanda probably run into the 'thousands'".³³

All these reports, and the data they are based on, conclusively demonstrate that Rwanda has been the primary driving force behind M23's operations on the ground in DRC since 2021, as well as in the earlier takeover of Goma in 2012. The 2012 invasion was resolved when the international community threatened to cut off aid to Rwanda if they didn't make the M23 leave Goma. Rwanda did this, and M23 left the city. This time around, the international community has asked Rwanda repeatedly to stop the invasion, but has not yet been willing to stop aiding Rwanda. Consequently Rwanda has found it can ignore them. As recently as mid-February, despite many threats from European countries and the UK, Kagame vowed to "spit in the face" of anyone trying to punish him for these incursions.³⁴

What are the reasons for this invasion of DRC?

Despite talking about the need to protect ethnic Tutsis living in DRC from maltreatment, and to defend Rwanda against any possible incursions by the FDLR, neither Rwanda nor the M23 has done anything to better the conditions of Tutsis in DRC. In fact, ethnic tensions are much worse now due to Congolese anger over the war led primarily by Tutsi forces. Furthermore, neither

²⁹ <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2022/479> ; <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2022/967>

³⁰ <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2023/431> ; <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2023/990>

³¹ <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2024/432> ; <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2024/969>

³² <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/01/democratic-republic-of-congo-briefing.php> ;

<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/01/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-briefing-3.php>

³³ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/feb/07/democratic-republic-congo-drc-paul-kagame-m23-rebels-goma-rwanda-troops-dying-denials>

³⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/au-summit-unlikely-make-progress-congo-face-rwanda-defiance-2025-02-14/>

Rwanda nor the M23 has targeted the FDLR in any substantial way, despite saying that they are the primary threat to Rwandan security.³⁵

So what have they been doing? M23 and their Rwandan backers have been capturing mine sites after mine sites first in Nord-Kivu Province, and now in Sud-Kivu Province. They do this by entering the territories, terrorizing the population around the mines so they either flee or comply, and then installing their soldiers to control the minerals extraction and export process. These are not large-scale industrial mines controlled by large companies; they are mostly “artisanal” mines, dug by hand by local residents – sometimes including children. The armed forces that take over charge a “tax” on all the minerals that are exported for sale. Citing reports of the UN Security Council’s Group of Experts in the DRC, a map presented in The Africa Report shows some 40 mine sites under the control of M23 already in 2023.³⁶

The ore from these mines is then carried across the border into Rwanda, where it is processed and sold on the global market as a product of Rwanda. This is important to buyers in the West because it is problematic for them to purchase “conflict minerals” or minerals mined by children, widely associated with DRC. The US Dodd-Frank Act and the EU’s Conflict Minerals Regulation both require difficult, time-consuming and expensive reporting for tin, tungsten, tantalum, and gold (the so-called 3TG minerals) that come from the DRC or other conflict-affected and high-risk areas. It is much easier if these minerals can be purchased instead from Rwanda, and certified by the International Tin Supply Chain Initiative (ITSCI).

Unfortunately, a detailed investigation by the NGO Global Witness found that the ITSCI certification process has been widely corrupted, and is used to launder minerals from DRC into Rwanda with false certifications.³⁷ Global Witness found that tech giants Apple, Tesla and Intel, among others, used this system to obtain minerals. The Congolese government has filed charges against Apple based on their purchase of minerals certified by this discredited system, and are currently in court in France and in Belgium.³⁸

M23 and Rwanda’s involvement in obtaining minerals has been well-documented in the coltan mining region around Rubaya, Nord-Kivu Province. According to an article in The Africa Report, “Since it took over the mining town on 30 April, the M23 has controlled ‘the monthly trade and transport of 120 tonnes of coltan, earning at least \$800,000 a month’ by imposing taxes on miners and traders, according to the latest report by the United Nations Group of Experts on the situation in eastern DRC, published 7 January.”³⁹ This practice, repeated elsewhere across the region they have occupied, is important to the M23 because it provides funding for them,

³⁵ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/great-lakes/democratic-republic-congo/fall-drcs-goma-urgent-action-needed-avert-regional-war>

³⁶ <https://www.theafricareport.com/375904/drc-rwanda-rubaya-coltan-mine-at-the-heart-of-m23-financing/>

³⁷ <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/natural-resource-governance/itsci-laundromat/>

³⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/20/why-has-drc-filed-criminal-charges-against-apple-over-conflict-minerals>

³⁹ <https://www.theafricareport.com/375904/drc-rwanda-rubaya-coltan-mine-at-the-heart-of-m23-financing/>

and to Rwanda because it ensures a steady stream of raw materials for their lucrative minerals processing sector. This is particularly important now, as DRC's Minister of Mines is talking about regulating their own mineral supply more closely and developing processing facilities inside DRC to create jobs and increase the value of the products sold.⁴⁰

What is the role of Western countries in this minerals trade?

The desire to extract minerals from DRC should not be surprising. The US and other Western countries are determined to obtain the critical minerals needed to outcompete China in the transition to an all-electric economy. Tantalum (from coltan), for example, allows electrical charges to be easily stored in small capacitors; it is essential for electronics in cell phones, automobiles, satellites, aerospace, military equipment and medical devices.⁴¹ DRC is by far the world's largest producer of cobalt, accounting for roughly 73 percent of global production in 2023.⁴² The DRC is also the world's biggest tantalum producer, producing nearly 41 percent of the world's mined supply in 2023 (mostly from coltan).⁴³ In addition, Rwanda is the world's second biggest tantalum producer, but it's likely that much of this came from DRC through the illegal trafficking and falsification of certifications discussed above.⁴⁴ In addition to cobalt and coltan (tantalum), mines in DRC also produce substantial amounts of gold, diamonds (gem and industrial quality), and high-grade copper.⁴⁵ In fact, just overtook Peru as the world's second-largest producer of copper.⁴⁶

China has a large and relatively transparent relationship with DRC in the minerals sector, allowing it to obtain the minerals it needs directly from the source, in return for various infrastructure and other development assistance. Western countries, on the other hand, tend to operate directly through their corporate interests, facilitated by various government policies and interventions. There are a number of industrial-scale mining companies from Europe, Canada and the US operating in the DRC. However, coltan is generally produced through artisanal mining, making the relationships between producers and buyers more complicated. As mentioned above, there are laws and processes that were developed to prevent supply chains of minerals obtained through the use of militias, forced labor and child labor, but these processes have been corrupted to ensure a profitable flow of minerals – mainly through Rwanda.

⁴⁰ <https://actualite.cd/2025/02/02/mining-indaba-le-ministre-kizito-pakabomba-plaide-pour-une-transformation-de-lindustrie>

⁴¹ <https://investingnews.com/what-is-coltan-mineral-uses/>

⁴² <https://investingnews.com/where-is-cobalt-mined/>

⁴³ <https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/top-5-tantalum-mining-countries-updated-2024>

⁴⁴ <https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/top-5-tantalum-mining-countries-updated-2024>

⁴⁵ <https://pubs.usgs.gov/myb/vol3/2019/myb3-2019-congo-kinshasa.pdf>

⁴⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/congo-emerges-chinas-strategic-copper-supplier-andy-home-2025-02-17/>

Agreement between EU and Rwanda on Minerals Supply Chain

In February 2024, the EU and Rwanda signed a "Memorandum of Understanding on Sustainable Raw Materials Value Chains"⁴⁷, agreeing to cooperate in five areas:

- Integration of sustainable raw materials value chains;
- Sustainable and responsible production of critical and strategic raw materials, including increased due diligence and traceability, fighting against illegal trafficking of raw materials, and alignment with international Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) standards;
- Funding for infrastructure for the development of raw material value chains, and improving the investment climate;
- Research and innovation and sharing of knowledge and technologies; and
- Building capacity to enforce relevant rules, and increase training and skills related to the critical and strategic raw materials value chain.

Despite the flowery language about traceability and international standards, critics of the agreement say that it will exacerbate the conflict in eastern DRC. Emmanuel Umpula Nkumba, executive director of African Natural Resources Watch, has been quoted as saying, "The deal sends the message that the EU, because it needs access to minerals, can go beyond the principles of human rights."⁴⁸ More than simply encouraging the extraction of critical minerals through Rwanda, the EU has already committed to giving Rwanda 900 million euros to develop its infrastructure in raw materials extraction, health and climate resilience.⁴⁹ From what we know about how and where these minerals are obtained, it is entirely possible that the EU will become complicit in the conflict in DRC as they ignore the hostile role of Rwanda in order to satisfy their own interests in obtaining critical minerals.

Is Rwanda also receiving financial aid that they use to support the invasion of DRC?

Since the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took over Rwanda in 1994, Western aid to the country has been significant and growing. While it's difficult to obtain clear estimates of military versus non-military assistance from various countries and international institutions, the following numbers can be found:

- Annual aid from the US grew from \$54 M in 1994 to \$234 M in 2020⁵⁰
- Total aid from the US between 2001-2024: \$3.58 billion, ranging from \$37 M to \$269 M per year⁵¹

⁴⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_822

⁴⁸ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-rwanda-minerals-agreement-coltan-ore-mining-conflict-smuggling-rubaya-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-paul-kagame/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/02/pressure-grows-on-eu-to-freeze-minerals-deal-with-rwanda-over-drc-fighting>

⁵⁰ https://data.usaid.gov/Administration-and-Oversight/U-S-Overseas-Loans-and-Grants-Greenbook-Data/7cnw-pw8v/about_data - From USAID data download in January 2025; webpages now taken offline by the current US administration

⁵¹ <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/rwanda/2023/obligations/0>

- Average annual aid given to Rwanda by the top 10 donors (globally) in 2020 and 2021 was \$1.24 billion per year, by the following (from highest to lowest): the World Bank's International Development Association (\$409 M), United States (\$174 M), IMF (\$141 M), Global Fund (\$95 M), African Development Fund (\$89 M), Germany (\$80 M), EU Institutions (\$71 M), Japan (\$63 M), France (\$62 M), and Belgium (\$56 M)⁵²
- Rwandan annual military expenditures (documented by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) have risen steadily from 2005 (\$40 M) through 2021 (\$180 M)⁵³

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) data starting in 1997 indicate that 92% of the incidents of violence in unilateral deployments that the Rwandan military launched were in DRC.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, bilateral and multilateral deployments that Rwandan forces have been paid to participate in include Central African Republic, South Sudan and Sudan, and most recently Mozambique; each of these efforts would have its own separate budget. In addition to the difficulty in obtaining reliable data on aid from donor countries that ends up being directed to military purposes, it is basically impossible to document what actually happens to the military budget, even when it is given for specific deployments. For example, in a controversial move, the EU (at the urging of France, and with the support of Portugal and Italy) directed 20 M euros to Rwanda in 2022 for military protection of French oil company TotalEnergy's oilfields in Cabo Delgado Province, Mozambique, and another 20 M euros in late 2024.^{55,56} The budget for Rwandan forces to collaborate with Mozambique in fighting against Islamist rebel groups has been estimated at \$250 M for 2,000 troops in 2023.⁵⁷ That troop level has now risen to 4,000. In June 2024 it was reported that Rwanda was paying \$10 M per month for its troops in the country.⁵⁸

Although the EU directed a total of 40 M euros to Rwanda for this operation, Rwandan President Kagame has also said that the operation was largely self-funded⁵⁹ – which could mean through revenues obtained by independent business activities in the region, or perhaps through revenues from “mercenary” contracts with TotalEnergy to protect their investments in the oilfields. Thus we don't really know how much money the Rwandan forces received from

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https://public.tableau.com/views/OECDACAidataglacebyrecipient_new/Recipients?:embed=y&:display_count=y&:showTabs=y&:toolbar=no&:showVizHome=no

⁵³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?end=2023&locations=RW&start=1973&view=chart>

⁵⁴ <https://acleddata.com/2024/09/27/the-rwanda-defence-force-rdf-operations-abroad-signal-a-shift-in-rwandas-regional-standing/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/11/18/european-peace-facility-council-tops-up-support-to-the-deployment-of-the-rwanda-defence-force-to-fight-terrorism-in-cabo-delgado/>

⁵⁶ <https://democracyinfrica.org/the-bad-politics-behind-the-new-eu-e20-million-for-rwanda/>

⁵⁷ <https://acleddata.com/2024/09/27/the-rwanda-defence-force-rdf-operations-abroad-signal-a-shift-in-rwandas-regional-standing/>

⁵⁸ <https://www.africaintelligence.com/southern-africa-and-islands/2024/06/28/rwandan-firms-flourish-in-cabo-delgado-thanks-to-totalenergies,110252540-gra>

⁵⁹ <https://acleddata.com/2024/09/27/the-rwanda-defence-force-rdf-operations-abroad-signal-a-shift-in-rwandas-regional-standing/>

their Mozambique operations from 2017 through the present. Neither do we know how the funds received were spent, or even where the troops were deployed, as there is no transparency, nor are there mechanisms to enforce any agreements.

Other European countries (Sweden, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands) were against financing the Rwandan military, raising concerns about the ‘connection between the two theaters’, meaning that there may be Rwandan troop movement between Mozambique and eastern DRC, in support of M23. In fact, when the UN Security Council’s Group of Experts checked into the situation, they found that there was much overlap in the command of troops. Their June 2024 report documented 3 high-level commanders involved in both DRC and Mozambique (Major-General NKubito, Brigadier General Pascal Muhizi, and Major-General Alexis Kagame, the current reserve force chief of staff).⁶⁰ Furthermore, current Joint Task Force commander of the Rwanda Security Force mission (for Mozambique), Emmy Ruvusha, was mentioned in the June 2023 UN Security Council report⁶¹ as commanding RDF (Rwandan) operations in Eastern DRC. In short, there are reasons to believe that funding the Rwandan mission in Mozambique on behalf of TotalEnergy also supports the current minerals grab in DRC.

Recent threats to cut off aid

As the conflict in DRC worsens, certain Western countries are beginning to give lip service to cutting off their longtime support for Rwanda, and some parties in the EU are reconsidering the signing of their minerals agreement with Rwanda.

Belgium: According to The Guardian on 02 February 2025, “The international community must consider how to respond, because declarations have not been enough,” said Belgium’s foreign minister, Bernard Quintin, last week during a visit to Morocco. “We have the levers and we have to decide how to use them.” Diplomatic sources said Belgium had pressed for a suspension of the EU-Rwanda minerals agreement at several levels, including at a meeting of EU foreign ministers last Monday.”⁶² On 15 February 2025, Belgium strongly condemned the offensive on Bukavu and called for the withdrawal of the M23 and Rwandan troops. Brussels also urged the parties to engage in regional mediation and dialogue, while affirming that measures to pressure Rwanda were being considered with Belgium’s European and international partners.⁶³

On 18 February 2025, Rwanda announced that it was suspending its development cooperation with Belgium, saying that Belgium had made a political decision to choose sides in the conflict,

⁶⁰ <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2024/432>

⁶¹ <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2023/431>

⁶² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/02/pressure-grows-on-eu-to-freeze-minerals-deal-with-rwanda-over-drc-fighting>

⁶³ <https://actualite.cd/2025/02/15/rdc-macron-appelle-tshisekedi-exige-le-retrait-immmediat-du-m23-de-bukavu-et-de-laeroport>

which Rwanda found disrespectful and unacceptable.⁶⁴ It is more likely that Belgium had attached conditions for further aid, which Rwanda was unwilling to accept.

European Union: On 13 February 2025 the European Parliament urged the European Union to freeze direct budget support for Rwanda until it stops supporting the M23 rebels and allows humanitarian access to areas of the DRC they have occupied. The parliament also called for the suspension of a memorandum of understanding between Rwanda and the EU that aims to support Rwandan supplies of strategic minerals, until Rwanda stops interfering in Congo.

"MEPs strongly condemn the occupation of Goma and other territories in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) by M23 rebels and the Rwandan defence forces as an (unacceptable) breach of the DRC's sovereignty and territorial integrity," the body said in a statement. The parliament adopted the resolution in a 443-4 vote. Another 48 lawmakers abstained.⁶⁵ It remains to be seen whether the European Commission will follow through with this resolution.

France: France supported two emergency meetings at the United Nations Security Council, where it condemned the role of the M23 and the Rwandan army and pushed the EU to strongly condemn the rebel offensive and demand an immediate ceasefire. The French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs reminded the French Senate that the M23 offensive constituted an attack on Congolese sovereignty, then traveled to Kinshasa to discuss how to end the conflict. French Senator Christophe-André Frassa denounced the ongoing passivity of the international community, and the absence of sanctions against supporters of the M23. He pointed out the illegal exploitation of Congolese resources, recalling that Rwanda is a major exporter of coltan even though this strategic mineral does not exist on its soil.⁶⁶

On 31 January, France proposed a "draft resolution to the U.N. Security Council that aims to 'increase the pressure on Rwanda' to withdraw its troops from eastern DRC, French U.N. Ambassador Nicolas de Riviere said. Once the draft is circulated to the 15 members, the council will then negotiate the language before a vote is scheduled. 'I hope this resolution can be adopted soon,' he said, adding that he did not think the resolution would threaten any sanctions at this stage."⁶⁷ In mid-February, Cédric Perrin, Chairman of France's Senate Foreign Affairs, Defense and Armed Forces Committee, called on all parties to step up initiatives to halt the advance of the M23 rebels as they continue their offensive in South Kivu province.⁶⁸ Then,

⁶⁴ <https://x.com/rwandamfa/status/1891906876197286195?s=48>

⁶⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/european-parliament-seeks-freeze-eu-aid-rwanda-over-congo-conflict-2025-02-13/>

⁶⁶ <https://actualite.cd/2025/01/30/m23rdf-goma-la-diplomatie-francaise-peut-elle-peser-face-lescalade-lest-queles-actions>

⁶⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-propose-un-resolution-increase-pressure-rwanda-over-drc-conflict-2025-01-31/>

⁶⁸ <https://actualite.cd/2025/02/13/offensive-du-m23-apres-loccupation-de-goma-aupres-du-senat-francais-therese-kayikwamba>

as M23 drew closer to Bukavu, the Macron administration issued yet another a statement saying “this offensive by the M23 supported by the RDF [Rwandan Defense Forces] compromises regional peace efforts and the implementation of the conclusions of the joint summit of the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) held on February 7 and 8, 2025. France urges the parties to implement the immediate and unconditional ceasefire decided at this summit.”⁶⁹

However, despite all this rhetoric, no concrete actions have been taken by France to cut off the stream of funding to Rwanda. According to Congo analyst Kristof Titeca, “Belgium has been pushing for sanctions, while France has been taking the lead in blocking these. France’s national interests are a key reason for this: Rwandan peacekeeping troops are key in Mozambique, where a major TotalEnergies gas project – worth US\$20 billion – is on hold because of an ongoing insurgency.”⁷⁰

Germany: In the only concrete step taken as of this writing, the German Ministry for Development and Economic Cooperation announced that “Government consultations” between Berlin and Kigali, scheduled for February, have been cancelled, a spokesperson for the ministry confirmed. “In the current escalation, there can be no business as usual,” he said.⁷¹

United Kingdom: The United Kingdom announced that it is actively studying the next steps, alongside its international partners, including the possibility of reviewing all of its support for Rwanda.”⁷²

United Nations: UN chief Antonio Guterres called Sunday on Rwandan forces to withdraw from the Democratic Republic of Congo and halt support for fighters advancing on the key Congolese city of Goma. “The Secretary-General is deeply concerned by the escalating violence” and “calls on the Rwanda Defence Forces to cease support to the M23 and withdraw from DRC territory,” said a statement from his spokesman Stephane Dujarric. In his statement, made after three UN peacekeepers in eastern DRC had been killed within 48 hours, Guterres emphasised that “attacks against United Nations personnel may constitute a war crime.”⁷³

⁶⁹ <https://actualite.cd/2025/02/15/offensives-du-m23-dans-le-sud-kivu-la-france-se-dit-prete-la-mise-en-oeuvre-de-nouvelles>

⁷⁰ <https://theconversation.com/m23-rebels-are-marching-across-eastern-drc-the-interests-driving-players-in-the-conflict-249738>

⁷¹ <https://actualite.cd/2025/02/04/guerre-du-m23afc-goma-denis-mukwege-note-lurgence-de-couper-laide-militaire-et>

⁷² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/29/rwanda-global-aid-under-threat-drc-invasion-david-lammy> ; <https://actualite.cd/2025/02/04/guerre-du-m23afc-goma-denis-mukwege-note-lurgence-de-couper-laide-militaire-et>

⁷³ <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20250127-un-chief-rwandan-dr-congo>

United States: The US embassy in DRC has also raised concerns that armed groups are benefiting from illegal trade in Congolese minerals, including gold and tantalum. “Significant quantities” of Congolese minerals are being moved by traders, supported by armed groups and security services, to Rwanda and Uganda, where they are sold on to international buyers, the US embassy in Kinshasa said in July of 2024. “In many cases, these minerals directly or indirectly benefit armed groups,” it said.”⁷⁴ However, despite this promising statement from last July, any targeted policies concerning aid to Rwanda are likely to be lost in the chaos of the dismantling of USAID under the Trump administration⁷⁵, which will hurt DRC much more than it will hurt Rwanda.

Despite these growing calls to stop Rwandan support for the M23 in DRC, the ongoing financial aid for Rwanda, including the minerals agreement and the funding for military operations in Mozambique, is still mostly in place. Rwanda is essentially calling the West’s bluff by continuing with its invasion and occupation in eastern DRC, using the aid it receives from the West. To what degree is this a surprise to Western countries, and to what extent is this part of their plan?

The bigger picture: what do Western countries want?

Ever since the Congo received independence from Belgium in June 1960, it was clear that Western powers were unwilling to let go of control of the Congo. In September of 1960, with the backing of the US and Belgium, President Joseph Kasa-Vubu illegally dismissed the first elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, from office⁷⁶; he was then handed over to authorities in Katanga, a Congolese province, and executed by Belgian-led Katangan troops.⁷⁷ More than 40 years later, Belgium issued an apology for their role in killing Lumumba.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, the US and other Western powers decided to support Lieutenant-General Mobutu Sese Seko, seeing him as a counter-weight to the Soviets and to anti-capitalist liberation movements in Africa.⁷⁹ He launched a successful coup against Kasa-Vubu, taking over the Congo in 1965⁸⁰ and renaming the country ‘Republic of Zaire’ in 1971. Mobutu ruled as an increasingly corrupt and kleptocratic dictator from 1965 through 1997. He held power through repression, periodically holding elections in which he was the only candidate, and succeeded in bankrupting the country through “odious debt” of over \$13 billion owed to the IMF, as he and

⁷⁴ <https://cd.usembassy.gov/statement-of-concern-related-to-certain-minerals-supply-chains-from-rwanda-and-eastern-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-contributing-to-the-ongoing-co/>

⁷⁵ https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/01/us/us-aid-agency-trump.html?unlocked_article_code=1.yE4.NmPA.cfMTbBvujaQM&smid=url-share

⁷⁶ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v14/d212>

⁷⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/story/how-did-patrice-lumumba-die> ; <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/1/17/symbol-of-resistance-lumumba-the-congolese-hero-killed-before-his-prime>

⁷⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/feb/08/worlddispatch>

⁷⁹ <https://observingafrica.wordpress.com/2016/02/18/why-did-the-us-support-joseph-mobutu/>

⁸⁰ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v23/d456>

his friends made off with much of the money that was granted to or invested in Zaire.⁸¹ The need by rich Western countries to keep Mobutu in power diminished after the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991, and he became more an embarrassment than an essential ally. What to do?

The Israel of Africa

Fortunately for Western interests, a new strongman entered the scene. With military experience in Uganda and military training in the US, Paul Kagame led the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), returning from the US to take over just days after the rebel armed force invaded Rwanda from Uganda in 1990.⁸² Warfare between the Tutsi-led RPF and the majority-Hutu government of Juvénal Habyarimana, and the subsequent assassination of Habyarimana in April 1994, led to the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Kagame's RPF won the war, and have held power since 1994.⁸³ Kagame served as Vice President and Minister of Defence from 1994 to 2000, then became President in 2000, a position he has retained until today.⁸⁴

The US, and to a lesser degree European countries, saw their opportunity to support a country and leader who could actively promote Western and capitalist interests in eastern and central Africa. They built the myth of Kagame as the hero who had stopped the genocide, and poured massive amounts of aid into Rwanda to build a business-friendly climate for Western investors. In return, Kagame had to keep his reputation relatively clean, appear to support gender equality, and help to police the region. His backers ignored Kagame's violations of human rights and authoritarian anti-democratic practices, and put him to good use in the various military deployments that Rwanda took on (Sudan, South Sudan, Central African Republic and most recently, Mozambique). In 2022 to mid-2024, Kagame negotiated with the UK, offering to take deported immigrants off their hands for a steep price (240 million pounds)⁸⁵; however, the plan was cancelled when the Labour party won the national elections in July 2024.⁸⁶

Perhaps the biggest service that Rwanda provides to the West, however, is to ensure a continuous pipeline of critical minerals, despite the laws preventing the use of conflict minerals or minerals obtained through child labor. Although Rwanda has very few mineral deposits to speak of, they exported minerals worth an estimated \$1.5 billion in 2024.⁸⁷ It's an open secret that these minerals are illegally obtained and trafficked from the DRC, and given false certification papers as they cross the border.⁸⁸

⁸¹ https://peri.umass.edu/images/Congo_s_Odious_Debts.pdf

⁸² <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/94694>

⁸³ <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/94694>

⁸⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cxe20pj5x8o>

⁸⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-61782866>

⁸⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz9dn8erg3zo>

⁸⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-rwanda-minerals-agreement-coltan-ore-mining-conflict-smuggling-rubaya-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-paul-kagame/>

⁸⁸ <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/natural-resource-governance/itsci-laundromat/>

In other words, since the 1990's, Rwanda, under Kagame, has been doing the dirty work of military incursions, resource grabs, and establishing a business-friendly environment on behalf of Western countries, in return for large amounts of "foreign assistance" and lucrative business contracts, especially in the minerals sector. Drawing parallels with the role played by Israel in the Middle East, Congolese analyst Kambale Musavuli calls Rwanda "The Israel of Africa."⁸⁹

What can be done to stop the incursions, occupation and pillage of minerals in DRC?

At the international level, it is essential to immediately stop the activities that both enable and incentivize the violent incursions, occupation and pillaging of minerals. These activities are described in the report above, and include:

- providing substantial funding to Rwanda which makes it possible for them to divert their own budget to warfare,
- enacting various agreements that formalize Rwanda's role in obtaining minerals from DRC to process and sell,
- allowing business enterprises to buy whatever Rwanda is selling, even when it is clearly a violation of various existing laws against minerals obtained through conflict, child labor, and other human rights abuses, and
- looking the other way when international laws are egregiously violated.

At the regional level, it is essential to support and implement various recognized dialogue and mediation processes, to follow all requirements laid out in the African Charter, and to use the powers of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the several African Courts chartered under the African Union to ensure that the terms of the African Charter are adhered to, as interpreted by these legal bodies. Finally, the member states of the African Union must bring all their moral and political pressure to bear on Rwanda, to convince it to cease its violent and destructive behavior.

At the national level, the DRC must step up to its responsibilities in overcoming a host of long-standing internal pathologies which lead to a weakening of the nation's political stability, social solidarity, rule of law, and defense capabilities. These pathologies include corruption among the political and business class, election subversion, tribalism and other ethnic divisions, severe social and economic inequalities, and willingness to sell out one's compatriots for personal gain.

The ongoing suffering of the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo reflects shortcomings at all these levels: international, regional and national. Everyone who cares about the Congolese people and their future can find a helpful role to play at one of these levels, no matter what their background or where they live.

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⁸⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGQt-VUOUPY&list=PLxHZIQg7t8DM7jKGSndcWtMZHO8M_-nUF&index=16&t=1s