

INTERNATIONAL CRIMES CENTRALE DOCUMENTATION

SECTION AFRICA BUREAU DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Redaction : 27/07/2025
Reference : AFRDC-NDC-2 (ENG)
Not protected

Context note
Location : Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)
Period : November 2021 to July 2025

Subject: Rebel armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Overview :

- Several armed groups opposed to the government operate in the DRC. The main groups include the March 23 Movement (**M23**), the Allied Democratic Forces (**ADF**), the Cooperative for the Development of Congo (**CODECO**, divided into multiple factions), and various **Mai-Mai** groups.
- All these armed groups are accused of committing **serious and repeated exactions against civilian populations**.
- These groups operate primarily in the eastern regions of the DRC, notably **Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu**.
- Eastern DRC is particularly rich in natural resources. Most of these groups generate revenue through **mining activities** (copper, gold, coltan) and/or **agricultural production** (coffee, cocoa) in the territories under their control. The stakes associated with the exploitation of these resources are a major incentive for the parties involved, and encourage **organised crime phenomena**.

1 March 23rd Movement (M23)

- The M23 is an armed group created in 2012 by former **Congolese Tutsi rebels**, following disagreements over the implementation of a previously concluded peace agreement. The group underwent a military defeat at the end of 2013. It was reactivated in 2021 and significantly expanded its area of control.
- Benefiting from the **natural resources** of the territories it controls, and from alleged **foreign support**, the M23 is established as the prominent armed group, with **significant operational capabilities**.
- See DCCI context note reference AFRDC-NDC-1.

Area of operation: Primarily the regions of Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu (eastern DRC).

Strength: At least 8,000 combatants as of 2025.

Declared objectives:

- Overthrow the government of the DRC, which M23 accuses of failing to respect the 2013 peace agreements;
- Present itself as the defender of the Tutsi ethnic group in the DRC.

Imputed objective: control and generate financial income from the natural resources of eastern DRC.

Adversaries: Government and armed forces of the DRC.

Allies:

- The M23 is part of the Congo River Alliance (Alliance Fleuve Congo, AFC), a coalition aiming to overthrow the Congolese government by force. The AFC is led by Mr. Corneille Nangaa ;
- Rwanda, and to a lesser extent Uganda, are accused of supporting M23, allegations which both states deny. Rwandan armed forces reportedly provide direct military assistance to M23, including on DRC territory.

Funding:

- Exploitation of mining resources (gold, copper, coltan, etc.) within its control zones ;
- Taxes and extortion imposed on local populations and businesses.

Military capabilities: Light infantry.

Authorities/Command:

- Sultani Makenga, military commander. Direct armed operations ;
- Bertrand Bisimwa, “President” of the M23. Responsible for political and diplomatic affairs.

Comment: Although the M23 and the ADF operate in the same regions, and despite a common adversary (the armed forces of the DRC), the two armed groups are not allied because their objectives differ.

2 Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)

- The ADF was **originally a Ugandan rebel group**, which extended its area of operations to **eastern Congo** from the late 1990s. A large proportion of its members and leaders are still from Uganda.
- From 2017, it drew closer to the **Islamic State**, and subsequently pledged allegiance to it.
- Commits **terror attacks**, notably for religious reasons.
- Often operates in small, mobile **guerrilla-style groups**.

Area of operation: Ituri and North Kivu regions (eastern DRC), and Uganda.

Strength: estimated between 1,500 and 2,000 fighters (in 2025).

Declared objectives: Salafist jihadism, implementation of sharia law.

Imputed objective: to control and generate financial income from the natural resources of eastern DRC.

Adversaries:

- Armed forces of the DRC ;
- Armed forces of Uganda.

Allies:

- Islamic State and affiliates ;
- Recruitment of collaborators and fighters from certain Mai-Mai groups (small armed groups operating like gangs, based on a certain territory).

Funding:

- Exploitation of natural resources (timber, minerals and agricultural production - in particular coffee and cocoa) in its area of control ;
- Transborder arms trafficking ;
- Looting.

Military capabilities: Light weaponry, explosives - sometimes improvised - and bladed weapons. Disparate equipment.

Authorities/Command:

- Jamil Mukulu, former commander of the group. Arrested in 2015 ;
- Musa Seka Baluku, group commander after Mukulu's arrest.

Comment: Although the M23 and the ADF operate in the same regions, and despite a common adversary (the armed forces of the DRC), the two armed groups are not allied because their objectives differ.

3 Coopérative pour le Développement du Congo (CODECO)

- The CODECO was originally an agricultural organisation founded in the 1970s, which evolved into an armed group from the late 1990s. It is associated with the **Lendu ethnic group**.
- After the death of the CODECO's charismatic leader in 2020, the armed group **fragmented into several factions**, which act independently from each other.
- The factions claiming to be part of the CODECO include the **URDPC** (for 'union des révolutionnaires pour la défense du peuple congolais'), the **ARDPC** (for 'armée des révolutionnaires pour la défense du peuple congolais') and the **ALC** (for 'armée de libération du Congo').
- The group is also described as **a sect**, because some of its leaders also act as spiritual guides (Christian-inspired rites, with mystical incantations).

Area of operation: Ituri region (eastern DRC), Walendu sectors.

Strength: estimated around 2,000 fighters.

Declared objectives: to protect the members and interests of the Lendu ethnic community, in particular against the Hema ethnic community, and against the DRC armed forces, which the CODECO accuses of abuses. Defines itself as a self-defence group.

Imputed objective: *idem*.

Adversaries:

- Hema community, armed group 'Zaire' (Hema group) ;
- DRC armed forces.

Allies: --

Funding:

- Exploitation of gold mines in its area of control ;
- Taxes and extortion.

Military capabilities: Light and disparate weaponry - assault rifles, hunting weapons, bladed weapons, homemade arms.

Authorities/Command:

- Justin Ngudjolo (known as Innocent Ngudjolo, or 'the General'), former charismatic leader of CODECO. Killed in March 2020 by the armed forces ;
- Charité Nguna Kiza, commander of the CODECO-URDPC faction ;
- Justin Maki Ges, commander of the CODECO-ALC faction ;
- Ngabu Ngawi Olivier, former commander of the CODECO-ARDPC faction. Has surrendered to government forces.

Comment: certain factions that claim to be part of the CODECO can occasionally confront each other, as in the case of the URDPC and the ARDPC.

4 Mai-Mai groups

- Mai-Mai is a generic term for small armed groups organised on a territory and **led by a warlord** (tribal or village chiefs, local notables, etc.). There is a **multitude of Mai-Mai groups** in eastern DRC.
- Each group has its own identity, but mysticism and superstition are often common features.
- Their position with regard to government forces and armed groups is variable. Some groups place themselves at the disposal of one or the other depending on the advantages they can obtain.

Area of operation: mainly the Kivu regions, and adjacent regions to a lesser extent (eastern DRC).

Strength: depending on the group, from a few dozen to several hundred members.

Declared objectives: protection of the local population.

Imputed objective: control over a territory, generation of revenue through organised crime.

Adversaries & allies: varies from group to group.

- Some groups are opposed to the DRC's armed forces, while others are willing to work with them to fight the M23 ;
- Other Mai-Mai collaborate with armed groups such as the Allied Democratic Forces ;
- The Mai-Mai often regard the Banyamulenges community and members of the Tutsi ethnic group as adversaries - considered to be allies of the Rwandan government.

Funding:

- Theft, extortion and banditry ;
- Exploitation of natural resources ;
- Mercenarism.

Military capabilities: limited. Disparate equipment - firearms and bladed weapons.

Authorities/Command:

Among the main Mai-Mai groups:

- Guidon Shimiray Mwisu, influential Mai-Mai leader, commander of the Nduma Defense of Congo Rénové (NDC-R) in North Kivu. Offers his support to the DRC armed forces to fight against the M23 ;
- William Yakutumba, leader of the Mai-Mai Yakutumba. Based in South Kivu, formerly very active against the DRC government ;
- Janvier Karairi, prominent Mai-Mai leader in the high plateaux of South Kivu. Commander of the Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain (APCLS). Opposed to the M23 but would not collaborate with government armed forces.

Comment: --

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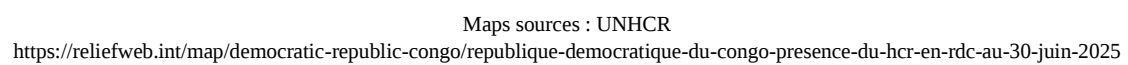
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