

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

DRC Monthly Briefing February 2025

DRC Summary 4 February 2025

M23 rebels invade Goma (North Kivu Province), a key mineral-rich region bordering Rwanda, on 27 January, marking the gravest escalation of the decades-old conflict in eastern DRC since 2012. The attack heightens regional tensions, leading to a public spat between Rwanda's President Paul Kagame (2000-present) and South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa (2018-present), following the deaths of 13 South African soldiers in the fighting. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) and East African Community (EAC) plan to meet from 7 to 8 February to discuss the crisis in Goma.

Tshisekedi vows resistance after M23 captures Goma

M23 rebels invaded **Goma (North Kivu Province)** on 27 January, overpowering the **Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC)** (DRC armed forces) which was supported by the **United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)**, the **Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC)**, **Romanian** mercenaries and allied militias.¹ The rebel group's capture of mineral-rich Goma, which borders **Rwanda**, marks the gravest escalation of the decades-old conflict in eastern DRC since 2012, when the M23 last captured the key trading hub of two million people.² The **World Health Organization (WHO)** reported on 30 January that at least 2,000 people had been wounded by recent fighting in and around Goma and at least 45 deaths registered so far.³ The WHO cautioned that displacement of over a million residents from Goma had increased the risk of the spread of diseases such as mpox, cholera and measles.⁴

President **Felix Tshisekedi** (2019-present), in a televised address on 29 January and speaking publicly for the first time since the Rwanda-backed M23 assumed control of Goma, said his country will not be "*humiliated or crushed*" and was preparing a "*vigorous and coordinated*" response against the M23 and their "*patrons*", taken to mean Rwanda, which has been accused of backing the rebels.⁵ While stressing that dialogue was the preferred means of action, Tshisekedi emphasised that the DRC is committed to defending its territory and sovereignty by any means necessary. In his address, Tshisekedi further stressed that the presence of thousands of **Rwanda Defence Force (RDF)** troops in the DRC, their support of the M23 and their "*illegal exploitation*" of the DRC's minerals will result in "*unpredictable consequences*" for the region.⁶ Tshisekedi called for resilience and resistance from Congolese in the face of M23's campaign.

The address came after Tshisekedi met on 29 January in **Luanda (Angola)** with Angola's President **Joao Lourenço** (2017-present), who has been leading mediation efforts between the DRC and Rwanda.⁷ Lourenço will assume the rotating presidency of the **African Union (AU)** in February and is expected to use his position to prioritise the situation in eastern DRC. Tshisekedi's meeting with Lourenço resulted in him skipping an emergency summit held on 30 January by the eight countries of the **East African Community (EAC)**, where they called for an immediate ceasefire and for DRC to

¹ The East African, 27 Jan 2025

² SABC, 30 Jan 2025

³ Reuters, 30 Jan 2025

⁴ Reuters, 30 Jan 2025

⁵ CNN, 30 Jan 2025

⁶ SABC, 30 Jan 2025

⁷ Moneyweb, 30 Jan 2025

negotiate with M23.⁸ Tshisekedi's office cited scheduling conflicts as the reason for his absence at the EAC meeting. Lourenço said in a statement on 29 January that the M23 should withdraw from Goma and called on the RDF to leave the DRC.⁹

M23's seizure of Goma came two weeks after a group of **United Nations (UN)** experts published a report on 9 January detailing how the M23 has captured Congolese towns with Rwanda's assistance and established parallel government administrations to control key mines and trade routes since April 2024 (see *ARC Briefing DRC Jan 2025*).¹⁰ UN experts also noted that despite a ceasefire agreement reached between the DRC and Rwanda last year, the conflict continued with the M23's object being territorial expansion and long-term occupation and exploration of these territories.

UN experts reported in July 2024 that between 3,000 and 4,000 RDF soldiers were deployed in the eastern DRC, adding that each M23 unit is supervised and supported by RDF special forces (see *ARC Briefing DRC Jul 2024*). However, Rwanda's President **Paul Kagame** (2000-present), who attended the EAC emergency summit, once again denied that Rwanda has anything to do with the M23.¹¹ Kagame questioned the UN experts' integrity and motives and accused them of ignoring violations committed by FARDC, Congolese police and other groups.

Kagame has often blamed the conflict on Tshisekedi's failure to govern his territory effectively and protect citizens. The M23 has also regularly claimed that it is defending the rights of **Tutsis** and other Rwandan-language speakers in the DRC while combating the **Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR)**, a rebel group with connections to those responsible for the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which over 800,000 people, primarily Tutsis, were killed. Kagame has accused the FARDC of fighting alongside the FDLR against M23.¹² However, DRC's foreign minister, **Therese Kayikwamba Wagner**, told reporters at the UN on 26 January that while Rwanda is concerned about its territorial integrity and its "*fears are legitimate*", they have not been realised but rather,

"We are the ones being killed; we are the ones being violated and Rwanda is responsible for that."¹³

The escalation of events in Goma has raised concerns of a wider regional war, reminiscent of the **First and Second Congo Wars** in the 1990s, which left millions dead and continues to destabilise the region. However, a full-scale war remains unlikely at this stage as the RDF is much stronger than the underfunded and struggling FARDC.¹⁴ The RDF is viewed as one of the most capable forces on the continent, which will likely deter other countries from also intervening or offering additional assistance, like they did in the Second Congo War, when Angola, **Chad, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Sudan** and **Burundi** intervened. Several of these countries are also facing their own internal struggles and cannot dedicate resources.

While international reactions have been relatively muted since 2021, when hostilities flared up again, **South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA)** analyst **Stephanie Wolters** said on 27 January that the M23 capturing Goma had crossed a red line for some in the international community and could prompt stronger action.¹⁵ **France's** ambassador to the UN, **Nicolas de Rivière**, said his country "*strongly condemns*" Rwanda's support of the M23's offensive in Goma, and the **United Kingdom's (UK)** foreign minister **David Lammy** has warned that bilateral UK assistance could be suspended to Rwanda.¹⁶ However, no significant concrete action has taken place.

Another key difference is the overwhelming reaction on social media. Thousands of users, including prominent **African** politicians and journalists, have expressed outrage following the fall of Goma.

⁸ SABC, 30 Jan 2025

⁹ President Joao Lourenco in a statement, 29 Jan 2025

¹⁰ Bloomberg, 9 Jan 2025

¹¹ Bloomberg, 9 Jan 2025

¹² Reuters, 30 Jan 2025

¹³ Bloomberg, 27 Jan 2025

¹⁴ Financial Post, 27 Jan 2025

¹⁵ Bloomberg, 27 Jan 2025

¹⁶ Bloomberg, 27 Jan 2025

Social media played a crucial role in shaping global perceptions during the **Israel-Hamas** conflict, significantly denting Israel's international standing. Given the intensity of online criticism against Rwanda, it could face similar reputational consequences on the global stage.

Rwanda is currently pushing for Kinshasa to engage in negotiations with the M23, but Tshisekedi has firmly rejected this demand, viewing the M23 as a Rwandan proxy, force rather than a legitimate Congolese rebel group, used by Kigali to pillage valuable minerals from the country.¹⁷ The coming weeks will be critical in determining whether the situation stabilises through external mediation or spirals into deeper conflict (see below).

SADC and EAC leaders to meet as Kagame spars with South Africa's Ramaphosa...

Southern African leaders met for an emergency meeting in **Harare (Zimbabwe)** on 31 January to discuss the situation in eastern DRC, pledging their support to the DRC.¹⁸ SADC's published statement guaranteed,

"unwavering commitment to continue supporting the DRC in its pursuit of safeguarding its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity".¹⁹

SADC also called for *"an immediate joint summit"* between the bloc and the EAC to discuss the conflict.²⁰ **Kenya's** President **William Ruto** (2022-present) announced on 3 February that the joint summit will take place from 7 to 8 February in **Dar es Salaam (Tanzania)**.²¹ Both Tshisekedi and Kagame have confirmed they would attend the meeting, as well as **South Africa's** President **Cyril Ramaphosa** (2018-present).²²

Ramaphosa's attendance is notable given that he and Kagame were recently involved in a public spat over the situation.²³ South Africa's defence minister, **Angie Motshekga**, said on 29 January that Ramaphosa had warned Kagame that any attacks on South African troops in eastern DRC would be considered a *"declaration of war"*.²⁴ Kagame responded by daring South Africa to take action against Rwanda.

Kagame also accused Ramaphosa of lying and distorting talks between the two leaders in his statement to South Africans on the situation in eastern DRC, posted on 29 January.²⁵ Kagame further noted that Ramaphosa *"has never given a warning of any kind"* as noted by Motshekga and demanded that,

"if South Africa prefers confrontation, Rwanda will deal with the matter in that context any day".²⁶

At least 14 South Africans, 12 of which were part of SAMIDRC and two part of MONUSCO, were killed in the recent conflict.²⁷ In his statement, Ramaphosa attributed the fighting and deaths to *"an escalation by the rebel group M23 and the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) militia"* against FARDC and SAMIDRC.²⁸ Kagame took issue with Ramaphosa's characterisation of Rwanda's army as a militia but notably, the version published on the South African presidency's official website omits the term.²⁹

Tensions between South Africa and Rwanda are not new. South Africa expelled Rwandan diplomats in 2014, over allegations of illegal activities, including the assassination of dissidents on South African

¹⁷ Reuters, 30 Jan 2025

¹⁸ Bloomberg, 31 Jan 2025

¹⁹ SADC statement, 31 Jan 2025

²⁰ SADC statement, 31 Jan 2025

²¹ Reuters, 3 Feb 2025

²² The East African, 3 Feb 2025

²³ Africa Report, 30 Jan 2025

²⁴ Business Live, 30 Jan 2025

²⁵ Business Live, 30 Jan 2025

²⁶ Moneyweb, 30 Jan 2025

²⁷ All Africa, 29 Jan 2025

²⁸ Business Live, 30 Jan 2025

²⁹ Bloomberg, 30 Jan 2025

soil - in 2014, a former Rwandan intelligence chief in exile in South Africa, **Patrick Karegeya**, was found strangled in his hotel room.³⁰ In 2021, South Africa accused Rwanda of spying on Ramaphosa in the **Pegasus** spyware scandal.³¹ Rwanda denied the accusation.

While South Africa and Rwanda had sought to mend relations in recent months, reconciliation efforts now look dim amid the latest diplomatic fallout. Although an outright military clash between Rwanda and South Africa is unlikely, the deepening rift could significantly undermine any prospects for a ceasefire in DRC.

...while M23's seizure of Goma demonstrates Kagame's growing power

M23's capture of Goma has illustrated Kagame's growing power in the region but also how Rwanda's placement as one of the West's most important allies in Africa have protected it from unified condemnation or sanctions. Despite UN expert reports and US allegations that the RDF fights alongside the M23, several Western governments, including France, are dependent on the RDF to protect key gas projects and act as an alternative to **Russian** mercenary groups, most notably in **Mozambique** where it was deployed to stem the insurgency in **Cabo Delgado Province**, where France-headquartered **TotalEnergies** LNG project sits.³²

Rwanda has several reasons for intervening in the DRC, including the continued significance of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda – and the need to eliminate remnants of the genocide -, the “*maximalist approach*” to security which entails eliminating even minor threats and benefits it can reap from chaos in the eastern DRC.³³

The other key driver behind the conflict is minerals. UN experts have documented the export of large quantities of looted minerals from the DRC via Rwanda, including gold and coltan.³⁴ Rwanda exported gold worth approximately \$885m to the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** in 2023, a 75% increase compared to its previous five-year average.³⁵ Rwanda's coltan exports are also reported to have risen by 50% between 2022 and 2023.³⁶ Seizing control of Goma allows Rwanda to continue this resource extraction but on a larger scale now.

Despite being forced to withdraw from Goma in 2012, Kagame's focus on the region has remained, recognising its geopolitical and economic significance.³⁷ Despite the risk of escalating the conflict in the DRC, control over Goma not only strengthens Kagame's leverage in regional politics but also provides access to valuable resources that fuel both economic and security interests. Local sentiment is also that Tshisekedi cannot address the issue,

*“We all know Kagame is a thug but let us not forget that Tshisekedi is weak. All he does is make statements”.*³⁸

Planner

2025 (DRC) Constitution review process to start;

7-8 Feb 2025 **Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) Southern African Development Community (SADC) and East African Community (EAC)** to meet to discuss the crisis in Goma;

TBC 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) End date of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC) peacekeeping mission;**

³⁰ Africa Report, 30 Jan 2025

³¹ Moneyweb, 30 Jan 2025

³² Financial Post, 27 Jan 2025

³³ Center on International Cooperation, 27 Jan 2025

³⁴ Reuters, 30 Jan 2025

³⁵ Mining.com, 30 Jan 2025

³⁶ BBC, 1 Feb 2025

³⁷ Financial Post, 27 Jan 2025

³⁸ ARC source, local resident, Kinshasa

Chronology

3 Feb 2025 **Kigali (Rwanda) CNN**. President **Paul Kagame** says he does not know if there are Rwandan troops in eastern **DRC** supporting rebel military group **M23**, but says Rwanda “*would do anything to protect itself*”, while accusing **South Africa** of sending troops there to secure minerals;

3 Feb 2025 **Kigali (Rwanda) CNN**. President **Paul Kagame** says it will not be “*business as usual*” as long as **Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR)** is armed and supported by **DRC**, **Burundi** and mercenaries, saying he has not spoken to President **Felix Tshisekedi** “*in a while*” and calling **DRC**’s appeal to **British** football team **Arsenal FC** to cancel Rwandan sponsorship a “*wasted effort*”;

1 Feb 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) Bloomberg**. The **DRC** has asked **European** football clubs **Arsenal FC**, **Paris Saint-Germain** and **FC Bayern Munich** to end their sponsorship deals with the “*Visit Rwanda*” tourism campaign as threats of a full-scale war escalate between the neighbours;

31 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) ENCA**. **Southern African** heads of state re-affirm their support for **DRC** in its fight against **Rwanda**-backed rebels who continue to take new territory in the east of the country;

30 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) Weekly Times**. President **Felix Tshisekedi** announces a vigorous military response against **Rwanda**-backed rebel military group **M23** fighters following their capture of **Goma**;

30 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) Pindula**. **South Africa**’s President **Cyril Ramaphosa** warns **Rwanda**’s President **Paul Kagame** that attacks on South African troops in **DRC** will be a declaration of war;

30 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) Taarifa**. **East African Community (EAC)** heads of state call for President **Felix Tshisekedi** to engage in dialogue with his armed opponents to resolve the ongoing crisis and call for an urgent summit with the **Southern African Development Community (SADC)**;

30 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) Tanzania times**. **East African Community (EAC)** heads of state convene for extra-ordinary summit meeting and call upon the **DRC** to protect foreign embassies from ongoing attacks;

29 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) All Africa**. **South Africa**’s President **Cyril Ramaphosa** expresses deep sorrow following the loss of 13 South African soldiers in **DRC** as fighting intensifies with rebel military group **M23** and the **Rwanda Defence Force**;

29 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) Bloomberg**. **United States** calls for an immediate truce in eastern **DRC**;

29 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) Bloomberg**. **Angola**’s President **João Lourenço**, who has been mediating peace talks between **Rwanda** and the **DRC**, calls for the withdrawal of Rwandan-backed **M23** rebels from the city of **Goma** and for Rwandan troops to leave Congolese territory;

29 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) The East African**. Foreign affairs minister **Thérèse Kayikwamba Wagner** states that the government regrets vandalism of embassies and says it is taking all practical measures to guarantee the protection of diplomatic missions following the capture of **Goma** by rebel military group **M23** and the **Rwanda Defence Force**;

29 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) MSN**. Clashes between rebel military group **M23**, the **Rwanda Defence Force** and the **DRC** army in **North Kivu** province have displaced more than 500,000 people;

29 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC) MSN**. Clashes between the **DRC** army, **M23** and the **Rwanda Defence Force** leave over 100 dead and 1,000 wounded as the forces move to seize **Goma**, capital of mineral-rich **North Kivu** province;

28 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC)** *Bloomberg*. Fighting between **Rwanda**-backed **M23** rebels and the Congolese army continue for a second day in Goma amid calls by **African** leaders for an immediate ceasefire;

28 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC)** *Bloomberg*. An additional four **South African** soldiers are killed in fighting in the eastern DRC, raising the death toll to 13;

27 Jan 2025 **Goma (DRC)** *Le Monde*. **Rwanda**-backed rebel military group **M23** claims to have captured **North Kivu** provincial capital Goma, with the government calling the advance a declaration of war;

26 Jan 2025 **Nairobi (Kenya)** *eNCA*. President **William Ruto** calls for an urgent **East African Community (EAC)** summit with **Rwanda's** President **Paul Kagame** and **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** President **Felix Tshisekedi** to discuss the advance by **M23** rebels on **Goma** in eastern DRC;

26 Jan 2025 **Johannesburg (South Africa)** *Daily Maverick*. The **South African National Defence Force (SANDF)** is reportedly preparing to send reinforcements to eastern **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** after nine South African soldiers were killed in fighting against **M23** rebels;

24 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC)** *Jeune Afrique*. President **Felix Tshisekedi** returns early from the **World Economic Forum** in **Switzerland** to convene a defence council meeting as **M23** rebels continue their advance on **Saké**, about 20 km from **North Kivu's** provincial capital, **Goma**;

21 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC)** *Al Jazeera*. Authorities report **M23** rebels have seized **Minova (South Kivu Province)**, a key supply route town for provincial capital **Goma**;

20 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC)** *Actualite*. Justice minister **Constant Mutamba** announces a judicial investigation into the management of **Central Bank of Congo (BCC)** and state-owned **Gécamines** after a report identified that at least \$315m was embezzled from **Gécamines** between 2012 and 2020;

19 Jan 2025 **Kinshasa (DRC)** *Jeune Afrique*. Residents report that **M23** rebels have seized control of the mining town **Lumbishi (South Kivu Province)**;

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