

**Examining the Role of Rwanda in the DRC Insurgency  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights**

**Testimony**

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights: Thank you for the invitation to testify.

I have been working on the eastern Congo for the past eleven years. In 2008, I was the coordinator of the United Nations Group of Experts on the Congo, and I have also worked on the country for the United Nations peacekeeping mission, as a senior analyst for the International Crisis Group, and as journalist and writer.

I currently work for the Rift Valley Institute (RVI), a non-profit research organization working in Eastern and Central Africa. I am the director of the RVI's Usalama Project, whose team of researchers is in the middle of a fifteen-month investigation of armed groups in the eastern Congo as part of an effort to promote solutions to ongoing violence there.

**Background to the current crisis**

The current crisis, beginning with the rise of the new M23 rebellion, is the result of the failure of the Congolese peace process to deal with the persistent causes of conflict in the region. A potent mix of ethnic tensions, state weakness, and Rwandan involvement – located at local, national and regional levels – lie at the heart of the violence. While there

are no easy fixes to these deep-rooted challenges, the United States government can help avert a further escalation by helping to broker a settlement. This will require a significant change in how the US engages with Rwanda, but also for Kinshasa to provide the political vision necessary for a solution.

The origins of the current conflict can be traced back to 2003, when the country was being unified after years of civil war, and all belligerents were obliged to integrate their troops into a national army. A group of officers, who hailed from the Rwandan-backed Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), refused to join this new army. They eventually launched a rebellion, called the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP) – the predecessor to today's M23.

The CNDP officers, led by the charismatic Laurent Nkunda, claimed that they suffered from ethnic discrimination, that the Tutsi community, from which most of them came, was the victim of persecution. Their apologists point out, correctly, that over 50,000 Congolese Tutsi refugees still live in Rwanda, unable to return home due to the lack of security and land. The officers also argued that they themselves were at risk – since 1996, hundreds of Tutsi had been massacred by fellow soldiers in army camps across the country, accused of being Rwandan proxies.

There is no doubting the prevalence and vitriol of anti-Tutsi sentiment in the Congo. However, this legitimate grievance has also been manipulated. From the beginning, the CNDP received support from the Rwandan government and local politicians, who ruled over much of the eastern Congo between 1996 and 2003, and who worried that the unification of the country would jeopardize their businesses, personal security, and

control over local politics. This is the second factor fueling the current morass – elites employing armed force to preserve their interests.

The final source of insecurity is the Congolese state itself. Its crippling weakness reinforces the belief that the only way of protecting property and individual freedoms is through armed force. The Congolese state has neither the rule of law to guarantee property rights, nor the force of law to suppress armed rivals. This lack of faith in Congolese institutions is perhaps the most intractable part of the current conundrum.

### **The M23 mutiny**

When in April a new rebellion emerged in army camps across the eastern Congo, it drew on these same three sources of instability. It is the direct successor to the CNDP, which had been integrated into the Congolese army in January 2009, after Kinshasa struck a peace deal with Kigali. The Congolese government calculated that, by integrating the CNDP into the army, it would be able to co-opt their officers one-by-one, dismantling the organization. But the deal in fact strengthened the CNDP, which maintained parallel chains of command within the army, and profited from trade in minerals and other goods.

It was this stand-off between the CNDP and the Kinshasa government that resulted in this most recent wave of violence. In early April, CNDP officers, led by General Bosco Ntaganda and Colonel Sultani Makenga, staged a mutiny as a pre-emptive move, to prevent their leaders from being dispersed across the country. The mutiny initially failed, with a majority of those having defected from the national army returning within days

and over a dozen of the ringleaders arrested. The remaining mutineers fled to a small stretch of hills bordering Rwanda.

The Rwandan government intervened to prevent Kinshasa from crushing the mutiny. Over the following months, it supplied weapons and equipment, helped the M23 recruit hundreds of soldiers, and on several occasions sent whole Rwandan army units across the border as reinforcement. Thus, the M23 was able to push back the Congolese army's offensive, and seize several important towns.

There is no doubt about Rwanda's involvement. It has been documented by a United Nations report released in June, by Human Rights Watch, and by the Rift Valley Institute's own researchers. In response to this evidence, donors suspended around \$90 million in aid to Rwanda, including \$200,000 from the US government.

Despite this, the situation has not improved. Rwanda has continued to support the M23, including by sending in troops to Rutshuru near the Ugandan border in early July. Other armed groups, largely ethnically based, have also gained in strength, in part due to their links to the M23 and the Congolese army's focus on the mutiny, and have engaged in tit-for-tat massacres of the local population.

### **Pitfalls and solutions**

Perhaps the most sobering prospect is the lack of potential solutions on the table. Kinshasa continues to refuse to talk with the M23, while Congolese army commanders insist on a battlefield solution despite past military failures, sending thousands of troops to the Kivus, setting the stage for the next round of fighting.

The diplomatic efforts of countries in the region have focused on the creation of a neutral military force to carry out offensive operations against the M23 and the FDLR, an initiative coordinated by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). But would this happen? The latest deal between the countries would have Kenya, Tanzania, Angola and the Congo staff such a mission, but it is difficult to imagine these countries sending troops to conduct risky counterinsurgency operations in the Congo.

Also, none of the major donors seems eager to foot the bill. They are already spending \$1,4 billion each year on MONUSCO, and have little appetite for another military mission in the region. In the meantime, the M23 has taken advantage of the break in fighting to train new troops, perhaps up to a thousand men.

What is the way out of this impasse, and how can the United States help? So far, the US – along with other major donors – has reprimanded Kigali and condemned the mutiny. But such criticism of Rwanda is, on its own, not a solution and will only enhance the defiant rhetoric coming out of Kigali. While pressure on Rwanda must be increased, as it continues to play a pivotal role in supporting the mutiny, it will not be effective unless it is part of a larger peace plan that includes Kigali.

The Congolese army cannot defeat the M23 with military might alone; sooner or later, a deal will have to be struck with the mutineers. An acceptable outcome would include the arrest of the worst offenders within the M23, including Bosco Ntaganda, who is wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court, and the reintegration of other officers and troops in the army, but redeployed elsewhere in the country. This would achieve the dismantling of CNDP structures in the eastern DRC.

At the same time, the Congolese government should reach out to reassure its rivals. This includes helping some refugees in neighboring Rwanda return home, and setting up an inquiry on abuses committed by all sides since the mutiny began. It should also consider allowing Rwandan troops to deploy small units in joint operations in the eastern Congo against the Rwandan FDLR rebels, albeit with significant safeguards. In the absence of effective state power, compromise of this kind is the only way forward.

The only way this kind of deal can work is if Rwanda plays a part. This means reformulating the kind of pressure put on Kigali, from asking them to stop providing support to the M23 – an outcome that is hard to measure, given the clandestine nature of the backing – to becoming an active part of the solution. It would have to allow the Congolese government or the United Nations to deploy troops along its border with M23 territory, as well as arrest key leaders of the mutiny, some of whom are based in Rwanda.

This kind of deal will require strong and sustained pressure on Kigali. Donors, chief among them the United States and the international financial institutions where Washington has influence, have some hard choices to make. They can no longer see Rwanda's admirable successes in health care, education and peacekeeping as separate from its interference in the Congo.

The measures I have outlined are a short-term fix. In order to address root causes, and prevent future violence, there will need to be more far-reaching reforms. How can Rwanda – and Rwanda's local clients in the Congo – be persuaded that they do not need to support armed groups in order to protect their interests? How can the Congolese state overcome inertia and vested interests to reform its decrepit state apparatus? These are the most fundamental questions policy-makers inside and outside of the region need to

address. There is a range of possibilities to consider, including cross-border economic projects, legal guarantees for minorities, a new pact on security sector reform, and greater decentralization of power within the Congo.

But these should not be solutions imposed by outsiders. An African option would be a high-level expert panel, like the Mbeki Panel on Sudan, with an African Union mandate to pursue both short and long-term solutions. This could revive the international community's political engagement with the conflict, which has lacked coherence and focus since the end of the transition in 2006. While the UN peacekeeping mission still fulfills a vital role in terms of humanitarian access and reporting, it has been utterly marginalized politically in recent years.

To conclude, the situation in the eastern Congo is bleak. But this latest crisis is also an opportunity to change the way the outside world engages with this region, and to address some of the structural problems that have caused these crises to recur with tragic regularity. It is time to act. As a matter of moral consistency, the United States cannot continue to help fund the Rwandan national budget and at the same time continue to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on programs to stabilize the eastern Congo.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to present today. I am happy to answer questions.