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The Tension in the Great Lakes Region Over the M23 Rebellion in Eastern Democratic Republic of CONGO (DRC)

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ABSTRACT

The re-emergence of the March 23 Movement (M23) in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has reignited tensions in the Great Lakes Region, exposing deep-rooted historical, ethnic, political, and economic grievances. This study analyzes the causes, dynamics, and consequences of the rebellion, situating it within the colonial legacy, state fragility, and regional competition, with particular emphasis on the roles of Rwanda and Uganda. Using Conflict Theory and Realist International Relations Theory, the research highlights key drivers of conflict, including the socio-political marginalization of the Congolese Tutsi minority, competition over vast natural resources, and the weakness of the Congolese state. Qualitative methods and secondary data from UN, AU, and NGO reports form the basis of this analysis. Findings reveal that the rebellion persists due to unfulfilled peace agreements, ethnic divisions, and the shadow economy fueled by illicit resource extraction. The consequences are severe: over a million displaced people, widespread human rights abuses, and devastated livelihoods. Despite interventions by the East African Community, MONUSCO, and international sanctions, mistrust, weak institutions, and conflicting regional interests hinder peace. The study concludes that only a holistic peacebuilding process—encompassing regional cooperation, accountability for war crimes, governance reforms, and inclusive economic growth—can break the cycle of violence and foster stability in Eastern DRC and the wider Great Lakes Region.

Keywords:

M23 Rebellion, Great Lakes Region, Eastern DRC, Ethnic Conflict, Resource Exploitation.

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INTRODUCTION

Following independence in Congo in 1960, these ethnic cleavages of colonial vintage did not dissipate but deepened, as alternative political allegiances utilized ethnicity to mobilize toward power. Marginalization of Rwandaphone Congolese Tutsis, who were perceived as foreigners by the general population, was a recurring government theme in the post-independence era. Citizenship legislation in the post-1980s and 1990s sought to dispossess Tutsi communities of citizenship, creating a struggle for membership and political participation that continues to this day (Rwasamanzi, 2020; Nzobakenga, 2024).

The eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), specifically the province of North Kivu, has been a theater of war predicated on a complex cross-fertilization of local grievances, regional rivalry, and international power competition. The 2021 return of the March 23 Movement (M23) was not a simple recirculation of violence but also revealed longstanding structural and historical issues that persistently endanger peace and stability in the Great Lakes Region. While recent accounts portray ethnic competition and violence over resources as primary concerns, the full explanation requires examining the long-term legacy

of colonialism, the geostrategic interests of foreign powers, and the weak institutions of the DRC (Nzobakenga, 2024).

The origins of M23 trace back to the aftermath of the Second Congo War (1998–2003) and the subsequent peace agreements, which failed to fully integrate former rebels into the national army. Composed mainly of ethnic Tutsi fighters, the group initially justified its rebellion by citing the DRC government's failure to implement previous agreements, particularly the 2009 peace deal. However, its activities have been widely linked to external support, with accusations against Rwanda and Uganda for allegedly providing military and logistical assistance. These allegations have exacerbated regional tensions, leading to retaliatory measures and diplomatic confrontations between the involved states (Expert, 2023).

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has faced persistent conflicts fueled by political instability, ethnic rivalries, and struggles over natural resources. The eastern region, particularly North Kivu, has been a battleground for various armed groups, with the March 23 Movement (M23) emerging as a key actor in the cycle of violence. Since its resurgence in 2021, M23 has escalated hostilities, displaced thousands, and strained diplomatic relations between the DRC and its neighboring states, notably Rwanda and Uganda. This conflict underscores the broader security challenges in the Great Lakes Region, where historical grievances and regional competition continue to fuel instability (UNHCR, 2023).

The eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), particularly the province of North Kivu, has long been a theater of war characterized by a complex interplay of local grievances, regional rivalries, and international power competition. The resurgence of the March 23 Movement (M23) in 2021 is not merely a recirculation of violence but a stark manifestation of deep-seated structural and historical issues that persistently threaten peace and stability in the Great Lakes Region. Previous research by scholars such as Autesserre (2010) and Nzobakenga (2024) has extensively documented the roles of ethnic competition and resource exploitation as primary drivers of conflict. However, these studies often approach the subject from a singular disciplinary lens, either focusing on historical grievances or contemporary geopolitics, leaving a gap for a more synthesized analysis.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the escalating humanitarian catastrophe; recent hostilities have displaced over a million people, exacerbated regional diplomatic tensions, and created fertile ground for widespread human rights abuses (UNHCR, 2023). The novelty of this study lies in its application of a dual theoretical framework combining Conflict Theory and Realist International Relations Theory—to provide a more holistic understanding of the crisis. This approach uniquely bridges the micro-level analysis of socio-economic marginalization and the macro-level examination of regional power dynamics and international economic interests.

The primary objective of this research is to comprehensively analyze the historical foundations and key actors, as well as the multifaceted political, ethnic, and economic drivers of the M23 rebellion. Furthermore, it aims to critically assess the effectiveness of existing regional and international intervention mechanisms. The benefit of this study lies in its potential to contribute to academia by filling the identified research gap and to inform policymakers by providing evidence-based recommendations for a more effective, holistic, and sustainable peacebuilding process in the Great Lakes Region.

This paper explores the complexities of the M23 conflict, analyzing its historical foundations, the role of regional actors, and the geopolitical implications for the Great Lakes Region. By examining the interplay between domestic governance challenges and external interventions, the study aims to provide insights into the drivers of the conflict and potential pathways toward sustainable peace. Understanding the M23 crisis within a broader regional context is essential for addressing the root causes of instability and fostering cooperative security frameworks in the region.

At home, the DRC is also afflicted with profound governance deficiencies that have shattered the state's ability to contain conflict. Central state power wielded by Kinshasa is in jeopardy over vast tracts of eastern provinces where state presence is relentlessly targeted by foreign-backed militias, armed groups, and traditional authorities. Fragmentation does not occur through constant conflict but via a more extended path of political neglect, corruption, and institutional decay (Greco & Radley, 2025).

Within all sectors, the FARDC remains underpaid, poorly equipped, and often suspected of cooperating with militias or acting against civilian rule. Such conditions allow for the emergence of an alliance like M23. This is compounded by a socio-political environment further marred by frequent elections, which are often affected by fraud and repression. This contributes to loss of citizen faith in electoral processes and widens perceptions of disenfranchisement among citizens, especially in affected provinces. Young people are particularly vulnerable to brainwashing and recruitment into armed forces because they perceive few avenues for education, employment, or civic participation (Rwasamanzi, 2020).

The M23 rebellion originates from the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), a rebel group active in eastern DRC during the early 2000s. The CNDP, primarily composed of ethnic Tutsi fighters, justified its insurgency by claiming to protect the interests of Congolese Tutsis who faced discrimination and violence. In an attempt to bring stability, the DRC government signed a peace agreement with the CNDP in March 2009, integrating its fighters into the Congolese national army (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo, FARDC). In 2012, these frustrations culminated in the formation of the M23 rebellion, named after the March 23, 2009 peace deal. Led by defectors from the FARDC, the group justified its armed resistance by citing the government’s failure to fully implement the agreement (Nzobakenga, 2024).

The radicalization of youths in eastern DRC has been a growing concern, with many young people joining armed groups such as the March 23 Movement (M23). Several factors contribute to this radicalization, including poverty, unemployment, ethnic tensions, and the influence of extremist ideologies propagated through local and online networks. Many youths in conflict-affected regions have limited access to education and economic opportunities, making them vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups that promise financial incentives, protection, and a sense of belonging (Expert, 2023).

Some individuals join voluntarily due to ideological alignment or personal grievances against the Congolese government, while others are forcibly conscripted. Reports indicate that M23 recruiters target vulnerable communities, particularly in North Kivu and South Kivu, using propaganda that portrays the group as a protector of marginalized ethnic groups (De & Schwarz, 2018).

Social media platforms and encrypted messaging applications have been used to spread recruitment messages, glorify armed resistance, and demonize the DRC government (UNICEF, 2023). Apart from regional and local agendas, the M23 war is intertwined with international interests. Eastern DRC is mineral-rich, with gold, coltan, cassiterite, and other minerals integral to industries across the globe, from electronics manufacturing to weapons. Minerals have turned the region into a lucrative war zone with foreign governments, multinational companies, and rebels competing for dominance (Hanai, 2021).

Non-regional players have intensified the conflict in a counter-direction. Donor states and multilateral actors fund peace support missions and humanitarian efforts, but economic interests and corporate conduct tend to exacerbate grievances within the region. For example, impenetrable mineral supply chains have allowed DRC conflict minerals to enter global markets, sustaining endemic violence (LLP, 2024).

The eastern Congo conflict is ethnic, political, and strongly economic. The natural resources of the region have been systematically hijacked by what scholars call a "shadow economy," in which illegal mining, smuggling, and clandestine taxation occur outside formal state control but are often sanctioned or facilitated by state actors (Hanai, 2021).

M23 fights for or exercises control over strategic mineral-rich territories, such as smuggling corridors for gold and coltan into Uganda and Rwanda. Militias extract rents from artisanal miners, traders, and border posts, typically establishing parallel governmental institutions. War economies not only fund conflict but also sustain a warlord-style political economy in which power is derived from access to resources rather than democratic legitimacy (Greco & Radley, 2025).

Attempts to regulate the mining sector—such as the International Tin Supply Chain Initiative (ITSCi) and the Dodd-Frank Act Section 1502—aimed to cut funding to insurgent groups but have often had unintended consequences, such as driving small-scale miners out of business due to international compliance costs (Hanai, 2021).

If mineral wealth remains a cause of war rather than a foundation for peace, no peace will endure. Sound economic management based on transparency, local benefit, and resource control must be a cornerstone of any durable peacebuilding process.

This study applies Conflict Theory, developed by Karl Marx, to explain how power struggles, economic disparities, and social inequalities contribute to conflicts (Collier et al., 2004). In the context of the M23 rebellion in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Conflict Theory elucidates how historical grievances, ethnic tensions, and competition over resources such as land, minerals, and political influence have fueled instability. The conflict is deeply rooted in the marginalization of certain ethnic groups, particularly the Tutsi community, which claims to face discrimination from the Congolese government (Kerstan, 2024). Additionally, control over valuable resources—including gold, coltan, and diamonds—has intensified struggles among armed groups, regional powers, and multinational corporations, leading to prolonged unrest.

Moreover, Realist International Relations Theory is relevant in analyzing the role of regional and international actors in the M23 conflict. This theory posits that states prioritize their national interests, often intervening in foreign conflicts to protect economic resources, ensure regional stability, or assert political dominance (Magabo & Mushitsi, 2024). Countries like Rwanda and Uganda have been accused of supporting M23 for strategic

reasons, while global powers such as the United States, China, and European nations engage diplomatically to protect their economic and security interests (Nantulya, 2025). For instance, reports indicate that M23 rebels have captured strategic mineral-rich towns in eastern DRC, highlighting the intersection of local conflicts with broader geopolitical interests (UN, 2022).

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology, using secondary data sources to analyze the origins, causes, and impacts of the M23 rebellion (Creswell, 2021). A descriptive and analytical approach was applied to interpret historical documents, government reports, and academic literature, providing a comprehensive examination of the conflict. Secondary sources included reports from the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), Human Rights Watch (HRW), and academic journal articles, ensuring an objective analysis of the crisis (Watch, 2023).

To ensure reliability, the study employed content analysis to examine themes related to ethnic identity, governance failures, regional interventions, and resource exploitation. This approach helped identify patterns in media reports, policy papers, and conflict resolution proposals, offering a broader perspective on how the conflict was perceived and addressed. Historical analysis traced the roots of the M23 rebellion, linking past conflicts in the Great Lakes Region to the insurgency (1 & Muhammad Rey Dafa, 2025). This methodology enabled a multi-dimensional exploration of the M23 rebellion, highlighting both internal and external factors contributing to the crisis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Why the DRC Government Considers M23 a Terrorist Group

The government of the Democratic Republic of Congo officially designates M23 as a terrorist organization due to its destabilizing activities, human rights abuses, and connections to foreign actors that undermine national sovereignty (Nations, 2025). One of the primary reasons for this designation is the group's repeated attacks on civilians, government forces, and humanitarian workers. M23 has been responsible for mass killings, forced displacements, and systematic human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, torture, and sexual violence (International, 2023)

Additionally, M23 has been accused of recruiting and using child soldiers, a practice that is considered a war crime under international law. Reports from the United Nations and human rights organizations indicate that M23 forcibly enlists children as young as 12, subjecting them to brutal training and combat situations (UNICEF, 2023). The group also imposes illegal taxes on local populations, controls smuggling routes for valuable minerals such as gold and coltan, and engages in illicit trade networks that fuel conflict in the region (LLP, 2024)

The terrorist designation of M23 allows the Congolese government to justify military actions against the group and seek international support for counterinsurgency operations. However, despite diplomatic and military efforts, M23 continues to operate in the region, highlighting the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of the

conflict, including governance reforms, economic development, and regional cooperation.(Magabo & Mushitsi, 2024)

Ethnic Tensions

Ethnic divisions, particularly between the Tutsi and other communities in Eastern DRC, have played a central role in the conflict. The presence of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), an armed group composed of Hutu extremists linked to the 1994 Rwandan genocide, has been a major security concern for Congolese Tutsis and neighboring Rwanda (Milián et al., 2023) and (Watch, 2023). M23 has positioned itself as a defender of Tutsi interests, further exacerbating tensions with other ethnic groups in the region. Violent clashes between communities, fueled by historical grievances and political manipulation, have continued to inflame hostilities, making reconciliation efforts increasingly difficult. (Autesserre, 2010)

Regional Power Struggles

The involvement of neighboring countries, particularly Rwanda and Uganda, has significantly influenced the trajectory of the M23 conflict. Both countries have been accused of providing military and logistical support to M23, allegedly to maintain their influence over Eastern DRC and secure access to its resources (UN, 2022) . While Rwanda has denied these allegations, tensions between Kigali and Kinshasa have escalated, with the Congolese government openly blaming Rwanda for destabilizing the region ((Murhabazi, 2022) The Great Lakes Region has long been characterized by cross-border conflicts and power struggles, and the M23 rebellion represents a continuation of these complex geopolitical dynamics.

The resurgence of M23 highlights the fragility of peace in Eastern DRC and the need for comprehensive conflict resolution strategies that address both local grievances and regional tensions. Without a sustained commitment to peacebuilding, governance reforms, and regional cooperation, the cycle of violence is likely to persist, further destabilizing the Great Lakes Region (Expert, 2023)

The Role of the East African Community (EAC)

The East African Community (EAC) has taken a proactive role in addressing the instability caused by the M23 rebellion. In 2022, the EAC established a regional force, known as the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF), to assist the Congolese government in restoring security in Eastern DRC (EAC, 2022)

Comprising troops from Kenya, Uganda, Burundi, and South Sudan, the EACRF was mandated to neutralize armed groups and facilitate dialogue among conflicting parties. However, the mission faced challenges, including logistical constraints, resistance from certain factions within the Congolese government, and accusations of neutrality violations (Greco & Radley, 2025). Despite these obstacles, the EAC's military engagement marked an important step in regional security cooperation.

Beyond military intervention, the EAC has facilitated diplomatic engagements aimed at fostering peace in Eastern DRC. High-level meetings between the leaders of the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda, and other stakeholders have sought to de-escalate tensions and negotiate political settlements. However, these diplomatic efforts have been hindered by deep-seated

mistrust between the Congolese government and its neighbors, particularly Rwanda, which has been accused of backing M23 (Group, 2022)

The African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN)

The African Union (AU) has played a crucial role in peacebuilding efforts in the Great Lakes Region, often working in collaboration with the United Nations. The AU has consistently called for a cessation of hostilities, urging dialogue and regional cooperation to address the root causes of the conflict (Afrrica, 2025). Additionally, the AU has supported mediation efforts led by former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, who was appointed as the EAC's chief facilitator in peace talks between the DRC government and armed groups. The United Nations, through its peacekeeping mission in the DRC, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), has been actively engaged in efforts to contain the M23 insurgency and protect civilians. MONUSCO, which has been operating in the DRC since 1999, has deployed peacekeeping forces in North Kivu to prevent further territorial advances by M23 and mitigate human rights violations (UN, 2022) However, MONUSCO has faced widespread criticism for its perceived ineffectiveness in curbing violence, leading to protests from Congolese citizens demanding its withdrawal.

Sanctions and Diplomatic Efforts

In addition to military and diplomatic interventions, the international community has imposed targeted sanctions on individuals and entities linked to M23. The United States, the European Union, and the United Nations have blacklisted key M23 commanders and their alleged foreign backers, freezing their assets and restricting their international travel (Parliament, 2025)These sanctions are intended to weaken M23's operational capabilities and pressure regional actors to disengage from the conflict.

Furthermore, diplomatic efforts by international organizations, including the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), have sought to foster dialogue between conflicting parties. The Luanda and Nairobi peace processes have been instrumental in bringing regional leaders together to discuss security arrangements, though concrete results remain elusive due to ongoing hostilities (ICGLR, 2023) .

While regional and international responses have played a vital role in containing the M23 crisis, long-term stability in Eastern DRC will require a comprehensive approach that addresses governance challenges, economic inequalities, and historical grievances. Without sustainable peacebuilding efforts and genuine regional cooperation, the conflict is likely to persist, exacerbating insecurity and humanitarian suffering in the Great Lakes Region (Kaniki, n.d.)

Moreover, diplomatic tensions between DRC and Rwanda have further complicated negotiations. The Congolese government remains wary of Rwanda's intentions, while Kigali insists that its security concerns regarding the FDLR remain unresolved. This mutual suspicion has derailed efforts to establish open and constructive dialogue between the two nations. (Afrrica, 2025)

Human Rights Violations and War Crimes

The M23 rebellion has been marked by widespread human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, and the recruitment of child soldiers. Reports from human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch 2023 (Department, 2023), have documented instances of massacres, targeted assassinations, and mass rapes committed by armed groups, including M23 and other militias operating in the region (International, 2023)

One of the most concerning aspects of the conflict is the use of child soldiers. According to a report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), M23 has forcibly recruited children to serve as fighters, porters, and informants. Many of these children are subjected to brutal conditions and psychological trauma, with little hope of reintegration into society (UNICEF, 2024)

Sexual violence has also been used as a weapon of war, with armed groups deliberately targeting women and girls to instill fear and exert control over communities. Survivors of sexual violence face stigmatization and limited access to medical and psychological support, further compounding their suffering (International, 2023)

Rwanda's Alleged Involvement

Rwanda has been at the center of accusations regarding the M23 insurgency, with the Congolese government and the United Nations (UN) alleging that it provides logistical and military support to the rebel group (UN, 2022). Historically, Rwanda has justified its interventions in Eastern DRC by citing security concerns, particularly threats posed by the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a militia composed of remnants of the perpetrators of the 1994 Rwandan genocide (Watch, 2023). However, reports suggest that Rwandan troops and intelligence networks have been actively involved in supporting M23, allegedly to maintain influence over Eastern DRC's rich mineral resources and secure economic and security interests (International, 2023)

Diplomatic tensions between Rwanda and DRC have escalated in recent years, with Kinshasa accusing Kigali of direct military incursions and violations of its sovereignty. The Congolese government has called for international sanctions against Rwanda, while regional leaders have attempted to mediate between the two nations. Despite these efforts, relations remain strained, and the conflict continues to undermine regional stability (Afrrica, 2025)

Uganda's Role in the Conflict

Uganda has also been implicated in the conflict, although its role is viewed as more complex than Rwanda's. Some reports have suggested that Uganda has provided indirect support to M23, while others highlight its efforts to mediate peace under the East African Community (EAC) framework. Uganda shares deep historical ties with armed groups in Eastern DRC, dating back to its involvement in previous conflicts in the region, including the First and Second Congo Wars (Mngqibisa et al., 2022)

However, unlike Rwanda, Uganda has positioned itself as a key player in regional peace initiatives. President Yoweri Museveni has facilitated diplomatic talks between the DRC government and M23, while Uganda has contributed troops to the regional EAC force deployed in Eastern DRC (Stiftung, n.d.) Nevertheless, allegations persist that certain

factions within Uganda's military and business sectors have benefited from the illicit mineral trade in Eastern DRC, raising concerns about the country's true motivations in the conflict (Expert, 2023)

Weak Governance in DRC

The Congolese government's inability to exert full control over its vast and resource-rich territory has made conflict resolution an uphill battle. The DRC's security forces, including the national army (FARDC), suffer from chronic underfunding, corruption, and internal divisions, making them ill-equipped to effectively combat rebel groups such as M23.(Bank, 2023)

Governance challenges extend beyond the security sector the absence of strong state institutions in Eastern DRC has allowed armed groups to fill the power vacuum, imposing their own rule and controlling vast swathes of territory. Many communities in the region rely on these militias for security and economic opportunities, further complicating disarmament and reintegration efforts.(UNDP, 2023)

Potential Solutions and Recommendations

The M23 conflict and its regional implications demand a comprehensive and coordinated response a combination of diplomatic efforts, security reinforcements, economic development initiatives, and justice mechanisms is necessary to establish long-term stability in Eastern DRC and the wider Great Lakes region by addressing the root causes of the conflict while ensuring the commitment of all relevant stakeholders will be crucial in achieving lasting peace.

Regional organizations such as the East African Community (EAC), the African Union (AU), and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) should lead peace negotiations and security coordination. Initiatives such as intelligence-sharing, joint security operations, and cross-border monitoring mechanisms can help reduce tensions and limit external support for armed groups.

The role of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) must be reinforced to ensure effective conflict management. While MONUSCO has contributed to stabilizing parts of Eastern DRC, its operational limitations have hindered its overall impact. The UN Security Council should consider expanding MONUSCO's mandate to allow more proactive engagement in protecting civilians and preventing rebel advances.

By addressing the economic challenges requires substantial investment in infrastructure development, including roads, schools, and healthcare facilities, job creation programs, particularly in agriculture, mining, and small-scale enterprises, can offer alternative livelihoods and reduce the appeal of joining rebel movements.

Ensuring accountability for war crimes and human rights violations is vital for long-term reconciliation and peacebuilding. Reports of extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, and child soldier recruitment demand immediate action. Strengthening the Congolese judicial system to prosecute war crimes and human rights violations is essential.

CONCLUSION

The resurgence of the M23 rebellion in eastern DRC has deepened tensions in the Great Lakes Region, fueled by intertwined political, ethnic, and economic factors. Despite regional and international efforts, lasting peace remains elusive due to ongoing challenges. Resolving the crisis requires a multifaceted approach combining diplomatic, security, economic, and judicial measures, including stronger regional cooperation, enforcement of comprehensive peace agreements, reinforcement of MONUSCO's mandate, investment in economic development, and accountability for war crimes. Effective collaboration among the international community, regional actors, and the Congolese government is essential to break the cycle of violence and achieve sustainable stability. Future research should explore the role of grassroots peacebuilding initiatives and their integration with formal regional strategies to enhance conflict resolution and long-term development.

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