

LmunA 2025

Research report

Forum: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Issue: Addressing the protection of refugees fleeing  
conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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### Introduction

The ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world. Starting in December 2024, the most recent fighting in Goma, capital of North Kivu Province, escalated rapidly, displacing half a million people in just a month. Nevertheless, violence in the region has been going on for years, leading to the displacement of 4.6 million people in North and South Kivu Provinces alone since March 2022.

Sites sheltering displaced people have been bombed, leading to more casualties and further displacement. Access to shelter, food, or basic services in the region remains a significant challenge, making the need for action urgent and vital. Alphonsine, who was displaced by violence in Ituri Province, Eastern DRC, said, *‘We had a good life. There’s no way to go back home; everything has been destroyed. All I’m asking for is peace.’*

### Definitions of key terms

#### Asylum seekers

People who are seeking international protection. Their request for refugee status or complementary protection status has yet to be processed, or they may not have yet requested asylum, but they intend to do so.

#### Casualties

People injured or killed in a serious accident or war.

#### Convention

A large formal meeting of people who do a particular job or have a similar interest, or a large meeting for a political party

#### Internally displaced persons (IDP)

People have been forced to flee their homes by conflict, violence, persecution, or disasters; however, unlike refugees, they remain within their own country.

#### Militias

Military forces whose members are trained soldiers, but who often have other jobs.

#### Refugees

People who have fled their countries to escape conflict, violence, or persecution and have sought safety in another country.

#### Non-refoulement

Under international human rights law, the principle of non-refoulement guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, and other irreparable harm. This principle applies to all migrants at all times, irrespective of migration status.

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## General overview

The refugee crisis in the DRC, one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world, has been ongoing for decades. To this day, armed conflict, political instability, and competition over natural resources remain in the region. The DRC, with its rich natural resources, including cobalt, coltan, gold, and other valuable minerals, has faced cycles of violence since the 1990s. The Rwandan Genocide occurred in 1994. During the genocide, Hutus killed millions of Tutsis and moderate Hutus. As a result of the genocide, millions of Rwandan refugees fled to Eastern DRC. Most of these refugees settled in refugee camps in the North Kivu and South Kivu provinces. Rwandan refugees fleeing to the DRC included Hutu extremists, which caused instability in the region. Refugee camps got militarized, and instability in the region sparked even more. The long-lasting violence between the Hutus and the Tutsi has drifted to the DRC, launching a decades-long humanitarian crisis in the region. The new Tutsi-led government in Rwanda, which gained a victory against the old genocidal Rwandan government, began its involvement in the DRC. Later, in 1996, Tutsi-led Rwandan troops, under the leadership of Mobutu Sésé Seko, invaded Congo.

The invasion marked the beginning of the First Congo War (1996-1997), often referred to as “Africa’s First World War.” The war killed and displaced millions. The First Congo War was followed by the Second Congo War in 1998, also known as the “Great War of Africa,” mainly due to deteriorating relations between the DRC and Rwanda. The war involved 9 African nations, dozens of armed groups, and resulted in millions of deaths, being marked as a true tragedy in history. On 2 April 2003, the Sun City Agreement was signed in Sun City, South Africa, marking the end of the Second Congo War. This agreement is also known as the Final Act of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. Subsequently, the Transitional Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo was established in July 2003. Although a peace agreement was signed, violence in the region remained, and the DRC remained the center of armed conflict, with armed groups such as the M23 rebels and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) continuing to terrorize civilians and commit human rights violations. These attacks forced many Congolese citizens to flee their homes, creating one of the most significant refugee crises in the world.

In the following years, one of the most significant conflicts in the DRC was the M23 rebellion of 2012–2013. During the rebellion, rebels captured territory in North Kivu, displacing thousands of civilians. Although the armed rebel group was defeated militarily, it emerged in 2022-2023, launching new attacks, forcing over 1 million people to flee either as IDPs or as refugees to bordering countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi. Another major event happened in 2017-2018, when violence in the Kasai region escalated, leading to further unrest in the DRC. As a result of the conflict, 3.8 million people in the Kasai region need humanitarian assistance, including 2.3 million children.

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The situation in the DRC remains complex, and the refugee crisis, as a result of years of armed conflict, continues to be one of the most significant in the world. Past peace efforts, such as the Luanda and Nairobi peace processes, were made. The peace processes targeted to de-escalate tensions between the DRC and Rwanda, and negotiate ceasefires with rebel groups, especially the M23. These actions demonstrated diplomatic engagement between the parties. Despite past peace efforts, violence and displacement in the region continue, and a permanent solution is yet to be made.

### **Major parties involved**

#### *African Union (AU)*

The AU plays a coordinating role in ensuring peace and security on the continent. It promotes cooperation among African states and works to align member states' refugee policies with the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. While providing frameworks for burden-sharing among African nations, it also encourages host nations to endorse humanitarian principles.

#### *Armed groups and militias*

Ongoing violence by armed groups and militias such as M23 and Mai-Mai has led to displacement in Eastern DRC. Some of the atrocities committed by these groups include killings, sexual violence, and forced recruitment. In addition, cross-border militia activity imposes further risk on the refugees, complicating their protection and destabilizing the host countries.

#### *Congolese refugees*

Fleeing conflict, human rights abuses, and lack of security, Congolese refugees are the population most directly affected by the issue. Many end up in neighboring countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania.

#### *Host Countries*

Neighboring states (Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Burundi, Zambia, etc.) have hosted millions of Congolese refugees fleeing the conflict, providing them with asylum and shelter. Although they struggle with limited resources, as well as social tensions and security risks, they are an essential party for ensuring the safety of the refugees.

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### *The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) government*

As the state of origin, the government of the DRC has the responsibility of taking care of its citizens by enhancing security and addressing the root causes of the conflict. Resolving the armed conflict and ensuring peace in the region would reduce the number of refugees fleeing the country, offering a permanent solution to the issue.

### *United Nations (UN)*

The UN, through the UNHCR, aims to promote refugee protection and provide aid. Furthermore, the UN Peacekeeping Mission in DRC (MONUSCO) intends to stabilize conflict areas in order to reduce displacement.

## **Timeline of Key Events**

|           |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1960      | The Democratic Republic of Congo gained independence.                                                                                                                                             |
| 1994      | The Rwandan Genocide happened, and millions of Rwandan refugees fled into eastern Zaire (now DRC). Refugee camps became militarized, leading to regional instability.                             |
| 1996-1997 | The First Congo War occurred. A coalition led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila overthrew Mobutu Sésé Seko. The conflict led to mass displacement as armed groups attacked refugee camps in eastern Congo. |
| 1998–2003 | The Second Congo War, also known as “Africa’s World War,” occurred. This conflict, the deadliest conflict since WWII, led to millions of deaths and displaced many.                               |
| 1999      | The UN established the MONUC (later MONUSCO) peacekeeping operation to stabilize the country and protect civilians.                                                                               |
| 2003      | The Sun City Agreement formally ended the Second Congo War. However, eastern DRC remained unstable. Displacement continued.                                                                       |
| 2012-2013 | The M23 Rebellion occurred. Rebel groups launched attacks in eastern DRC, displacing thousands.                                                                                                   |
| 2017-2018 | Violence in Kasai & Eastern Provinces escalated, leading to a new wave of displacement.                                                                                                           |

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|           |                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2022-2023 | The resurgence of M23 and further rebel activity caused mass displacement with 1 million new IDPs and refugees fleeing to neighboring countries.                   |
| 2023      | Regional mediation, including the Luanda & Nairobi peace processes, attempted to reach ceasefires.                                                                 |
| 2024-2025 | The ongoing crisis continues to displace Congolese citizens, making DRC one of the largest displacement crises in the world, with over 6 million displaced people. |

## Previous attempts to solve the issue

There have been multiple previous attempts to address the issue, with some focusing widely on global refugee rights, while others have addressed the problem solely in the DRC.

Primarily, the 1951 Refugee Convention in Geneva and its 1967 Protocol establish global standards for refugee rights, introducing the concept of non-refoulement. While remaining the only international legal instruments explicitly covering the most critical aspects of a refugee's life, their provisions demand that refugees, as a minimum, deserve the same treatment enjoyed by other foreign nationals in the country. These past efforts made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees still carry great importance in addressing the issue and provide frameworks for refugee protection.

Additionally, the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention, signed in Addis Ababa by the members of the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union), made efforts to address refugee problems in Africa. While recognizing the constantly increasing number of refugees in Africa, the convention redefined the term “refugee” and emphasized the need for humanitarian aid in resolving refugee issues. This convention, which promotes cooperation among African states, encourages states to assume responsibility for hosting refugees and sharing the burden.

Furthermore, efforts by the UN, including the management of refugee camps by the UN Refugee Agency, have played an important role in addressing the issue. The UN has provided humanitarian aid (shelter, food, health, education, etc.) and advocated for the rights of Congolese refugees in host countries, including Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania.

Another effort made by the UN is the MONUSCO peacekeeping operation, launched on 1 July 2010, which took over from a previous UN peacekeeping operation called the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC). The operation's headquarters are located in the capital of the DRC, Kinshasa, and the operation intends to stabilize conflict zones, protect civilians, and reduce displacement. As of May 2025, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, South Africa, and Indonesia have been the top military contributors, while Senegal, Egypt, Bangladesh, India, and Burkina Faso have been the top police contributors.

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Multiple peace efforts, including the Sun City Agreement in 2002, the Goma Peace Agreement in 2008, and the Nairobi Declaration in 2013, have also been made in the past. These efforts aimed to ensure peace in the region and reduce the refugee flow.

### Possible solutions

One possible solution could be improving the conditions of refugees by upgrading camps with better housing, sanitation, and safety. This would be done primarily to protect women and children, who are vulnerable to abuse. Financial support by the UN and wealthier nations would make such improvements possible.

Another solution is to increase funding for host countries, such as Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania. This would improve the living conditions of Congolese refugees in host countries, expanding access to education, healthcare, and other essential services. This solution would ensure that refugees are not heavily dependent on aid and can maintain a humanitarian standard of living.

Addressing the root causes of the conflict and strengthening peace efforts are also solutions that would provide a permanent resolution to the issue. Encouraging peace negotiations between the DRC government and armed groups, similar to the Nairobi & Luanda processes, would help ensure a permanent peace in the region. This would reduce displacement and increase the safety and security of Congolese civilians.

Furthermore, combating corruption in the DRC and ensuring that humanitarian aid reaches those in need are essential. Improving the governance of natural resources, such as cobalt, coltan, and gold, and combating the influence of armed groups over them are also crucial steps that can be taken to ensure political stability in the region. Such reforms in the DRC would not only reduce displacement but also offer hope for the future of the region.

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