



Expert Meeting on the Humanitarian Crisis in Eastern DRC

Thursday 6 March 2025 | 15:30 - 17:00 CET | Hybrid

Summary report

This report was written based on the discussion taking place at the time of the meeting and has not been updated to include developments and events that have occurred since then.

The Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has seen armed conflict since the late 1990s. Fighting escalated in early 2025 between Congolese security forces and the M23 after the Rwanda-backed M23 seized control of Goma in January 2025. Since then, the rebel group has continued its offensive with fighters taking over Bukavu on February 14th. The escalation in fighting has exacerbated the humanitarian needs of the Congolese population. At the same time, delivering aid has become more difficult due to insecurity and mass displacement. Therefore, now was the time to come together as a sector and to jointly reflect and discuss the complex situation in the Eastern Congo.

On March 6, KUNO organised an expert meeting to discuss the current situation in the Eastern Congo. Following remarks by the speakers, participants - both online and in person - were invited to jointly reflect, ask questions, and engage in discussion. This expert meeting was moderated by **Kiza Magendane**, an independent writer, political scientist, and social entrepreneur.

Prof. Judith Verweijen, assistant professor at Utrecht University in Political Geography and International Development Studies, began by providing an overview of the history and political context of the conflict. Judith began by explaining that there are competing and conflicting perspectives at play. She described that there are three interwoven layers that drive the war in Eastern Congo.

The first layer is the local, related to the historically complex position of Rwandophones (Hutus and Tutsis) and access to land in the DRC. The Tutsi population has been marginalised but has also held privileged positions economically. This makes them a complex group. To advance their rights, populations have, in some cases, sided with Rwanda-led rebellions.

The second layer is national, relating to the struggle for power, resources, and political influence among the Congolese elite. For example, in 2012, M23 was formed when forces deserted from the Congolese army to challenge the government's plans to relocate them out of the Kivu provinces. The M23's senior officers, who had previously been integrated into the Congolese army, opposed the government's attempt to limit their influence in the eastern part of the country. The M23 uprising illustrates how different elites can instrumentalise ethnic tensions in their bid for power and control in the absence of a strong Congolese government and a functioning army.

The third layer is the regional. The Great Lakes Region has seen geopolitical struggles around spheres of influence in the eastern Congo by Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi. Rwanda views the FDLR (Rwandan rebels, some officers of which participated in the genocide and are now active in the DRC) as a national security threat and as a vehicle for genocidal ideology. Economic interests are also at play since the

Kivu region is rich in gold and economically vital for Rwanda. Until some months ago, it was not clear they would occupy Goma; their strategy has shifted and has moved to regime change.

According to Prof. Verweijen, lasting solutions will need to address all three of these levels. If not, the conflict will be re-ignited.

The second speaker to take the floor was **Delu Lusambya Mwenebyake**, PhD researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies. Delu visited Goma in January of this year and shared his experiences from his time there. Delu sketched the image of a dire humanitarian crisis: inhabitants of refugee camps around Goma were forcibly displaced, there was and still is a shortage of food, hygiene facilities were destroyed, and many people were forced to return to communities where there is a lack of water and food, and where many houses were destroyed. Many other houses have fallen apart later because they were made of weak materials that couldn't last more than two years without people living in them. Facilities are overwhelmed in responding to the affected. Different health risks have emerged, such as the outbreaks of cholera and Mpox. Banks in Goma are now closed, and economic activities are disrupted. This all affects responding to humanitarian needs. For the humanitarian response, Delu calls for a humanitarian resilience approach, containing a Nexus approach: strengthen the coordination between humanitarian, development and peace response by integrating their activities for a more coherent and sustainable response to the crises. Moreover, he urges international actors to support the local actors in developing a contingency plan.

Last of the speakers, **Poppy Anguandia**, Country Director for Tearfund in the DRC and DRA Acute Joint Response Representative in Goma, provided more insights into the humanitarian response in the Eastern Congo. Poppy also emphasised the widespread and repeated displacement of the Congolese population during the conflict, which escalated in Goma this year. Originally, people moved towards Goma, but they now have to move elsewhere. The resilience of people has been stretched due to the protracted and widespread violence. However, the Joint Response and humanitarian response in general have encountered many challenges. For example, Poppy mentioned how the safety of aid workers is at risk due to attacks. In addition, many banks are closed, which hinders humanitarian work from taking place. The changing contexts of the conflict in the DRC have forced humanitarian workers to be flexible and to continue to adapt to the changing situations. Though strong coordination between the INGOS and the local partners in the Joint Response is happening. The project started in February and will last six months.

After these introductions, the floor was opened for questions and discussions. One participant remarked that there is one additional level that plays a role in the conflict in the DRC: global dynamics. A huge factor resulting in poverty in the DRC is unfair trade practices and the undervaluation and underpayment of Congolese minerals. In addition, discrimination against the Tutsi population is rooted in colonial practices, and some European states are major export partners for arms to Rwanda. All of this highlights that humanitarian relief alone will not bring durable peace to Congo; what is also truly needed is justice and reparations.

Justice, acknowledging the truth, reconciliation, and forgiveness are all needed in this sense. However, larger actors with a bigger hand need to be involved in resolving the conflict. It was stressed that the DRC has immense ethnic diversity and that we need to be aware of the dangers of single stories. In the conflict, there are different narratives, and all truths need to come together. We like to

think about war as a situation with victims and perpetrators. However, after a while – in the Congo conflict has been going on for 30 years – distinctions start to blur.

After, it was questioned whether the conflict taking place now was truly complex, or whether it can be simplified by focusing on the fact that M23 is a Rwandan-backed rebel group, which would not have been able to spread this much violence without that support. The panel responded that there is absolutely no justification for Rwanda's invasion. Pressure on Rwanda is needed, however, it is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to come to peace. The Congolese government also needs to take its responsibilities and broader peace-building efforts remain necessary.

Some local peace initiatives are happening. Some participants elaborated that peace must come from inside: Many actors are involved in the conflict, each with their own self-interests, but peace is the primary concern of local populations. One such initiative is getting local community leaders together to talk. However, it is unclear what initiatives the authorities will allow to take place. Moreover, many of the local actors in these initiatives are affected on a personal level by the conflict, as well as affected.

This meeting is the beginning of a conversation in which many narratives and perspectives play a role and need to be heard. It is crucial to understand the history and context of the conflict when discussing and also implementing humanitarian aid. The continuous violence and insecurity have made the humanitarian space in Eastern Congo a challenging and dangerous space to operate in.