



Summary Report on the Effects of the Withdrawal of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)

Period covered: May–June 2024



Contents

Acronyms and Abbreviations	3
I. GENERAL CONTEXT.....	4
II. THE MONUSCO TRANSITION PROCESS	5
III. Current Security Situation and Conflict Dynamics in South Kivu (May–June 2024)	6
- Deteriorating Security Around Former MONUSCO Bases and Roads Controlled by MONUSCO	6
- Growing Tensions Surrounding the Wazalendo Groups.....	7
- Recurring clashes involving foreign or foreign-backed rebel groups	8
- Increased intercommunal tensions	9
IV. Protection dynamics.....	10
- Situation of Displaced Persons and Returnees	10
- Access to Humanitarian Aid and Protection Challenges.....	12
- Escalating Tensions Related to Wazalendo	14
- Expansion of the M23 in South Kivu	15
- Escalating Tensions Between Rwanda and Burundi	15
- Abandonment of Enclaved Areas.....	16
Recommendations	16

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AFL: Congo River Alliance
CAS: MONUSCO Civil Affairs CAN:
Community Alert Networks
CNRD-FLN: Democracy—National Liberation Forces
CNPSC: National People’s Coalition for the Sovereignty of the
Congo CNDH: National Human Rights Commission
COB: Company Operating Base
EPIT: Integrated Provincial Transition Team FABB:
Biloze Bishambuke Armed Forces
FARDC: Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
FDNB: Burundi National Defense Force
HDP: Humanitarian, Development, and Peacebuilding (HDP) JPT: Joint
Protection Teams
LENI: National Intervention Legion
LPC: Local Protection Committees
M23: March 23 Movement
MCDPIN: Congolese Movement for the Defense of the People and National Integrity
MONUSCO: United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
INGO: International Non-Governmental Organization NGO:
Non-Governmental Organization
UN: United Nations
PDDRC-S: Program for Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Recovery, and
Stabilization
PNC: Congolese National Police
RAD: Armed Defense Reserve RN:
National Highway
SGBV: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
UNHAS: United Nations Humanitarian Air
Service

I. GENERAL CONTEXT

On June 30, 2024, the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) announced that it had completed its withdrawal from South Kivu province, although it did not withdraw from Mikenge—where it had been protecting two camps for internally displaced persons—until July 5, and as of this writing, it continues to maintain a presence in Minembwe, in the Fizi Highlands, Uvira, and Mwenga. MONUSCO’s withdrawal has led to the closure or refurbishment of its ten remaining bases in the province. Only the Bukavu base remains open to accommodate the activities of the remaining civilian personnel (see below)¹.

MONUSCO’s withdrawal has led to a localized deterioration of the security situation around the former bases and along the routes that were regularly patrolled by MONUSCO forces. However, this deterioration is also the result of the growing presence of unpaid or underpaid forces of the so-called Wazalendo in major cities and along main roads, which coincides with a resurgence of banditry. In this regard, it is important to note that MONUSCO had already significantly reduced its presence in South Kivu over the past three years. Furthermore, while MONUSCO has certainly shaped the main factors contributing to insecurity, its impact on these factors has been modest overall, particularly with regard to regional geopolitical tensions (in the Great Lakes region), political competition at the national and provincial levels, and the Congolese government’s policy toward armed groups. These three factors fuel the current instability, contributing to clashes between armed groups and intercommunal tensions.

In the short and medium term, we can expect an increase in insecurity around the former MONUSCO bases. Consequently, how the situation in the Hauts Plateaux evolves will depend heavily on how the new brigade (the 21st Commando Brigade), which is replacing the 12th Rapid Reaction Brigade of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC), is perceived and received. Furthermore, security dynamics will depend on the situation in Wazalendo, particularly the emergence of new clashes between these groups and between these groups and the FARDC.

In the following sections, we will first address the MONUSCO transition process, then describe the evolution of the security situation during May and June 2024. Next, we will examine the main protection challenges and look ahead to assess future risks and scenarios related to protection. We conclude with a number of recommendations addressed to various stakeholders, including the Congolese government, civil society, international donors, and all humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding (HDP) actors.

¹ These bases include Sange, Uvira (Rutemba), and Kamanyola in Uvira Territory; Baraka and Minembwe in Fizi Territory; Mikenge in Mwenga Territory; Kavumu and Amsar in Kabare Territory; and Bunyakiri in Kalehe Territory.

II. THE MONUSCO TRANSITION PROCESS

MONUSCO's withdrawal from South Kivu marks the start of a 12-month transition process that officially began on July 1, 2024. During this transition, Congolese authorities and security services are expected to assume the responsibilities previously carried out by the United Nations mission, with support from United Nations (UN) agencies, funds, and programs. To this end, a residual team of 34 civilians remains in Bukavu to assist with the transition process, including maintaining community alert networks, protecting children, and engaging in dialogue with communities. However, this team will have to operate without any field presence, which could limit its activities.

The transition will be guided by the Integrated Provincial Transition Team (EPIT), composed of provincial authorities, representatives from MONUSCO and United Nations programs and agencies, civil society, and international NGOs. The EPIT has developed a roadmap for the transition, which governs the transfer of responsibilities in four (4) priority areas:

- Protection of civilians,
- Human rights,
- Strengthening state authority in the areas of security and justice,
- Disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and stabilization of ex-combatants.

The EPIT roadmap has an estimated budget of \$67.6 million, but it does not yet have a guaranteed budget, and both the Congolese government and international donors have been reluctant to commit to it.² It therefore remains to be seen to what extent the proposed projects will be implemented. The composition of the EPIT reflects a commitment to an inclusive process, as it includes representatives from civil society, NGOs, and INGOs.

The core tasks of MONUSCO's military component (protection of civilians, patrols) will be taken over by Congolese security forces. To this end, MONUSCO has transferred certain bases and equipment to these forces, with a total value of 10 million U.S. dollars, including a newly constructed heliport, vehicles, and certain bases—such as the one in Rutemba, near Uvira, and the base in Kamanyola. However, these bases are not fully operational, as many of them have only limited electricity due to a lack of fuel to power the generators. The fuel shortage also hinders the ability to patrol using the vehicles left behind by MONUSCO. For example, on National Road No. 5 between Uvira and Baraka, where MONUSCO used to patrol, there are currently no systematic FARDC patrols because the vehicles donated to the Operations Sector/Sokola 2 South-South in Uvira are not being used due to a lack of fuel. At some sites that formerly housed now-closed MONUSCO bases, other security forces have established a presence. The site of the former Company Operating Base (COB) in Sange is now occupied by the FARDC, the Congolese National Police (PNC), and the Burundian National Defense Force (FDNB, the Burundian army

² While MONUSCO has mobilized \$10 million, donors to the Stabilization Coherence Fund have so far raised \$6.2 million for South Kivu and Ituri.

operating in the regions of Fizi, Uvira, and Itombwe under a bilateral agreement between the governments of Burundi and the DRC), while the FDNB has also established a presence at the site of the former COB in Baraka. Furthermore, to facilitate the transition of security responsibilities, the central government has also decided to deploy 450 police officers from the National Intervention Legion (LENI) to Bukavu to ensure the safety and protection of the population.

There are concerns about the capacity of Congolese security forces to carry out certain tasks, such as facilitating humanitarian access and protecting civilians. The sometimes erratic behavior of these forces undermines public trust in them. For example, the accidental killing on June 22, 2024, of Mwami Simbi Charles, chief of the Babungwe Nord community in Fizi territory, and two other civilians, caused great distress among the population.

III. Current Security Situation and Conflict Dynamics in South Kivu (May–June 2024)

The security situation in the province remains volatile. Here we discuss four key developments: 1) the deterioration of security around certain former MONUSCO bases and patrol routes; 2) growing tensions surrounding the Wazalendo groups; 3) recurring clashes involving foreign rebel groups or those supported by neighboring countries; and 4) the intensification of intercommunal conflicts.

- Deterioration of security around former MONUSCO bases and routes controlled by MONUSCO

As mentioned, the increase in insecurity in areas where MONUSCO was present is not solely due to its withdrawal, as it coincided with the presence and increased freedom of movement of the “Wazalendo” groups. At the same time, the number of FARDC troops deployed in South Kivu has decreased significantly due to the concentration of military efforts to combat the M23 in North Kivu. One of the areas where these developments have led to a deterioration in security is Baraka. Over the past two months, there has been a resurgence of murders, armed robberies, and mob justice. This coincides with the presence of various “Wazalendo” groups in and around Baraka since last year.³ Since the

“Wazalendo” fighters are not paid, they have begun hiring themselves out to settle scores and resolve conflicts in order to earn a living. Tensions have also arisen between the various “Wazalendo” groups present in the region. In late June, the forces of “Zelambuma” (an alias for Milenge Ishi Bonane) clashed on the outskirts of Baraka with the forces of the National People’s Coalition for the Sovereignty of the Congo (CNPSC), led by William Amuri Yakutumba.

³ Another town where multiple armed groups have emerged is the town of Mwenga—which has been without a MONUSCO presence since 2017—and which currently hosts the armed groups of “Generals” Nyakiliba and Sezar, and “Colonels” Ibanda, Prince, Nguvu za Milima, and Jumbo Yoka.

A similar trend can be observed in the Bunyakiri region, where MONUSCO withdrew from its base at the end of April 2024. During the month of May, incidents of theft, looting, rape, and forced and early marriages committed by the “Raiya Mutomboki (RM)” factions increased significantly. Furthermore, between May 5 and 8, various RM factions clashed in Bunyakiri. First, the “Bwaare Hamakombo” group clashed with Mungoro Matafali’s group, and then Mwenye Asili’s group clashed with Hamakombo’s. There were reports of male fatalities, property damage, and the displacement of civilians to various locations.

There has also been a deterioration in security along certain roads where MONUSCO used to patrol regularly. This is the case on National Road (RN5) between Uvira and Bukavu, where, since the beginning of May, four cases of armed robberies have been reported, coinciding with the gradual withdrawal of MONUSCO patrols. A similar trend can be observed on National Route 2 (RN2), the Bukavu-Walungu-Kamituga highway, parts of which were previously patrolled by MONUSCO. On the stretch of road between Mwenga and Kasika, attacks on vehicles have increased. State security forces and the Wazalendo accuse each other of being behind these attacks.

Growing Tensions Surrounding the Wazalendo Groups

The Wazalendo groups’ increasing freedom of movement is heightening tensions with the FARDC and among the Wazalendo groups themselves. For example, in May, the FARDC clashed with Wazalendo elements in Nyangezi, a village located about 35 km from the city of Bukavu on the RN5 Bukavu-Uvira highway, which passes through the Ngomo escarpments. The toll included three civilian deaths, one death on the FARDC side, and two deaths among the Wazalendo. The trigger for these clashes appears to have been the erection of illegal roadblocks and the FARDC’s determination to remove them to ensure the free movement of peaceful citizens and their property.⁴ In addition to a stampede at the market, numerous items of property were lost or stolen.

Clashes between Wazalendo groups have also increased. In addition to the clashes between Zelambuma and the CNPSC near Baraka mentioned above, the CNPSC clashed with the troops of “General” Nakage, a dissident from the Biloze Bishambuke Armed Forces (FABB), near Misisi (Fizi territory) on April 29. There was also an exchange of fire between the FABB and CNPSC forces in early June in Bwala on the Mitumba Middle Plateaus. In mid-June, CNPSC forces attacked the FABB, led by Ngomanzito (an alias for Delphin Kalembe), as well as their ally, the Burundian rebel group Resistance for the Rule of Law-Tabara (Red-Tabara), in Lulenge and around Minembwe in Fizi, affecting numerous villages including Kasulukwa, Ibumba, Nabibuye, Babengwe, Matanganyika, Bigaragara, Rugezi, Kijombo, and Kabanja. These clashes triggered population displacements. Furthermore, on May 29, clashes took place in Chitasungulwa (Mubuku group, Buhavu chiefdom) in the Kalehe Highlands between two factions of the Congolese Movement for the Defense of the People and National Integrity (MCDPIN) (formerly Nyatura), including the troops of self-proclaimed General Nzabona, based in Ramba, and those of self-proclaimed General

⁴ The Wazalendo groups (Raiya Mutomboki) have also set up an increasing number of roadblocks on National Route 3 (Miti-Bunyakiri-Walikale-Kisangani) in Kalehe, claiming that the FARDC's promises to pay them have not been honored.

Bahige, based in Bushaku. These clashes are the result of ongoing power struggles and competition over access to minerals and the exploitation of natural resources.

The growth of Wazalendo activism is also evident in increased recruitment. In April 2024, representatives of Wazalendo groups were summoned to Kinshasa to meet with the government. They were asked to prepare lists of their troops and officers to submit to the national coordination office of the Armed Defense Reserve (RAD) for potential integration. It was found that several self-proclaimed generals had reported troop numbers to the Congolese authorities that they did not actually have; consequently, each returned to his area to mobilize young people, which explains the new recruitment efforts within the various armed factions. These recruitment campaigns have, for example, been reported for some of the armed groups based in central Mwenga (see footnote 2), as well as in Fizi. Recruitment has also increased in Nindja, in Kabare Territory, where a new Raiya Mutomboki faction led by Lukoba (who had been demobilized but has now remobilized) has emerged following MONUSCO's withdrawal.

- Recurring clashes involving foreign or foreign-backed rebel groups

During the attack by a contingent of the FABB and Red-Tabara, the CNPSC reportedly received logistical support from the FDNB (Burundian army). The FDNB also collaborated with the Wazalendo forces under Kashumba's command during operations conducted in late June in the Muhungu Middle Plateaus above Kiliba against certain Red-Tabara elements who had fled the Fizi High Plateaus and joined others coming from Burundi, which also led to massive displacements of peaceful citizens along these routes. The FDNB's establishment at the sites of the former MONUSCO base in Baraka and Sange indicates that, following MONUSCO's withdrawal, the Burundian army has only grown in importance as a provider of security in the region.

This development reflects and fuels broader geopolitical tensions, particularly the animosities between, on the one hand, Rwanda—which a recent report by the UN Group of Experts accuses of having resumed its support for Red-Tabara in recent months—and, on the other hand, Burundi, which is fighting the Rwandan-backed M23 in North Kivu and maintains ties with Rwandan armed opposition groups operating in the DRC, such as the National Council for Renewal and Democracy—National Liberation Forces (CNRD-FLN).⁵

In addition to the geopolitical ramifications, a more pronounced presence of the FDNB (Burundian army) could begin to provoke internal opposition if the force's conduct deteriorates. In early July, the FDNB intervened in tensions in Bwegera, in the Ruzizi Plain, where the return of certain displaced Burundians and Banyamulenge was very poorly received by members of the Bafuliiru community, some of whom, through their youth,

⁵ See letter dated May 31, 2024, addressed to the President of the Security Council by the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, S/2024/432, June 4.

this tribe (known as the Wazalendo), triggered a crisis that led to violence resulting in one death and four people wounded by gunfire from the FDNB, which was attempting to separate young people from these communities that have been in conflict ever since. If such deadly incidents recur, the presence of the FDNB may face increasing criticism.

Another major development related to regional dynamics is that the M23 crisis is increasingly affecting South Kivu province. The M23's expansion southward and the intense fighting around Minova have generated flows of displaced people who have settled in Kalehe, particularly in Lumbishi, Shandje, Numbi, Chambombo, Buzi, Ziralo, Mubuku, Katasomwa, Ramba, and Chitasungulwa.

Increased Intercommunal Tensions

In various parts of South Kivu, tensions between communities have increased, mainly due to intensified political competition linked to the formation of the new national and provincial governments. In some cases, clashes between Wazalendo groups have added fuel to the fire. While MONUSCO's withdrawal is not a direct cause of the increased intensity of these conflicts, it may make managing them more difficult. MONUSCO used to support mediation and dialogue efforts by providing logistical, security, and sometimes financial resources, aided in this by its image as a relatively neutral force (in the context of intercommunal conflicts), even though it was sometimes also accused of bias.

A major conflict recently broke out between the Babembe and Bafuliiru in Fizi Territory, following attacks by the CNPSC against a faction of the FABB and the Red-Tabara. These attacks are part of a broader context of tensions between the CNPSC and the FABB, which have come to be interpreted through an inter-community lens. Underlying this is the growing demographic weight of the Bafuliiru and, to a lesser extent, the Banyindu in Fizi Territory, where there are also increasing concentrations of Fuliiru livestock, partly due to the insecurity prevailing in the Highlands. This development has been accompanied by increased activism on the part of FABB factions. While the newly arrived Bafuliiru and Banyindu are mostly settled in sparsely populated areas, the Babembe view their growing presence as a threat to their authority, claiming that in some cases, they do not pay the *itulo*, or customary tax, to the traditional Bembe authorities.

Furthermore, with the help of the FABB, the Bafuliiru are increasingly present in various gold-mining areas, particularly Rugezi, Bigaragara, Kijombo, Kitumba, and Muliza, as well as along the Misisi, Nyange, and Ngalula corridor, where there have been regular clashes between the CNPSC and the FABB. What further shifted the balance of power between the Bembe and Fuliiru armed groups was the arrival of the Burundian rebel group Red-Tabara—an ally of the FABB—in the Lulenge region, specifically in the Rugezi-Bigaragara-Kitumba area, after it had been driven out by FDNB operations in the Bijombo region in early 2023.

As a result, the CNPSC, dominated by the Bembe, is increasingly opposing the FABB's activities in Fizi, arguing that the Bafuliiru "should return to Uvira."

The appointment of the “Purusi” provincial government in South Kivu has also intensified tensions. In Uvira, the Bavira are already voicing their dissatisfaction that no Muvira are included in the government and are already calling it discriminatory, accusing the Bafuliiru of continuing to expand their hegemony in the Uvira territory. The appointment of the new provincial government has also intensified the resurgence of the conflict between the Barega and Bashi communities, which began to resurface after the formation of the Suminwa government. This is a resurgence of a conflict dating back to 1964, calling for the division of South Kivu Province to create a new province of Elila, comprising the territories of Mwenga, Shabunda, Uvira, and Fizi. This conflict is reportedly fueled by the Bashi’s dominance in the province’s administration as well as within the Suminwa government. Among the effects of this conflict, we can already observe the formation of alliances to build advocacy power, as many other dissatisfied tribes in the province have already joined the Barega in an effort to secure this new province. Furthermore, this conflict appears to be having negative effects on the job market. Neither the Bashi nor the Barega can easily secure jobs, as each group gives preference to its own members.

IV. Protection Dynamics

With regard to protection dynamics, the withdrawal of MONUSCO has both short- and long-term effects. In the short term, protection for internally displaced persons and returnees has deteriorated in certain areas. Furthermore, there are immediate challenges related to humanitarian access and monitoring and evaluation in isolated areas. The protection of human rights defenders and detainees also faces acute challenges. In the medium and long term, there are also challenges related to accountability for human rights violations—particularly sexual and gender-based violence—given that training for security personnel and support for mobile court hearings are not guaranteed.

Situation of Internally Displaced Persons and Returnees

There are concerns regarding the safety of internally displaced persons in various areas that have been recently or over the past year abandoned by MONUSCO. There are two camps for internally displaced persons in Mikenge, one inhabited mainly by Banyamulenge and the other by members of other communities (Bembe, Fuliiru, and Nyindu) who have experienced tensions with the Banyamulenge. In addition, there have recently been returns due to a temporary lull in hostilities. In Kanihura, Naruginga, and Kamombo, 35 households—totaling 210 people—have returned; in the villages of Mikalati, Sangani, Wagati, Kitasha, Binyengye, Katanda, and Kibanda, 1,190 households—totaling 7,140 people—have returned. These returnees are not receiving sufficient assistance from humanitarian actors.

Due to a lack of trust in the FARDC’s ability to ensure the safety of displaced persons and returnees, armed groups from their own communities have become involved. This is, for example, what happened with returnees in the Kahololo/Kageregere region after MONUSCO’s departure in 2023. In February 2023, this area received approximately 437

households—3,100 individuals—primarily Banyamulenge from Bwegera, Nyangezi,

and Uvira, and approximately 890 households—5,100 individuals—from other communities. After MONUSCO's departure, the Twigwaneho had assumed the role of protectors of the return zones for the Banyamulenge, while Masango and Malimba had become safe havens for the Bafuliru and Banyindu. Members of these latter communities were initially protected by Red Tabara and elements of the Mai-Mai Ilunga before the task forces (FDNB/FARDC) moved in to occupy these areas—including Kahololo, which would also be occupied in mid-2023.

The situation of internally displaced persons and returnees also remains a cause for concern in Bibokobo in the Mutambala sector (Fizi territory), where many displaced persons returned in 2023.⁶ However, the security situation has remained volatile in this area since then, and mistrust between the Banyamulenge and Babembe persists.

Another area of major concern regarding the protection of displaced persons is Kalehe, where many households have arrived over the past two months to flee clashes with the M23. Now that MONUSCO has left the area, security and logistical challenges have increased. Furthermore, humanitarian activities in the Kalehe Highlands have been scaled back due to fears of M23 infiltration into the area, which has further weakened protection efforts.

In all these areas, the situation of displaced women has proven particularly precarious. They are more vulnerable to rape and even abduction in the fields or while gathering firewood or water. Displaced women also face an increased risk of sexual violence within host families, particularly when they remain for extended periods without assistance or income. Furthermore, they are often victims of extortion of their belongings when they go to the market to sell agricultural products and stock up on basic necessities; nearly 21 women were recorded as victims of this despicable act between Mulenge and Kigoma in Uvira Territory in late May 2024. Displaced women are also more likely to be victims of extortion at roadblocks manned by security forces, as they often have no documents or identification because everything was lost, burned, or left behind in their homes. Notable cases include those recorded last May in Mukera, Fizi Territory, where displaced persons—including women and girls from Kabanja 1, Kisanya, Rugezi, and Bigaragara (the Minembwe health zone in the Fizi Highlands)—were subjected to illegal taxes or fines. In most cases, displaced women are also severely affected by a lack of access to primary healthcare, including during childbirth, which leads to increased neonatal and postpartum mortality.

These problems also affect displaced girls and boys, who are at risk of being recruited into armed groups operating in the area due to a lack of activities, driven by poverty, and because they wonder when the war will end in their home regions. There are also concerns about what will become of these children when the 2024–2025 school year begins.

⁶ In early February 2023, the number of displaced persons and returnees in Bibokoboko was estimated at nearly 1,500

Humanitarian access has clearly become more difficult in areas where MONUSCO has withdrawn. MONUSCO played an important role in facilitating this access, not only by ensuring security through its presence but also by facilitating logistics, including for monitoring and assessment missions in remote areas. UNHAS (United Nations Humanitarian Air Service), for example, which previously benefited from MONUSCO's protection of its landing sites, has seen its operations significantly reduced, as helipads have disappeared from bases that have been closed, and it does not land at bases controlled by the FARDC. Its operations could be further hampered if the no-fly zone established in areas affected by the M23 in North Kivu is extended to South Kivu.

Until its departure, MONUSCO had also provided transportation for Joint Protection Teams (JPTs)—multi-day missions led by multisectoral teams composed of UN personnel, Congolese military personnel, police officers, civil society representatives, and community liaison officers—to gather information and develop plans to protect communities. MONUSCO's transportation and security units also played a crucial role in rapid assessment missions aimed at identifying protection needs in areas affected by major humanitarian issues, such as displacement crises.

In addition, MONUSCO's Civil Affairs Section (CAS) supported Local Protection Committees (LPCs) and Community Alert Networks (CANs), which managed the early warning system mechanisms. The transition roadmap outlines actions to maintain these mechanisms, including the development of a provincial policy and strategy on the early warning system to regulate the management of alerts and responses, such as by establishing a Provincial Operations Center for Civil Protection Coordination involving the FARDC, PNC, and other government agencies. The Civil Protection Coordination Office should also establish branch offices in priority areas. As mentioned above, however, there are doubts regarding the full implementation of the transition plan due to available resources.

On the ground, some challenges were observed in the functioning of community protection structures and information-gathering networks in the absence of MONUSCO. At times, Civil Affairs Officers (CAS) were the only ones with a clear overview of which structures were active in which areas and which local individuals and organizations had received what type of training. Moreover, they often played a key role in revitalizing, supervising, equipping, and maintaining motivation. Some wonder whether EPIT will maintain a more collaborative approach with these community structures in order to sustain their motivation. Furthermore, there are concerns that the challenges associated with maintaining early warning systems in highly remote areas—especially those not covered by cellular networks—will increase.

It is nevertheless important to emphasize that the role played by CAS in community alert networks has varied significantly from one area to another. For example, in the South/South region, humanitarian coordination led by OCHA (the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs)—particularly its Baraka office—had already spent the past two years developing

mechanisms to support these structures—not only in anticipation of MONUSCO’s departure but, more importantly, to ensure their long-term sustainability. In some areas, alert structures—such as peace-building structures—are also supported by international NGOs working in consortia (such as Cordaid, VNGi, and ZOA).

Another key area in which MONUSCO has been active is raising awareness among Congolese security forces about humanitarian and human rights issues, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In principle, the roadmap calls for continuing to raise awareness among PNC and FARDC officials, as well as other security services, about SGBV, and for supporting them in continuing to organize awareness-raising sessions for men and women in the ranks and among the troops. However, since the transition will last only one year, there will be challenges related to the sustainability of these efforts in the absence of ongoing support from donors, as has been seen with other security force awareness programs.

MONUSCO has also assisted human rights defenders, particularly in monitoring cases of human rights violations—such as advocacy with authorities or legal proceedings—as well as in protecting defenders at risk. While the roadmap outlines several initiatives to ensure legal follow-up—including the organization of five itinerant courts and free legal and judicial assistance for women and girls who are survivors of sexual violence—it does not provide sufficient support in the area of advocacy, other than supporting monthly coordination meetings in Bukavu with, among others, human rights NGOs, the FARDC, the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), and civil and military courts. Thus, no actions are planned to help human rights defenders active in the various territories voice their concerns to Congolese security services, including when such concerns involve abuses committed by those very services. This work has already become more difficult following MONUSCO’s withdrawal from the field. During security meetings, local authorities and civil society organizations are increasingly hesitant to address the security services and hold them accountable in the absence of MONUSCO representatives. The security services, for their part, are reportedly more defensive, showing reluctance to acknowledge any wrongdoing or errors on their part.

Human rights defenders report growing difficulties in carrying out their work, particularly in exposing misconduct by security forces and other authorities. Furthermore, they state that Congolese authorities are sometimes less responsive to their requests. In addition, human rights defenders feel they are no longer protected when authorities attempt to silence or harass them. In the past, human rights defenders facing threats were assisted by MONUSCO, which often helped them flee areas where they were under threat and provided them with means of survival. Furthermore, when they were arrested, MONUSCO provided them with legal assistance to help secure their release and followed up on their cases. Local journalists also benefited from this assistance when they were threatened. Some now fear that they will engage in even greater self-censorship following MONUSCO’s departure. This is all the more concerning given that journalists are reporting increasing threats from the Wazalendo. Unfortunately, the roadmap does not include specific measures to ensure the protection of human rights defenders and journalists.

Another area in which protection and human rights actors anticipate new challenges is the monitoring of prisoners' status and prison conditions. MONUSCO has regularly conducted and facilitated visits to detention centers to verify the status of prisoners (for example, whether there were legal grounds for their detention) and their health (including access to medical care and the investigation of torture). Admittedly, the roadmap proposes several measures to strengthen prison management, including building the capacity of prison staff and conducting prison inspections. However, this does not necessarily help with monitoring individual detention cases. It is expected that those who will take on this task—including Congolese civil society organizations—will face greater difficulties in gaining access, particularly to military detention centers, as well as in obtaining information.

In the long term, especially after the 12-month transition period, the cumulative effects of reduced monitoring and oversight of human rights violations, combined with a decline in awareness-raising and training on these issues, could result in a growing sense of impunity among state officials, particularly within the security services.

V. OUTLOOK

Looking ahead, there are a number of challenges related to the protection of civilians in the context of MONUSCO's withdrawal:

Escalating Tensions Related to the Wazalendo

The situation of the Wazalendo is a ticking time bomb. Having been supported in the fight against the M23 in North Kivu, many hope that the government will eventually take care of them by providing them with a salary once they are integrated into the Armed Defense Reserve (RAD). As mentioned, numerous groups have launched recruitment campaigns to inflate the lists that will be submitted to the RAD's national coordination office, which raises the risk of recruiting minors—especially since oversight has become more difficult in the absence of MONUSCO. The increased movement of unpaid or underpaid wazalendo in major urban areas and along main roads also risks leading to an increase in harassment at roadblocks, thefts, rapes, and murders. Most of the Wazalendo in South Kivu who served in North Kivu to fight the M23 have since returned, often bringing new weapons and ammunition with them. Furthermore, there is a real risk of clashes between Wazalendo groups, as well as between these groups and the FARDC. Although the Wazalendo benefit from their current quasi-official status and the FARDC's policy of not attacking them, it is unclear how long this fragile balance will hold.

Meanwhile, MONUSCO's absence is hindering voluntary surrenders among armed group combatants. MONUSCO has often played a crucial role in facilitating logistics and ensuring the safety of those who surrender. Armed group combatants may not fully trust the FARDC to protect them and provide them with basic means of survival after their surrender. The Disarmament,

Demobilization, Community Recovery, and Stabilization Program (PDDRC-S) is officially taking over some of MONUSCO's DDR tasks, but as a new structure that has so far remained underfunded and has often been the subject of political struggles, it has not yet gained the trust of the population.

Expansion of the M23 in South Kivu

MONUSCO's withdrawal increases the risk of the M23 expanding into South Kivu. So far, fighting has been confined to the border areas between North and South Kivu, but that could change. There are particular concerns that the M23 could advance toward Kavumu Airport, which hosts CH4 attack drones, with new units scheduled to arrive in the coming weeks. This would also open the possibility of an advance toward Bukavu, which is not as well protected as Goma. An advance toward Kalehe and Kabare could also have repercussions on the Uvira, Fizi, and Itombwe Highlands, where some leaders of the Banyamulenge Twirwaneho armed group have maintained contacts with the M23 and the Congo River Alliance (AFC).⁷

However, the likelihood of a second M23 front in this region remains uncertain. The Banyamulenge are deeply divided over the possibility of collaborating with a group backed by Rwanda. Furthermore, the appointment of Munyamulenge politician Alexis Gisaro Muvunyi (who overturned the results of the parliamentary elections, thereby securing a seat in the Uvira constituency) as Minister of Infrastructure and Public Works in the government- Suminwa suggests that the Banyamulenge might be better able to serve their political and security interests by collaborating with the government rather than fighting it. The influential presence of the Bashi—who have always cooperated well with the Banyamulenge—in both the central government and the newly appointed provincial government could reinforce this idea. Other armed groups in South Kivu that have been in contact with the AFC and/or the M23 have often proven to be highly opportunistic. Many may initially want to see what the creation of the RAD will bring them, while individual fighters may be drawn by the prospect of accessing the benefits of the PDDRC-S, which recently launched its first projects in Fizi and Uvira—funded by the European Union and implemented by the International Organization for Migration.⁸ In light of these developments, the success of opening a second front in the Fizi/Uvira/Itombwe highlands remains uncertain, but is still possible.

Escalating Tensions Between Rwanda and Burundi

Whether or not a second front materializes in Fizi/Uvira/Itombwe will depend in part on the evolution of relations between Burundi and Rwanda. A further deterioration in these relations could prompt Rwanda to rally support for the M23 in these regions. This could also lead to increased support for cross-border attacks carried out by Red-Tabara on Burundian soil. Burundi, in turn, could strengthen its ties with the

⁷ Letter dated December 15, 2023, addressed to the President of the Security Council by the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, S/2023/990

⁸ These are projects to rehabilitate agricultural access roads in the territories of Fizi and Uvira, which will employ a total of 900 people, 50 percent of whom are former combatants.

CNRD-FLN, notably by allowing incursions into the Nyungwe Forest, from where they could launch cross-border attacks against Rwanda.⁹

As mentioned, MONUSCO's withdrawal has expanded the FDNB's area of operations and relative influence in Fizi and the Ruzizi Plain, as evidenced by their presence at the sites of former MONUSCO bases in Baraka and Sange. This could also provoke a backlash from Rwanda, which might in turn seek to expand its influence in the region.

Abandonment of Remote Areas

MONUSCO's withdrawal poses increased protection challenges in isolated areas. Security and access issues are intensifying as MONUSCO's security operations and logistical services—particularly helicopter transport—have come to an end. Access issues may be further exacerbated by the cessation of MONUSCO's contribution to road maintenance in South Kivu, through its contingent of Chinese engineers, especially if funding for the roadmap—which calls for providing South Kivu with a special fund for maintaining roads leading to isolated sites through the Office of Roads and the Provincial Road Maintenance Brigade—remains insufficient. MONUSCO's absence from remote areas further complicates the efforts of local protection and human rights actors, who face greater difficulties in holding armed groups and state officials accountable. Taken together, these developments pose a high risk that remote areas will be gradually abandoned by international protection actors, which will negatively impact the efforts of local protection actors.

Recommendations

To mitigate the negative effects of MONUSCO's withdrawal and address the other protection issues identified in this report, we recommend that relevant stakeholders—including the Congolese government, its international partners, civil society, and national and international peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian aid organizations—take the following measures:

➤ Secure funding for the transition roadmap or adapt it

The insufficient resources allocated to the roadmap, both by the government and by donors, raises doubts about its viability. It is also unclear to what extent the government is committed to implementing the transition plan, given that hostilities with the M23 are absorbing a large portion of its resources and attention. If funding is not secured, the ambitions of the transition plan must be scaled back, and the parties

⁹ For the links between Red-Tabara and the Rwandan government, as well as between the Burundian government and the CNRD-FLN, see "Letter dated May 31, 2024."

must begin planning for the failure to implement certain parts of the plan, which, on the whole, remains highly ambitious by proposing dozens of actions across many different areas.

Regularize the Status of the Wazalendo

It is urgent that the government disband the Wazalendo. These groups should be fully integrated into the RAD and/or demobilized, while those who refuse to participate in these processes should be considered armed groups with which the government should cease collaboration. Furthermore, now that the Wazalendo groups have begun to step up their recruitment efforts, increased monitoring is needed to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers. The government should also establish robust screening mechanisms to prevent the recruitment of minors into the RADs.

Strengthen Protection for Internally Displaced Persons and Returnees

The influx of displaced persons into northern Kalehe, as well as the precarious situation of displaced persons and returnees at various sites in the Hauts Plateaux (Mikenge, Minembwe, Bijombo, Bibokoboko), must be closely monitored, and measures must be taken to strengthen their security and protection, particularly by increasing aid efforts. When displaced persons are not adequately protected, there is an increased risk that armed groups will exploit the situation, which could trigger tensions and violence.

Supporting Intercommunal Peacebuilding Efforts

The recent escalation of intercommunal conflicts—which risk escalating into armed conflict—highlights the importance of initiatives aimed at mitigating and transforming these conflicts. Whether through informal discussions among elites, joint initiatives by faith-based organizations, or larger multi-stakeholder efforts, it is important to maintain dialogue and build people’s resilience against manipulation by hardliners within their communities.

Keeping the Focus on Remote Areas

To prevent remote regions from falling into a downward spiral—with less visibility, less access, less monitoring, less assistance, and greater protection challenges—it is essential to continue supporting local organizations that are actively involved in protection monitoring and in humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development efforts in these regions. Only through strong local networks can an adequate level of protection be maintained. At the same time, the Congolese government must continue to support the maintenance and improvement of road infrastructure to ensure these areas remain accessible.