

INFORMATION NOTE FOR HDP STAKEHOLDERS

WORKING IN THE KALEHE AREA

May 2025

0. General guidance

The Conflict Sensitivity Hub produces explanatory notes on context monitoring, which can help HDP¹ practitioners to better incorporate conflict sensitivity into their activities and organisational procedures. Given that the situation in eastern DRC can change rapidly, these notes are particularly relevant and beneficial when produced and used within a relatively short timeframe. Nevertheless, they remain valuable in the long term for documenting changes in the context and preserving a record of events that may enrich a learning process. The purpose of this document is to provide HDP actors with information on recent developments in the conflict context in the Kalehe territory, so that they can adapt their interventions to the context.

1. Situation regarding recent conflict dynamics in Kalehe

The arrival of the M23 rebellion in the Kalehe territory² has radically altered the situation there. The role of the state is now centralised in the hands of new de facto authorities (M23/AFC), focusing almost exclusively on the military dimension.

Following the capture³ of the city of Goma, capital of North Kivu province, at the end of January 2025, fighters from the '23 March Movement' gradually captured the villages of Kalungu, Lumbishi, Numbi, Chambombo, Chebumba, Shanje and Ziralo. They then took control of the mining town of Nyabibwe. In early February, fighting between the M23/AFC, supported by the RDF, and the FARDC and their allies around Mukwidja, Nyabibwe and Kasheke resulted in numerous civilian deaths and injuries. On 12 February 2025, the M23/AFC seized the towns of Ihusi and Kalehe-centre, situated approximately 60 kilometres from Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu⁴, thereby removing the final obstacle on the route to the city of Bukavu⁵. The M23's advance towards Bukavu was accompanied by a disorganised retreat by the FARDC; this retreat was marked by widespread looting, particularly in Kalehe⁶.

Although the M23 exercises control over this region, three community-based Wazalendo armed groups, allied with the FARDC, remain active there. This coalition includes the APDC⁷

¹ Humanitarian, Development and Peace

² Kalehe is one of the eight territories that make up South Kivu province. It lies to the north of Bukavu, which is the provincial capital and the capital of Kabare territory, with which it shares a southern border, covering an area of

4,082 km². Administratively, it comprises two chiefdoms: Buhavu and Buloho, each subdivided into groupings. Four tribal communities predominate within these entities, namely the Bahavu, the Barongeronge, the Batembo, the Hutu and the Tutsi. [Kalehe Territory – Wikipedia](https://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalehe_Territory)

³ In the past, the 23 March Movement (M23) had captured and occupied Goma for a week in November 2012, <https://www.ebuteli.org/publications/blogs/goma-comprendre-l-attaque-du-m23-et-des-rdf>

⁴ <https://www.afrik.com/conflit-en-rdc-soutenu-par-le-rwanda-le-m23-progresse-dans-le-territoire-de-kalehe>

⁵ <https://www.ledevoir.com/monde/afrique/844456/rdc-m23-troupes-rwandaisses-prennent-aeroport-bukavu>

⁶ In particular, FARDC units from the 'Guépards' intake and those under the command of 'Satan 2' were notorious for their atrocities.

⁷ Alliance of Patriots for the Defence of the Congo. It is associated with the Hutu ethnic group.

under the leadership of Bahigi Maguru, COPACO⁸ led by Kirikicho Marimba, and the MCDPIN/Nyatura⁹ led by Haguma Maik Maik. Elements of the FARDC and armed groups (Wazalendo) have therefore withdrawn to Kahuzi-Biega National Park (PNKB), which they now regard as their rear base. From there, they regularly launch attacks on M23/AFC positions. These same groups have launched an offensive against M23 positions in various parts of the territory. These clashes, which are taking place in populated areas, have led to the displacement of many residents.

It is important to note that certain armed groups have rallied to the M23 or facilitated its operations. During the fall of the district capital of Kalehe Centre and Ihusi towards Bushako, the self-proclaimed General Bahigi Maguru is reported to have played this role¹⁰.

2. Impact of the changes on local conflict dynamics

Exacerbation of land and inter-community conflicts: The M23/AFC rebellion has exacerbated both the land disputes between groups in Buzi and Ziralo, Mubugu and Mbinga-Sud¹¹, and the inter-community conflicts that existed in the Kalehe territory between the Havu, Tembo, Hutu and Tutsi communities¹². The Tutsi community is widely accused of colluding with the M23 rebellion; this allegation exacerbates the already existing conflict situation.

Escalation of land disputes: This war has reignited tensions between the so-called Twa Pygmies (also known as 'indigenous peoples (IP)') and the managers of the Kahuzi-Biega National Park (PNKB) and other communities living near the park over a land dispute¹³.

Difficult access to land and mineral resources: The crux of all these conflicts remains access to land for the artisanal mining of cassiterite, coltan and gold deposits along the lake shore and in the Kalehe highlands. With the arrival of the M23/AFC, the monopoly on mining has passed to the de facto authorities, who exploit the deposits and levy taxes on production; this rebel group has asserted itself as the sole entity authorised to organise and supervise extraction.

Pausing of certain conflicts: Disputes and tensions that were previously frequent (such as tensions between different communities, like the Tembo and the Hutu, over control of the mines; control of mining sites by armed groups to finance their activities; tensions amongst stakeholders regarding the illegal mining of minerals at certain sites) have significantly decreased, or even temporarily disappeared, with the presence of the M23, which has positioned itself as the absolute ruler of the mining blocks¹⁴.

⁸ Coalition of Patriots for Change. This group is mainly composed of Tembo fighters.

⁹ Congolese Movement for the Defence of the People and National Integrity (MCDPIN). This group is mainly composed of Hutu fighters.

¹⁰ This remains to be clarified, as the APDC group remains active against the M23/AFC.

¹¹ Emery Mudinga, 'Land conflicts in the east of the DRC: beyond the clashes between Rwandan-speakers and indigenous people in Kalehe', in *L'Afrique des grands lacs annuaire 2012–2013*

¹² Chrome-

extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://assets.ctfassets.net/jzxyrkiixcim/71xhONLkc2c814Yjd70uNA/47295718476556b6086422211e590f5f/09_Kalehe_report.pdf

¹³ Today, this conflict is exacerbated by the illegal and excessive exploitation of the PNKB, mainly through the encroachment of agricultural land onto the park, the felling of trees to produce charcoal and the extraction of minerals.

¹⁴ Telephone interview with a civil society representative and teacher based in the area

Mass population displacements: Clashes between the M23/AFC and their allies against the FARDC and their allies in February 2025 led to the displacement of populations towards Idjwi, Ihoka, Tshofi, Mabula and Ibinza. Even after the M23's occupation of Kalehe, regular skirmishes with the Wazalendo continue to cause further displacement, including among those who had already returned¹⁵.

3. Changes regarding the key actors

In the M23/AFC-occupied area of Kalehe, the main actors are returnees, community leaders who remained in the area, religious leaders, traditional chiefs, humanitarian actors, FARDC soldiers and their allies, and the Wazalendo. Some of these actors may be used as channels for influence or propaganda.

Many people displaced by the war have begun to return to their villages. Since the week of 17 to 22 February 2025, more than 23,000 people have returned to villages in the Mbinga-North and Mbinga-South groupings in Kalehe territory¹⁶. Civilians who remained and those who have returned are caught in the crossfire, with some suspected of being affiliated with the Wazalendo and summarily executed by the rebels¹⁷.

Community leaders, acting as spokespeople for the local population, remain wary of the M23/AFC rebels but are cooperating with humanitarian organisations to identify needs. Religious leaders provide moral, spiritual and, at times, social support to the population. They also play a mediating role in the event of minor conflicts.

Humanitarian organisations, with very limited response capacities, are on the ground and are attempting to address the immense humanitarian needs. Their operations are systematically controlled by the de facto authorities. Civil society has raised the alarm over the deteriorating security situation and human rights violations and is attempting to draw national and international attention to the issue.

Some localities in Kalehe remain under government control, as do the Wazalendo (Shanje, Bushaku 1, Bushaku 2 and Nyawarongo, etc.)

Previously, local leaders and smallholder farmers would discuss the use of land for agricultural or mining activities. In areas under occupation, such dialogues can no longer take place. In areas not yet occupied, landowners and politicians are joining forces with traditional leaders and armed groups to ensure secure use of the land.

The M23 coordinates and manages all mining operations at several sites in the Kalehe territory, including those that were at the centre of disputes over boundary demarcation and tensions between farmers and miners¹⁸.

The lingering fear is that the M23/AFC may support certain local actors who have felt wronged in the past and who may seek revenge, thereby creating a new cycle of confrontation and violence.

¹⁵ Interview with a representative of a local organisation in Kalehe

¹⁶ lapresseafricaine.net/article/idjwi-des-deplaces-regagnent-progressivement-leurs-villages-a-kalehe/985

¹⁷

<https://www.congoquotidien.com/2025/05/21/sud-kivu-deplaces-combats-m23-wazalendo-urgence-humanitaire/>

¹⁸ G. de Brier, Conflict Analysis and Stakeholder Mapping in South Kivu and Ituri, IPIS, Antwerp, April, 2021, page 28, available at <https://congomines.org/system/attachments/assets/000/002/145/original/Analyse-de-conflit-et-cartographie-des-acteurs-dans-le-Sud-Kivu-et-Ituri-2-compressed.pdf?1631202395>

4. Recommendations for HDP actors

In view of this situation and to minimise risks, humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors are encouraged to observe the following:

- **In light of the changing security and administrative context (presence of M23/AFC and allies)** : Humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors should liaise and ensure they have obtained access authorisation for any mission. This communication must go through the OCHA coordination body.
- **In light of the presence of the FARDC and the Wazalendo:** Encounters with them could prove fatal. The loss of control and military power may limit the level of cooperation and collaboration amongst FARDC military personnel and the Wazalendo who control certain areas. Actors must demonstrate respect for and recognition of their authority. At present, very few actors are present in the parts of Kalehe still controlled by the government.
- **Addressing negative perceptions:** Strengthen communication regarding their mandates (missions), particularly with the new authorities, especially those in charge of security at both provincial and local levels. The approach to communicating with the de facto authorities must be tailored and closely linked to negotiations regarding access to areas of operation. It should be noted that the aim is not to contribute to the legitimisation of the de facto authorities but to ensure their own protection. HDP actors should encourage their staff to continue to refrain from making public comments or engaging in public discussions regarding the ongoing armed conflict between the Congolese government and the M23/AFC.
- **In the face of insufficient funds to assist as many beneficiaries as possible:** HDP actors should ensure they communicate and discuss beneficiary eligibility criteria with communities, whilst emphasising the limited resources at their disposal.
- **To improve the implementation of conflict sensitivity:** Before deploying teams to the field, organisations must ensure that they have provided their field teams with comprehensive information on humanitarian principles and conflict sensitivity, including an overview of key contextual elements and factors contributing to the conflict.
- **To ensure the protection of beneficiaries and teams:** Actors shall ensure that they properly align responses with needs, risk and vulnerability mitigation efforts, and actions to strengthen community resilience.