The escalating crisis in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

Key risks and policy recommendations

By Agnes Gitau - Executive Director at the Eastern Africa Association and a partner at GBS Africa.

Following the resurgence of the M23 rebel group, which has advanced from North Kivu province and captured Goma, (a key economic hub and a gateway to the country's vast mineral wealth), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is yet again faced with a crisis in security, governance, and economic stability This renewed fighting by the various rebel groups has triggered a humanitarian crisis, regional instability, and a disruption to global mining operations, particularly in the cobalt and copper sectors.

In response, the East Africa community (EAC) Heads of State, convened the 24th Extra Ordinary summit, on January 29, 2025, intended to provide a coordinated regional response. However, the absence of DRC President Félix Tshisekedi raises serious diplomatic concerns and signals a widening rift between the DRC and the EAC, with Kinshasa seeking closer alignment with the Southern African Development Community (SADC). It signals not only strained relations within the regional bloc but also highlights the growing fragmentation of efforts to resolve the crisis in eastern DRC.

While the EAC has positioned itself as a key mediator, Tshisekedi's decision to abstain suggests a lack of confidence in the bloc's ability to address the conflict effectively, or worse, a deliberate sidelining of EAC-led initiatives in favor of alternative diplomatic or military solutions. The DRC's move to engage more closely with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) suggests a realignment in regional alliances, possibly due to dissatisfaction with how the EAC has managed the crisis—particularly regarding Rwanda's role.

Additionally, Kenyan President William Ruto's call to French President Emmanuel Macron has sparked concerns over external influence in Africa's security affairs, reinforcing perceptions that regional conflicts are increasingly subject to geopolitical maneuvering by foreign powers. President Kagame of Rwanda has questioned the intentions of the so called 'stakeholders' claiming personalities have become bigger than the peace process.

Another alarming development is the alleged involvement of Romanian mercenaries fighting on behalf of the DRC government. While unconfirmed, reports of foreign fighters being deployed in conflict zones suggest an internationalisation of the crisis.

- The presence of mercenaries, whether from Romania or other foreign military contractors, could indicate Tshisekedi's lack of faith in regional security arrangements and the ineffectiveness of the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) in combating M23 rebels.
- This move mirrors patterns seen in other African conflicts, where governments—facing insurgencies—turn to private military contractors (PMCs) such as Wagner Group (Russia), Dyck Advisory Group (South Africa), and other foreign entities to tip the balance of power on the battlefield.
- The risk of mercenary deployment is that it further destabilizes governance structures, undermines regional security cooperation, and escalates human rights violations.

The growing evidence of illicit mineral smuggling networks, implicating both state and non-state actors, threatens global supply chains and could lead to further regulatory scrutiny and trade restrictions from Western markets.

This policy brief examines the geopolitical, security, economic, and humanitarian dimensions of the crisis and outlines urgent recommendations for regional governments, international organizations, and industry stakeholders.

Who are the M23 rebels?

The M23 rebels are Congolese but widely suspected of receiving logistical and intelligence support from Rwanda. They decry historical grievances over ethnic representation, land rights, and resource control in eastern DRC. The Congolese government, under President Félix Tshisekedi, has increasingly relied on Burundi and others to counter rebel advances, raising concerns about a broader interstate conflict that could destabilise the Great Lakes region.

Despite the presence of United Nations peacekeepers (MONUSCO) and a regional military deployment under the EAC which Tsekedi expelled, the conflict has exposed the structural weaknesses of these forces in deterring rebel groups. The inability to curb M23's advance has eroded public confidence in international interventions, leading to civilian casualties, widespread displacement, and anti-government protests in Goma and other conflict-affected regions.

While international actors, including the United States, European Union, and China have called for diplomatic de-escalation, there has been limited enforcement of accountability measures against actors complicit in fueling the violence – either through direct support to militias or by engaging in illicit mineral trade that funds rebel operations.

How does this impact the cobalt industry?

The global mining sector – particularly the cobalt, copper, and gold industries – face disruptions as conflict zones expand. The DRC supplies more than 70% of the world's cobalt, a key mineral used in EV batteries, renewable energy storage, and high-tech manufacturing. Companies operating in the DRC, including Glencore, China Molybdenum, Trafigura, and Ivanhoe Mines, now face heightened security risks, supply chain disruptions, and regulatory scrutiny.

The displacement of mining communities and the growing influence of non-state armed actors over artisanal mining sites have raised concerns about illegal mineral trade routes, particularly through Rwanda and Uganda. Previous UN investigations have accused both countries of facilitating the smuggling of Congolese minerals. The lack of transparent and verifiable sourcing mechanisms in the global cobalt supply chain has created vulnerabilities for Western automakers and tech giants such as Tesla, Apple, and Samsung, which risk being linked to conflict minerals and human rights violations.

As the conflict persists, major markets should expect price volatility in cobalt and copper, with speculative trading likely to drive supply chain costs higher for companies in North America, Europe, and Asia. Meanwhile, China, with extensive mining concessions and long-term cobalt supply contracts in the DRC, will seek to leverage the instability to consolidate its dominance over the global battery metals industry.

The human cost: human rights and governance failures

Despite years of international commitments to ethically sourced mineral supply chains and corporate social responsibility, the cobalt and copper industries remain plagued by systemic human rights violations. Reports from Amnesty International and other watchdog organisations continue to highlight:

- The widespread use of child labor in artisanal cobalt mines.
- The exploitation of miners under unsafe working conditions, with little oversight.
- Sexual violence and human trafficking linked to mining operations controlled by armed groups.
- The complicity of major corporations in failing to implement robust due diligence mechanisms.

Efforts by the US and EU to strengthen import controls on conflict minerals have been ineffective due to weak and inconsistently applied as enforcement mechanisms. The lack of transparency in regional mineral trade has allowed state actors in Rwanda, Uganda, and beyond to continue profiting from Congolese resources, with minimal repercussions from the international community.

Weak legal frameworks and enforcement in both the DRC and international markets perpetuate the status quo, leaving mining communities vulnerable to exploitation, forced displacement, and violence.

What should Mining companies in this region do?

- Implement stricter sourcing and traceability mechanisms to ensure conflict-free minerals.
- Strengthen corporate ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) policies to prevent complicity in human rights violations.
- Diversify supply chains by investing in alternative cobalt sources, including Indonesia, Australia, and Canada.

Recommendations.

The crisis in Eastern DRC poses a serious threat to regional stability, mining operations, and global supply chains. If the situation worsens, it could lead to full-scale war, severe supply disruptions, and further humanitarian displacement.

The persistent failure of governments, corporations, and global institutions to act decisively has created a cycle of impunity, violence, and economic exploitation that fuels ongoing instability.

All stakeholders must make a genuine commitment to prevent a global crisis with far-reaching implications. The true victims remain the Congolese people, who suffer from displacement, violence, and economic collapse while regional and global actors manipulate the crisis for their own gain.

This situation underscores the urgent need for:

1. A genuinely African-led diplomatic initiative—free from external influence—to address the root causes of instability.
2. Greater transparency in foreign interventions, ensuring that foreign military involvement is accountable to regional and international legal standards.
3. Stronger multilateral coordination between EAC, SADC, and the African Union, preventing the further fragmentation of peace efforts.
4. Sanctions and diplomatic pressure on all parties fueling the conflict, including regional governments facilitating illegal mineral smuggling.

Without immediate and coordinated intervention, Eastern DRC risks becoming a battleground for proxy wars, exacerbating suffering and deepening regional instability. The absence of Tshisekedi from the EAC Summit, Ruto’s engagement with France, and the reported presence of mercenaries all point to a worsening crisis where external players are pulling the strings, while the Congolese people continue to bear the brunt of war and displacement.

The world cannot afford to ignore the crisis in Eastern DRC – its consequences extend far beyond Africa, affecting industries, investors, and economies worldwide.

Failure to act decisively will deepen insecurity, prolong human suffering, and compromise the global transition to a clean energy future.

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