

POLICY BRIEF



Democratic Republic of Congo

Peace, Protection, and Accountability

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) comprises a wide range of ethnic and cultural groups, with Christianity as the predominant religion, followed by 95.2%¹ of the population, alongside smaller Muslim and traditional faith communities.² The DRC constitution defines the country as a democratic and secular state and, through Article 22, guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to practice or not to practice any faith.³

Weak governance, corruption and decades of conflict have severely limited the state's ability to provide services or uphold the rule of law.⁴ The eastern DRC continues to face protracted conflict that has continued for decades. In provinces such as North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri, violence driven by competition for resources, external interference, and weak government control has created deep insecurity.⁵ In some cases, ideological motives also contribute to attacks against Christians.⁶

¹ "Democratic Republic of Congo: Background Information", Open Doors, September 2024. Available at: opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background

² thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=57c&utm_source

³ constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/DRC%20-%20Congo%20Constitution.pdf

⁴ u4.no/publications/democratic-republic-of-congo-overview-of-corruption-and-anti-corruption?utm

⁵ reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/unhcr-southern-africa-regional-external-update-19-eastern-drc-situation-11-july-2025

⁶ hrw.org/news/2025/08/06/dr-congo-armed-group-massacres-dozens-in-church

Civilians face killings, kidnappings, and large-scale displacement, while many live in constant fear of violence⁷ in attacks and counterattacks between armed groups and state security forces, caught in the crossfire of recurring clashes.⁸

Islamist militants and rebel groups attack churches and Christian communities, targeting places of worship, killing clergy, and harassing believers.⁹ Converts to Christianity from African Traditional Religions (ATR) face significant family and community pressure, particularly in North Kivu, Kisangani and Kasai, where conversion



Aftermath of violence from ADF attacks in Kivu and Ituri provinces, August 2025

is perceived as a rejection of long-standing cultural and spiritual traditions. In these areas, ethnic and militant leaders adhering to ATR belief systems often promote hostility towards Christians, further heightening pressure on converts.¹⁰ Mosques in North Kivu also face a hostile environment. Islamist militants target Muslims who oppose their violence, while the government suspects some Muslims of supporting rebel groups.¹¹

Escalating violence in Eastern DRC

A complex conflict involving multiple armed groups and weak state control continues to destabilize eastern DRC. The key groups include the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and the March 23 Movement (M23).¹²

The ADF, originally a Ugandan Islamist group now linked to Islamic State Central Africa Province is one of the most brutal actors in eastern DRC and deliberately targets Christians. The group is now linked to Islamic State Central Africa Province and operates mainly in the remote rural zones of North Kivu (such as Beni and Lubero) and Ituri.¹³ The ADF employs violent and targeted tactics, including massacres of civilians, attacks on churches and funeral gatherings, and the abduction of pastors and lay Christians, and the sexual assault of women and girls.¹⁴ In areas under its control, open expressions of Christian faith can carry a high risk of abduction or killing.¹⁵

In contrast to the ADF's religiously motivated attacks, the M23 rebel group represents a different kind of conflict, one rooted in politics, ethnicity, and control of territory. M23 is a rebel group made up of former Tutsi fighters. The group mainly operates in North Kivu, with some presence in South Kivu.¹⁶ While the group isn't driven by religious ideology, its offensives destroy homes and churches, displace civilians, including Christians,¹⁷ and are accompanied by widespread sexual violence against women and girls.¹⁸

The government has deployed the army, partnered with Uganda in Operation Shujaa,¹⁹ and signed peace deals

⁷ nrc.no/news/2025/april/dr-congo-millions-facing-destitution-as-violence-forces-people-to-flee-multiple-times?utm

⁸ reuters.com/world/africa/urgent-who-warns-threat-infections-drc-multiplied-due-conflict-2025-02-07/?utm

⁹ govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y3_R27-PURL-gpo223016/pdf/GOVPUB-Y3_R27-PURL-gpo223016.pdf?utm

¹⁰ "Democratic Republic of Congo: Background Information", *Ibid.*, pp. 9-16

¹¹ freedomhouse.org/country/democratic-republic-congo/freedom-world/2024

¹² researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10089/CBP-10089.pdf

¹³ congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF12206/IF12206.2.pdf

¹⁴ extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/The%20Islamic%20State%20in%20Congo%20English.pdf

¹⁵ Democratic Republic of the Congo: Persecution Dynamics, World Watch Research, Open Doors, January 2025, pp.15. Available at: opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers

¹⁶ reuters.com/world/africa/rwanda-exercises-command-control-over-m23-rebels-say-un-experts-2025-07-02

¹⁷ cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-democratic-republic-congo

¹⁸ [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/08/drc-warring-factions-in-eastern-drc-commit-horrific-abuses-including-gang-rapes-summary-executions-and-abductions](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/08/drc-warring-factions-in-eastern-drc-commit-horrific-abuses-including-gang-rapes-summary-executions-and-abductions)

¹⁹ Operation Shujaa is a joint military campaign by the DRC and Uganda targeting insurgent groups in Kivu and Ituri, mainly ADF

with M23.²⁰ Yet it still struggles to control the east, where both state and rebel forces commit gross human rights violations and civilians are often killed in the crossfire.²¹ Government forces have also been implicated in serious human rights violations, including sexual violence, torture, and arbitrary killings.²² In early 2025, the UN Human Rights Council launched a fact-finding mission and Commission of Inquiry to investigate atrocities in eastern DRC; the present funding crisis has, however, suspended the Commission of Inquiry.²³

Mass displacement and worsening humanitarian crisis

Local faith leaders play a vital role, often being the first responders, providing food, shelter, trauma support and protection, particularly in areas where international access is limited.²⁴

Yet, despite their efforts, the humanitarian situation in eastern DRC continues to deteriorate, with civilians, including the predominantly Christian population, bearing the heaviest impact of the conflict. Ongoing violence by violent Islamists and rebel groups has forced millions from their homes²⁵ into overcrowded, under-resourced displacement sites, including schools, church buildings, and other improvised shelters.²⁶ Churches, once central to community life, have been destroyed or repurposed as temporary refuges, further straining local capacity to provide spiritual and humanitarian support to the surrounding community.²⁷ Access to food, water, and healthcare remains critically limited,²⁸ while insecurity within and around these sites is widespread. Children are at heightened risk of abduction and forced recruitment by Islamist militants or rebel groups.²⁹ Women and girls face heightened risks of sexual violence and exploitation,³⁰ and despite the efforts of humanitarian and faith-based organizations, insecurity and persistent underfunding continue to hinder

effective relief operations, leaving large segments of the population without adequate protection or assistance.³¹

Weak governance and fragile institutions

The DRC continues to struggle with weak governance and fragile institutions that have directly contributed to the protracted violence and humanitarian crisis in the east. Decades of corruption, political favoritism, and mismanagement have eroded institutional capacity and weakened the state's ability to deliver services or uphold security beyond the capital city, Kinshasa. Audits by the Inspectorate General of Finance (IGF) have exposed large-scale misuse of public funds in state enterprises, while funds allocated for local governance and security operations in eastern provinces have often been diverted or mismanaged.³² This governance vacuum has enabled Islamist militants and rebel groups to entrench themselves in North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri, exploiting mineral wealth and controlling trade routes in areas where the state is largely absent.³³

Government reform efforts, such as decentralization and anti-corruption measures, are often inconsistent and weakened by poor oversight and political interference.³⁴ The Ministry of Justice continues to oversee the registration and renewal of religious organizations, but it has not issued new permits for churches since 2014, effectively restricting legal recognition for many congregations.³⁵ Institutional fragility has also weakened the government's humanitarian response, as poor coordination between authorities, security forces, and aid agencies continues to slow down effective action in conflict zones. Although security sector reforms and partnerships such as Operation Shujaa mentioned above have aimed to restore order, corruption, impunity, and the absence of local accountability mechanisms continue to erode progress.³⁶

²⁰ [reuters.com/world/africa/congo-m23-rebels-pledge-qatar-reach-peace-deal-next-month-2025-07-19](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/congo-m23-rebels-pledge-qatar-reach-peace-deal-next-month-2025-07-19)

²¹ Examples include sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, and forced disappearances. See: [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/08/drc-warring-factions-in-eastern-drc-commit-horrific-abuses-including-gang-rapes-summary-executions-and-abductions/#:~:text=DRC:%20Warring%20factions%20in%20eastern,said%20in%20a%20new%20briefing](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/08/drc-warring-factions-in-eastern-drc-commit-horrific-abuses-including-gang-rapes-summary-executions-and-abductions/#:~:text=DRC:%20Warring%20factions%20in%20eastern,said%20in%20a%20new%20briefing)

²² [globalr2p.org/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo](https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo)

²³ [reuters.com/world/africa/funding-crisis-stalls-un-probe-into-possible-war-crimes-congo-2025-06-24](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/funding-crisis-stalls-un-probe-into-possible-war-crimes-congo-2025-06-24)

²⁴ [unicef.org/media/170891/file/Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo-Humanitarian-Situation-Report-No.2%2C-31-December-2024.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/170891/file/Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo-Humanitarian-Situation-Report-No.2%2C-31-December-2024.pdf)

²⁵ [unhcr.org/us/where-we-work/countries/democratic-republic-congo](https://www.unhcr.org/us/where-we-work/countries/democratic-republic-congo)

²⁶ reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/democratic-republic-congo-protection-brief-february-2025

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ [unhcr.org/us/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-seeks-urgent-support-violence-eastern-dr-congo-leaves-hundreds-thousands](https://www.unhcr.org/us/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-seeks-urgent-support-violence-eastern-dr-congo-leaves-hundreds-thousands)

²⁹ reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/more-400-children-eastern-drc-recruited-conflict-first-two-months-2025

³⁰ [msf.org/msf-survey-shows-scale-violence-against-displaced-women-eastern-drc](https://www.msf.org/msf-survey-shows-scale-violence-against-displaced-women-eastern-drc)

³¹ [unhcr.org/us/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-seeks-urgent-support-violence-eastern-dr-congo-leaves-hundreds-thousands](https://www.unhcr.org/us/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-seeks-urgent-support-violence-eastern-dr-congo-leaves-hundreds-thousands)

³² Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index, Democratic Republic of Congo Report, 2024. Available at: bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/COD

³³ [globalr2p.org/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo](https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo)

³⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index, 2024, *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

³⁵ [state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/democratic-republic-of-the-congo](https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/democratic-republic-of-the-congo)

³⁶ Localizing Security Governance in the DRC: Security Committees in action, SIPRI Research Policy Paper, April 2025. Available at: [sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/rrp_2025_04_ssr_drc.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/rrp_2025_04_ssr_drc.pdf)

Recommendations:

To stop the continuous and severe violations of fundamental rights of citizens of DRC, Open Doors makes the following recommendations:

1 To address the escalating violence in eastern DRC and its devastating impact on civilians:

- The Government of DRC should ensure that **all military operations** in eastern DRC **comply with international humanitarian law and include clear command accountability mechanisms**. It should prioritize the **protection of civilians** by deploying trained, vetted units to areas most affected by attacks from groups such as the ADF and M23, and **establish protected zones** to safeguard communities, places of worship, schools, and other civilian infrastructure from violence by all parties to the conflict.
- The Government of DRC should take concrete steps to uphold its commitments to Freedom of Religion or Belief, including improving safeguards for religious leaders and communities at heightened risk of religiously motivated harassment or violence, and take action against non-state actors involved in such abuses.
- The International Community should **fully fund and operationalize the UN Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry on eastern DRC** to investigate atrocities by militant groups and abuses by state actors, including support for evidence gathering, witness protection, and prosecution referrals to ensure accountability.
- The African Union, together with regional organizations such as the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region and East African Community, should **strengthen cross-border intelligence sharing and coordination** to curb the flow of arms and financing that sustain violence in eastern DRC.

2 To protect displaced civilians and respond effectively to the deepening humanitarian emergency in eastern DRC:

- The Government of DRC should establish and enforce **IDP Site Safety Compacts (local protection agreements for displacement sites)** between local authorities, security forces, site committees, and faith leaders to ban armed actors from displacement sites and sanctuaries, ensure regular protection patrols, and guarantee safe humanitarian access. It should also ensure that all referral health facilities **provide comprehensive clinical and psychosocial care for survivors of sexual violence**, including timely access to post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) kits within 72 hours.
- The International Community should provide long-term and flexible funding to vetted and trusted local and faith-based organizations to deliver humanitarian assistance for displaced populations. This support should prioritize mobile health and protection services for women and girls, and fund child protection programs that build community early-warning networks against recruitment, reduce the risk of child soldiering, and provide recovery and reintegration assistance for former child soldiers.

3 To strengthen governance and restore accountability in DRC, the Government should:

- Empower the existing Anti-Corruption Agency (Agence de Prévention et de Lutte contre la Corruption) with **prosecutorial authority** and independent budgetary resources, enabling it to pursue high-level corruption cases and enforce recovery of stolen public funds;
- Resume and streamline the registration and renewal process for churches and religious organizations, with clear criteria, timelines, and appeal mechanisms.