

Study Guide

Week 18

Situation in Democratic
Republic of Congo

TLDR:

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) faces renewed conflict as the M23 militia advances on the eastern city of Goma, with evidence of Rwandan support fueling regional tensions. The fighting has worsened an already dire humanitarian crisis, displacing hundreds of thousands. Various foreign powers—including Rwanda, Uganda, South Africa, the UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO), and major global players like the U.S., China, the EU, and the UK—have competing interests in the DRC's vast mineral wealth, complicating peace efforts. Existing ceasefire frameworks (like the Luanda process) have stalled due to disputes over how to categorize M23 and concerns of international support. Achieving stability requires halting hostilities, engaging all major stakeholders in dialogue, and ensuring accountability for human rights abuses while balancing economic interests in the region's critical mineral resources.

1) Introduction

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a resource-rich country endowed with abundant mineral wealth and fertile land. Yet, it grapples with ongoing conflict, corruption, and humanitarian crises that hamper development and stability. Historically, King Leopold II's brutal colonial enterprise and decades of authoritarian rule under Mobutu Sese Seko laid the groundwork for today's political and economic challenges. In the postcolonial era, frequent upheavals, involving neighboring states and local militias, have resulted in dire conditions and widespread displacement. This volatility reverberates internationally, impacting global supply chains reliant on critical minerals like cobalt and coltan, while raising ethical concerns about labor practices and human rights abuses. Possible solutions include bolstering governance through transparency initiatives, fostering inclusive dialogue among warring factions, and ensuring accountability via international legal frameworks. Strengthening peacekeeping missions and humanitarian aid also remain essential to establish long-term stability and prosperity in the region. These measures must be tailored.

2) Discussion points

2.1) Halting of present hostilities and return to ceasefire agreement

The M23 militia has captured the strategically important city of Goma in eastern DRC and continues to advance further in the region. The UNSC has called on M23 to stop their advances and respect the ceasefire in the framework of the Luanda process talks (*Security Council Press Statement on Situation in Democratic Republic of Congo / Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*, 2025). Economic interests also play a role, as the region of Goma is a key trading hub with Rwanda and home to various gold and coltan mining operations (Serwat, 2025). Delegates need to consider these elements when deliberating on possible solutions that must include the perspectives of the DRC and key players in the region such as South Africa, Uganda and Rwanda. The Luanda process talks provide an already established framework for diplomatic talks, but the designation of M23 as a terrorist organization by the Congolese government delegitimizes their stated interests and prevents Rwanda, a key ally of M23, from engaging in peace talks.

2.2) Foreign powers interference

The M23 rebels are reportedly being heavily supported by the Rwandan army (*DR Congo Fighting: The Evidence That Shows Rwanda Is Backing M23 Rebels*, 2025), while the DRC's government forces are mainly aided by UN peacekeeping forces and the South African military as part of the SAMIDRC mission. Since the start of M23's offensive in early January, 9 South African soldiers have been killed (*DR Congo: Peacekeepers Killed in Heavy Fighting With M23 – DW – 01/26/2025*, 2025) and South Africa has warned Rwanda that any further clashes will be considered a declaration of war (*South Africa and Rwanda Go Head-To-Head Over DR Congo War*, 2025). Efforts to de-escalate diplomatic tensions are key to ensuring the domestic conflict doesn't spill over into a regional one, and peace talks can start to take place. MONUSCO mission in DRC remains vital for de-escalating hostilities, but suffers from logistical challenges and has already suffered casualties in clashes with M23. A reinforcement of its mission, both financially or militarily, or a withdrawal from DRC are some possible avenues to be explored to find a solution to the conflict.

2.3) Prevention of a humanitarian crisis

According to the UNHCR, more than 25 million people are in need of humanitarian aid in the DRC. (UNHCR, n.d.). The current hostilities only exacerbate this situation, with more than 400 thousand IDP since the start of the year (UNHCR, 2025) and more than 700 people dead (Vatican News, 2025). As clashes continue south of Goma, the humanitarian impact will result in further displacement of civilians and vulnerable groups. The volatility of the situation prevents effective action by MONUSCO and NGOs present in the area due to security concerns, and the taking of the main highways around Goma and the airport by M23 prevent additional resources being deployed (Mukoni, 2025). Stabilizing eastern DRC is essential to ensure regional stability and prevent a humanitarian crisis, and definitive action by key stakeholders is necessary to ensure civilian protection.

3) Major Stakeholders

3.1) The DRC

A country rich with natural resources, has been embroiled with conflict and instability since the 19th century. Initially under the rule of Belgian King Leopold from 1885 - 1908, and later a Belgian colony until its independence in 1960, the country suffered under several tumultuous administrations. Further destabilising the nation were the two Congolese civil wars from 1996 till 2003, ultimately involving the armies of seven African nations, with the first free elections after four decades finally being held in 2006.

Today, mining - accounting for 25% of the country's GDP is central driver to both economy and unfortunately conflict. While the Belgians were the first to set up mining units, most of the mining units are now mostly under the control of Chinese firms. The DRC holds four million tonnes in reserves and accounts for 60% of cobalt production in the world, a key component in lithium batteries. It also holds vast reserves of other minerals and metals and minerals such as gold, copper, tungsten and coltan, putting it at the epicentre of the tech revolution.

3.2) Rwanda

Rwanda's tense relationship with its much larger neighbour traces its roots back to the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which saw over 1 million Tutsi killed by extremist Hutu militias.

The current Rwandan president Paul Kagame, a former Tutsi rebel, has used this history to justify the military interventions in eastern DRC.

It is also what fuels the actions of the M23 rebel group, a group accused of using child soldiers and sexual violence as means of intimidation. The group claims the the DRC government is harbouring former Hutu extremists, a claim denied by the DRC.

The recent capture of the city Goma by the M23 is reminiscent of 2012, when the rebels had similarly seized the city but were forced to retreat due to international pressure. There are also reports that this time the rebels are much better resourced and coordinated.

While the Rwandan government has denied any involvement, reports from credible sources have shown evidence of the administration providing M23 with financial and military support, a position backed by UNSC members France and the US.

Adding to complexity are the economic interests in the resource rich part of eastern DRC.

3.3) Uganda

Uganda's relationship with the DRC is also complex and is shaped by its historical involvement with Rwanda in the Congolese civil wars, where the two countries, originally allies, turned upon each other when supporting different rebel groups in the DRC.

In more recent times, Uganda had worked together with the DRC in Operation Shuja to combat the increasing threat of the radical Islamist group the Allied Democratic Forces

which has been associated with the Islamic State group, signifying a mend in relations.

However, the capture of Goma by M23, reportedly backed by Uganda, could strain these relations. Furthermore, the economic motives behind this military incursion cannot be overlooked. In 2022 itself, the ICJ fined Uganda \$325 million for smuggling resources during the Congolese civil wars—a concern that remains relevant today, especially given that Uganda exports more gold than it produces.

3.4) USA

As the biggest donor of aid (\$1 billion USD per year) in the country, the US had played both a diplomatic and economic role in the country. It has strongly condemned the actions of the M23 rebel group although this is likely also in a bid to increase its influence in the region and counter Chinese influence and gain dominance in the supply chain of several critical minerals.

3.5) China

Although China officially held relations with the DRC since the 1960s, it was in 2008 their partnership started to transform into what we see today. China, promising to “break this [] exploitative economic relation”, introduced the infrastructure-for-minerals deal which pledged mining rights to Chinese firms in return for investment in infrastructure (part of the BRI) through the Chinese-Congolese project SICOMINE. This allowed China to gain access to critical minerals and subsequently dominate the global EV and solar panel market.

Unfortunately, there have been reports of corruption, questioning whether revenue from the mining projects truly went towards the promised infrastructure projects. There have also been concerns of the blatant disregard for safety and environment regulations and well as forced ‘relocation’.

3.5) EU

The European Union has consistently condemned the ongoing violence in the DRC, particularly the role of rebel groups like M23. Germany alone has already taken a firm stance by calling off aid talks with Rwanda, signaling a broader EU push for accountability. Additionally, the EU has been under increasing pressure to reconsider its mineral trade agreements, as concerns grow over ethical sourcing and the exploitation of conflict resources.

3.5) UK

The United Kingdom's stance on the DRC is complicated by its relationship with Rwanda, which has been a key partner in the UK's controversial deportation scheme for asylum seekers. Though this policy was introduced under the former Conservative government, it has shaped the UK's diplomatic approach. While the UK has condemned the violence in the DRC, it has been less vocal in pressuring Rwanda over its alleged support for M23.

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