



The illusion of protection

Peace support missions in the DRC

Fred Bauma & Reagan Miviri
August 2025

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Legal notice

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung RDC
70, avenue Batetela Kinshasa RDC
info@fes.cd

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Responsibility for content and editing

Constantin Grund, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Kinshasa
Fred Bauma, Ebuteli, Kinshasa

Contact

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung RDC
info@fes.cd

Design/layout

Henock Mbiyavanga Luneko

Cover design

Martha Mondo Matoke

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Glossary of acronymes

CNDP	National Congress for the Defence of the People
CSI	Integrated Strategic Framework
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
DDRRR	Disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, resettlement and reintegration
EAC-RF	East African Community - Regional Force
FARDC	Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo
FIB	Force intervention Brigade
M23	23 March Movement
MONUC	United Nations Organisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo
Monusco	United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
UN	United Nations
PSO	Peace Support Operations
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
RDF	Rwandan Defence Force
SADC	Southern African Development Community

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1. Introduction

After several days of fighting, the M23 rebellion (March 23 Movement) and their Rwandan allies, took control of the city of Goma on 26 January 2025. Before its fall, the city of nearly one million was protected by a grand defensive system consisting of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC), the Southern African Development Community in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIRDC), the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), contingents from the Burundian army, private military companies and a coalition of local militias united under the banner of Wazalendo («Patriots» in Swahili). With its overwhelming concentration of men and material, the government had good reason to bet that «Goma would not fall».

Yet, Goma did fall. According to the United Nations, the battle for the city caused an estimated 3,000 deaths, many of which were civilians. The camps for displaced persons, housing around 700,000 people, were dismantled by M23. Their occupants were forced back to their villages and left to fend for themselves without adequate humanitarian assistance. A crisis within a crisis.

The capture of Goma brought about a temporary collapse of the Congolese Army. The M23 continued to push their advantage, capturing the city of Bukavu, with its more than 1.5 million inhabitants. With the fall of Bukavu, the M23 gained complete control of Lake Kivu, a large swath of North and South Kivu, and the group makes no secret of its ambition to expand further into other provinces. No armed group has accomplished such territorial gains since the end of the Second Congo War in 2003.

The defeat of the Congolese army was a defeat of the international forces that supported it. Over the last several years, North Kivu had become a hub for foreign military missions. The UN mission MONUSCO has a large base there and in November 2023, it launched Operation Springbok with the aim of countering the advance of M23 and protecting the towns of Goma and Sake.

SAMIRDC, deployed since December 2023 with more than 4,000 troops, had the same objective: to protect the city of Goma. The protracted crisis in eastern DRC reignited the debate on the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions – or, to use the African Union's terminology, peace support

operations (PSOs) – in their mandate to protect civilians and combat armed groups. This report aims to understand Congolese perceptions of the mandate of peace support operations in their country. It will examine their views on the effectiveness of peace missions, the reasons for their successes and failures, and the conditions for responsible withdrawal.

Although the UN Security Council has strengthened MONUSCO's mandate to enable it to respond effectively to security challenges and support the Congolese government, the mission faces pressure from civil society and political forces who demand its departure. Since President Félix Tshisekedi came to power, the Congolese government repeatedly called for military support from both regional organisations and bilateral partners to resolve the crisis. So far, these efforts have proved unsuccessful.

Faced with protests by the population demanding the departure of MONUSCO, and later the Eastern Africa (EAC-RF), it is important to understand how the Congolese perceive PSO's inability to provide lasting peace. Although this report focuses on MONUSCO, this paper will also address the perception in North Kivu of recent regional initiatives by the EAC (EAC-RF) and SADC (SAMIRDC).

At the core of this report is over 50 semi-structured interviews with key informants that relayed their experiences with MONUSCO, the EAC-RF and SAMIRDC. Field research was conducted in Goma, Bukavu, Beni, Butembo, and Bunia between September and the end of December 2024. Key informants included local and provincial civil society leaders, journalists, former mayors, and provincial deputies.

We also spoke with current and former MONUSCO personnel in North Kivu, South Kivu and Kinshasa. Most informants were urban based, although some relayed rural experiences. This report also drew from internal MONUSCO reports, various secondary sources compiled by NGOs, as well as official documents issued by all actors.

This report is divided into two parts. The first part reviews the history of peacekeeping missions in the DRC. This section addresses the various transformations undergone by the UN force over the past 25 years, as well as the recent unsuccessful mission by the EAC and SADC. It lays out the tensions that pit peacekeeping missions against

the civilian public. The second part focuses on the perceptions of the population towards peacekeeping missions. This section highlights tensions between the mandate and the reality on the ground. These tensions are particularly evident when examining the protection of civilians, resources allocated to the forces, the duration of mandates, the use of offensive force by PSOs, and the role of regional contingents.

This report shows that despite the significant contributions of the UN mission to the reconstruction of a post-conflict Congolese state, its inability to protect has tarnished its reputation. More than any other aspect of MONUSCO's mandate, the population's understanding and expectation that the mission protect civilians had the greatest influence on public perception.

Three main factors shape this perception of protection: the public position of the missions, the duration of their presence, and the risk of political exploitation.

Through its equipment and logistics, MONUSCO projects an image of power that contrasted with its actual operational capabilities. Its prolonged presence undermined its reputation and fuels various conspiracy theories.

Furthermore, the risk of political exploitation makes it an ideal scapegoat for various political actors, especially during election season.

Finally, this report highlights that the population does not always share the optimism of many experts that regional forces are a viable alternative to peace missions. The Congolese public tends to distrust regional PSO's lack transparency and suspect the motivations of the troop contributing countries.

2. Supporting a Fragile Peace

After 25 years of uninterrupted operations in the DRC, the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) is a long running peacekeeping mission. It is also one of the largest missions, both in terms of the number of civilians and military personnel deployed and the size of its budget – more than US\$1 billion per year, nearly triple that of the Congolese army before the resurgence of the M23 in 2021.

It also is one of the most controversial missions. MONUSCO has been criticised in recent years by the Congolese government, as well as by a fringe of civil society and leaders in the Great Lakes region. Created in July 1999 as the United Nations Organisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC), the mission initially was tasked with observing the implementation of the Lusaka ceasefire. MONUC's mandate was later extended to cover all subsequent peace processes, notably the comprehensive agreement signed in Pretoria in December 2002 that ended the Second Congo War.

MONUC contributed positively to the post-conflict institution-building process in the Congo. It played a significant role in the quasi-reunification of the country and in the conduct of the three-year transition from 2003 to 2006. During this period, a new Constitution was adopted and promulgated, the first pluralistic and largely democratic elections were held in 2006, a national army and police force were established, and an initial disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process was implemented.

These advances brought peace to much of the country, but failed to secure the east where more than a hundred armed groups continue to operate. The use of political violence continues as common practice among the Congolese elite, while the state is unable to guarantee the security of the Congolese people from domestic rebellion or external aggression.

As the transitional government took office, MONUC was unable to prevent the massacres committed near its positions (Kisangani 2002, Walungu 2003 and Ituri 2002-2004), which severely undermined the mission's legitimacy. In May 2004, a mutiny led by Colonel Mutebusi, supported by Laurent Nkunda, broke out in Bukavu. In the weeks that followed, serious crimes were committed by both the official army and the mutineers, according to a report by Human

Rights Watch (HRW). These crimes included summary executions of members of the Banyamulenge community by the Congolese army, as well as sexual violence, looting and murders of civilians by elements loyal to Laurent Nkunda (HRW, June 2004).

Although MONUC occasionally intervened, it generally proved powerless to stop the violence against civilians. In its report, HRW recommended that *MONUC urgently reconsider the rules of engagement of MONUC in the DRC to ensure a broader interpretation of its mandate under Chapter VII, which consists of protecting civilians and contributing to improving security conditions.*

Despite its recommendations, the mutiny expanded into a new rebellion (the CNDP) and the conflict displaced more than two million people and led to further massacres. 150 people were killed in November 2008 by CNDP militiamen and Mai Mai reprisals in Kanyabayonga and Kiwanja. These massacres occurred despite the presence of a MONUC base in Kiwanja.

MONUC did intervene to facilitate the withdrawal of the rebels in Rumangabo and to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. Despite this success, popular criticism raged against the Mission, which was described as incompetent tourists or as profiteers. The slogan «No Nkunda, No Job» often directed at the mission encapsulated the latter view's popularity.

Demonstrations against MONUC were organised in Goma. Beyond MONUC's internal weaknesses (logistical difficulties, contradictory orders, etc.), its inability to protect civilians was also driven by political marginalization, reflected in tense relations with the Congolese army and the local administration in Rutshuru. In several cases, MONUC contingents were attacked by elements of the FARDC. In its report on violations committed by the FARDC in Goma and Kanyabayonga in 2008, the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) noted that *FARDC soldiers on the run attacked a MONUC patrol with stones and gunfire on the road to Rwindi.*

Furthermore, the involvement of FARDC units in human rights violations as well as their alliance with local militias both made cooperation with MONUC in protecting civilians difficult. This contributed to exacerbating tensions between

MONUC and the Congolese authorities demanding that the UN immediately apply Chapter VII against Nkunda.

From MONUC to MONUSCO: a first attempt at an exit strategy

In June 2010, the Security Council reconfigured MONUC, believing that the DRC was entering a new phase in its transition towards peace. With the establishment of new national government following the 2006 elections, progress in the demobilization of armed groups, successful military operations against the FDLR, and the signing of the 23 March 2009 agreement that ending the CNDP rebellion, the Congolese government believed that the security situation in eastern DRC had improved. A withdrawal of MONUC was desired.

A UN technical assessment entered discussions with the Congolese government and troop contributing countries, leading to an integrated strategic framework that would transform MONUC into a new mission. MONUSCO was born.

Now that the transitional period was over, MONUSCO would assist the Congolese government in “stabilization” of the turbulent east. MONUSCO concentrated its military presence in three eastern provinces (North Kivu, South Kivu and Maniema) and focused on the military operations in Kivu and Orientale Province and minimising the threat posed by armed groups.

These stabilization actions were designed to give the Congolese state a change to gradually build its security forces and take over, strengthening the authority of the

State. The Security Council gave MONUSCO a long lists of objectives. In addition to protecting civilians, the mission was tasked with supporting the DRC in reforming the security and justice sectors, developing and implementing a stabilisation and reconstruction plan, and combating the illegal exploitation of natural resources. Success would allow MONUSCO to hand over to the Congolese and withdrawal between June and August 2011.

Fifteen years later, MONUSCO is bogged down in the east and the situation is increasingly desperate. War has resumed in the east, causing a humanitarian crisis unprecedented since 1999. The Congolese army’s inability to defend the country against local armed groups or foreign aggression highlights the failure of MONUSCO efforts to hand over security to the national forces.

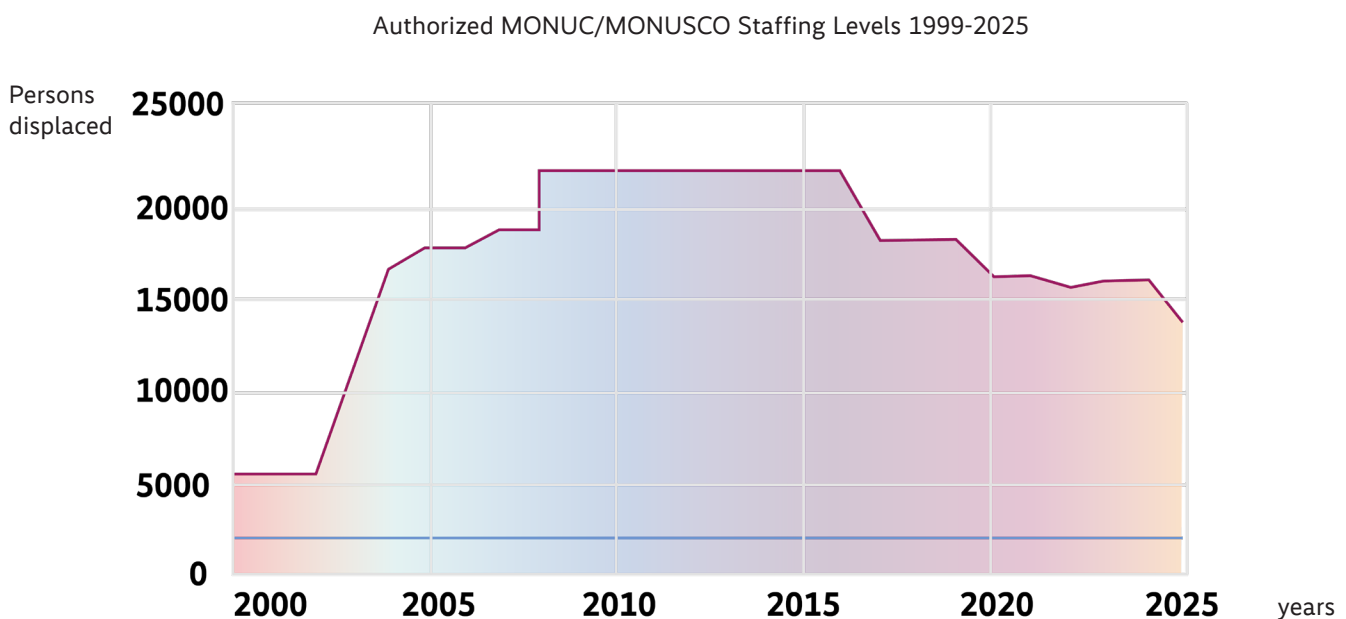
MONUSCO’s offensive mandate

In April 2012, former CNDP commanders integrated into the Congolese army and stationed in North and South Kivu rebelled again. This new movement, accusing the Congolese government of failing to comply with the agreements of 23 March 2009, named themselves “M23” after the agreement.

Months of clashes in Masisi and Rutshuru territories culminated in the brief occupation of the city of Goma on 20 November 2012. The Congolese army, in disarray, retreated to Minova in South Kivu. MONUSCO, despite its massive presence in Goma, did nothing to prevent the rebels from entering. This inaction was met with widespread criticism and the mandate become disputed by both international and civil society. Civil society organisations and international pressure for a more robust mandate soon

Image 1

Figure 1. Evolution of authorized MONUSCO personnel since 1999



different reports from the United Nations Secretary-General since 2000.

bore fruit. In March of 2023, under pressure from SADC states and Congolese civil society, the Security Council declared that a new “Force Intervention Brigade” (FIB) would be integrated into MONUSCO. This new force was mandated to use force to neutralise armed groups.

The Security Council permitted the FIB to act alone or with the FARDC. The FIB took the latter option and fought alongside the Congolese army until the defeat of the M23 in 2013. This victory strengthened the MONUSCO’s public image. It also raised the expectations of the Congolese public, who saw that MONUSCO was capable of protecting civilians. Although the FIB was criticised by some experts the force as contradicting the peacekeeping principle of impartiality, most Congolese informants interviewed highlighted the FIB’s victory as a major success.

The crisis of MONUSCO’s reputation

Since the FIB’s success in 2013, MONUSCO’s popularity declined dramatically. Popular criticism of the mission during the CNDP war, which subsided in 2013 thanks to the mission’s victory over the M23, returned with a series of massacres in 2014 attributed to the Ugandan Islamist Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).

The resurgence of the M23 in 2021, as well as populist rhetoric during the 2023 election heightened anti-MONUSCO sentiment among the population. Again, MONUSCO was criticised for its inability to protect civilians despite a robust mandate. Relations between the Congolese government and MONUSCO become quite rocky.

Attempts at joint operations between the Congolese and MONUSCO were blocked by human rights concerns. In 2015, after the Congolese government appointed Generals Fall Sikabwe and Bruno Mandevu to lead joint operations with MONUSCO against the FDLR, the UN demanded the officers be replaced due to allegations of human rights violations. The Congolese government accused the UN of meddling in internal affairs and decided to conduct operations alone.

The mission’s inability to respond to the killings perpetrated by the ADF in the Beni region, despite the presence of a MONUSCO base and rapid response brigades, eroded the UN’s reputation. Since 2019, large anti-MONUSCO demonstrations in DRC have been held in Beni and Butembo, protesting UN inaction.

The UN’s reputational crisis was worsened by a shrinking of resources. Since the end of the first M23 crisis in 2013, MONUSCO saw dramatic cuts to personnel by the Security Council. Its geographical presence correspondingly also declined. Initially present across the DRC, the mission gradually concentrated in the east. After closing its bases in the provinces of Tshopo, Kongo Central, Kasai and Kasai

Central, MONUSCO withdrew from Tanganyika province in June 2022 and finally South Kivu in June 2024. It is now only present in the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri.

Withdrawal plans and regional alternatives

Following a series of protests against MONUSCO in 2020, the Congolese government and the UN agreed on a plan for a gradual and responsible withdrawal. As the M23 rebellion advanced into Rutshuru territory in 2023 and anticipating a new wave of protests against MONUSCO, the Congolese government demanded an accelerated withdrawal by December 2024.

However, as the security situation underlying anti-MONUSCO sentiment deteriorated, the mission mandate was extended by one year. The Security Council gave the mission two objectives: to contribute to the protection of civilians and to support the stabilization and strengthening of state institutions.

On paper, MONUSCO’s new mandate remained robust. It authorised MONUSCO to take deterrent measures to protect civilians and gave it a mandate to conduct targeted and vigorous offensives in the DRC to neutralise armed groups and to conduct frequent and effective joint operations.

It also authorised MONUSCO to support the demobilisation, disarmament and community reintegration process. However, the advance of the M23 and the capture of Goma and Bukavu reignited a two-pronged debate. First, it is debated if MONUSCO has the ability to implement an offensive mandate in the face of foreign aggression. Second, the advance calls into question the feasibility of a mission withdrawal under such dire circumstances.

While MONUSCO withdrew from Bukavu in June 2024, new discussions are being held in New York on a possible redeployment to South Kivu. The continuing mobilisation of unruly local militia to counter M23 exposes the civilian population to serious threat of harm.

Despite the mission’s robust mandate and the massive build-up of Congolese army forces, the security situation continues to deteriorate. Massacres of civilians by the ADF continue in the north of North Kivu and Ituri. In southern North Kivu province, the M23 continues to advance.

Losing control, the Congolese government turned to regional forces for aid. In 2022, the East African Community mandated a force to intervene in the conflict. However, when deployed the EAC force interpreted their mandate differently than the Congolese, who desired a military ally, not a peacekeeper. The Congolese government, believing that the EAC-RF was not aggressive enough against the M23, decided to end the mission on the eve of the December 2023 elections. The EAC-RF was then replaced

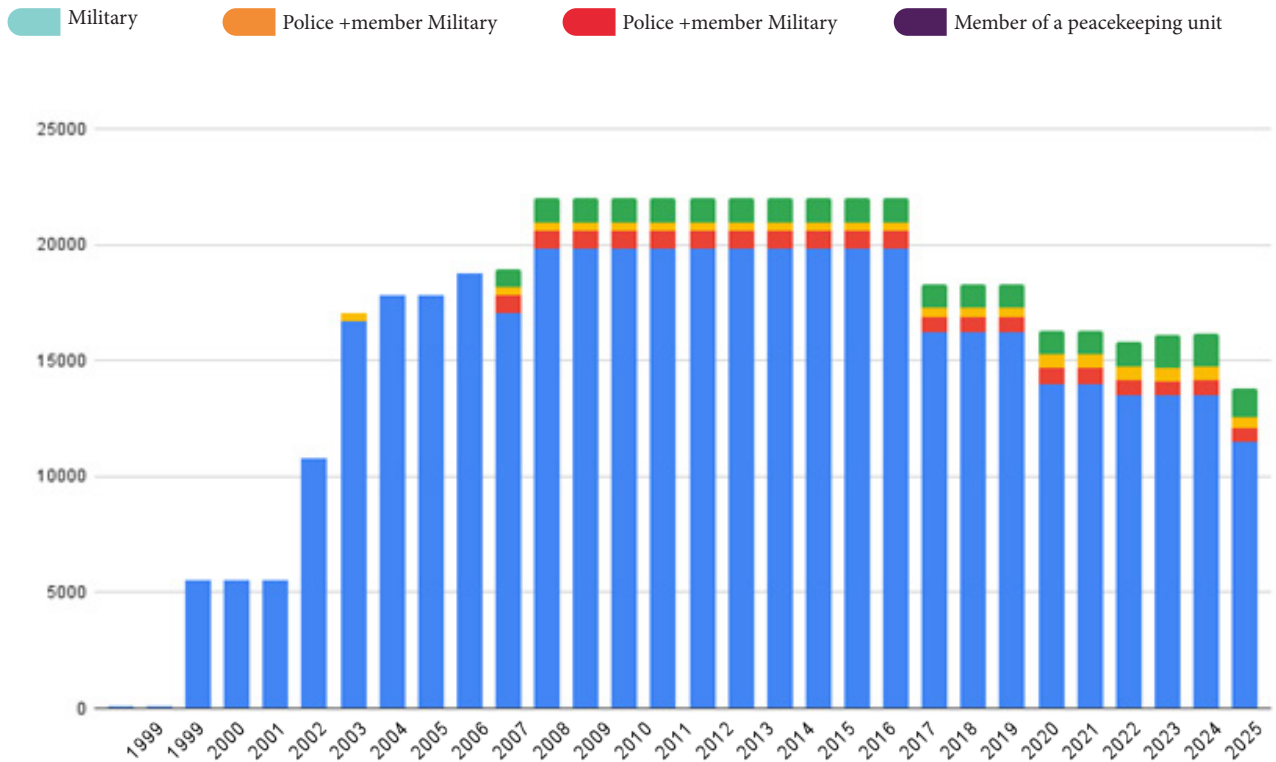
by a SADC force (SAMIRDC) composed of South Africa, Tanzania and Malawi.

This force was explicitly tasked with supporting the Congolese government against the M23, but limited itself to protecting Goma for several months, unable to prevent

the M23 advance. After the capture of Goma, its contingents were confined to their barracks, unable to carry out their mandate. At the SADC summit on 13 March 2025, the regional community withdrew the force. This failure brought into question the ability of regional missions to counter aggression by a state.

Image 2

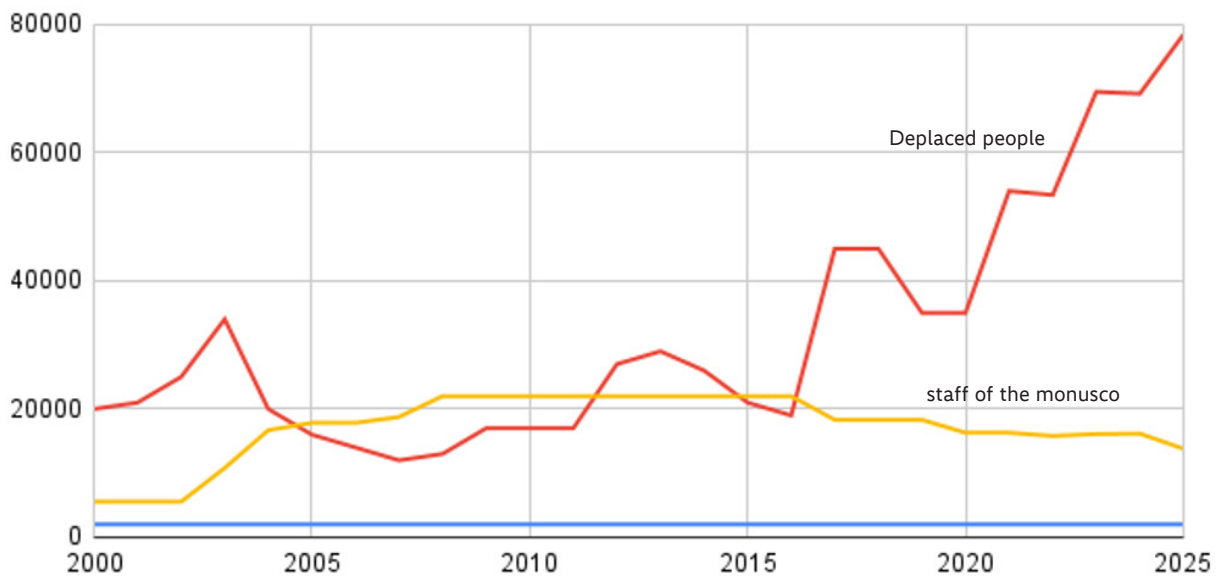
Figure 2. Composition of the authorized strength of MONUSCO

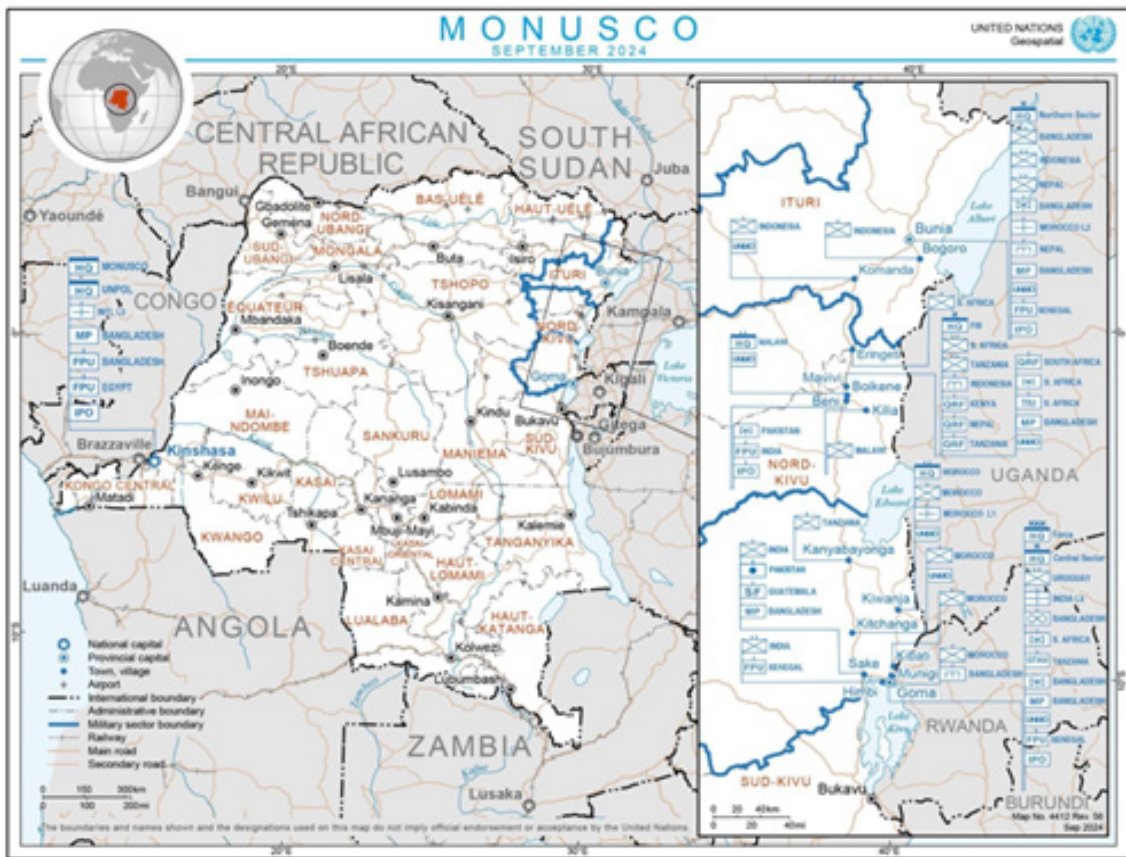


Source: various United Nations resolutions on the MONUSCO mandate

Image 3

Evolution of the MONUSCO force vs. evolution of internally displaced persons since 1999





Source: Monusco

3.

Perceptions of peace support operations

This section examines the population's perception of the various peace support missions in the DRC. This analysis will focus primarily on MONUSCO, although the conclusions remain relevant to other missions present in the DRC. After more than 25 years of presence in the DRC, MONUSCO's effectiveness is being called into question given the renewed war and persistent instability in the east. The question of MONUSCO's mandate and (more importantly) the Congolese public's expectations are at the heart of a revitalized debate as the security situation deteriorates.

The perception of peace support missions in the DRC is centered on civilian protection. While appearing simple, implementation is subject to numerous debates. Is it protection best provided by presence or the projection of forces? Should an offensive mandate be implemented, or is mission better limited to supporting the host country's government, which has primary responsibility for ensuring the protection of its population? Should action be taken in strict compliance with the fundamental principles of peacekeeping — namely, the consent of the parties, impartiality and non-use of force except in self-defence or in defence of the mandate? In a context of aggression, how can impartiality be interpreted? Who is accountable to the population in the event of a failure to protect?

This report shows that the Congolese public's expectations of protection strongly influenced the perception of the performance of MONUSCO (and other forces). The former mayor of Beni stated this clearly on 14 December 2024: *MONUSCO's mission has failed, even though it is doing great work in terms of social issues and support to the administration, in particular through the provision of fuel, infrastructure, training to strengthen the capacities of officials, and many other things that I cannot mention now.*

But as long as there are still bodies of people killed before its eyes, as long as threats to life are still a living reality, as long as the country is still under attack, and as long as there are hundreds of armed groups, then it will have failed. And only it knows why. But, in my opinion, it is because it is not active enough.

It does not intervene when it is needed, even though it has modern weapons. It is still waiting for orders from somewhere to strike the enemy. In short, it is a mission that does not help in terms of security.

This criticism is not unique to the Congo. Other peacekeeping missions in Africa frequently have tense relations with civilian populations and host governments. In Mali, the government called for the immediate withdrawal of the mission. The adoption in 2013 of Resolution 2098, creating the Intervention Brigade under the command of MONUSCO tasked with neutralising armed groups, raised new expectations among the population regarding the capabilities of a peacekeeping mission. The resumption of fighting with the M23 illustrates the limitations of this mandate.

First, this section describes the efforts made by MONUSCO to protect civilians. It then analyses the factors that explain why, despite these efforts, the perception of MONUSCO remains negative where it is most present. It also addresses other factors that influence the perception of peace support missions. These include the extensive and highly visible resources that missions mobilise, their duration, the issue of the use of force, and the risks of political exploitation by national actors. Finally, it discusses the role of regional forces as alternatives to MONUSCO.

Challenges in protecting civilians: considerable but insufficient efforts by MONUSCO

The protection of civilians is central to the mission's mandate and to the Congolese population's perception of it. In various resolutions since 2010, the UN established a hierarchy of priorities for MONUSCO's mandate, with the protection of civilians at the top of the list.

Those interviewed largely understood the protection of civilians to mean actions taken by MONUSCO to prevent attacks against civilians. Informants differed in their definition of "action" as referring to deterrence or if it must include offensive action. *When we talk about protecting civilians, it implies tracking down armed groups that may threaten the security of the civilian population.*

Several informants recognized the deterrent effect of MONUSCO bases. In North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri, many people cite the UN mission bases as places of refuge: *In the event of an attack, for example, or fear of an attack, the population's reflex has always been to gather where there are MONUSCO bases.*

This means that, in general, MONUSCO bases are places of safety, unlike Congolese army positions, which cannot be considered as such by the population.

In a context of withdrawal, with MONUSCO starting to close bases, this reduction in deterrence can pose risks to civilian populations. In 2017, when MONUSCO decided to close its base in Pinga, North Kivu, the population expressed fears of a return to insecurity. These fears were validated when armed groups reoccupied the city following MONUSCO's withdrawal.

MONUSCO implemented additional protection mechanisms, beyond deterrence, in the areas where it was present. These included early warning mechanisms, patrols, and community capacity building. MONUSCO also supported the training of civil society organisations in different parts of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri. This has also helped to strengthen local protection capacities, although it also contributed to the polarisation of civil society.

Despite successes, the cases in which MONUSCO failed in its preventive role were the most often cited to illustrate why the mission was a failure. Protection failures in Bukavu in 2004, Kiwanja and Kanyabayonga in 2008, Mavivi in 2014 and Kamananga in South Kivu in 2012, and Savo in Ituri in 2023 are regularly cited to explain how MONUSCO failed in its mission. A human rights activist from the city of Beni explained: *[MONUSCO] is overarmed but ineffective due to a lack of will... I remember that in 2017, as in 2018, the rebels carried out multiple massacres less than 100 metres from the MONUSCO base in Mavivi and elsewhere. Under these circumstances, how can it remain? Who will trust it? Faced with this situation, we believe it must pack its bags.*

More than three interviewees explained that the emergence of the nebulous Raia Mutomboki army in South Kivu was a consequence of the massacre of civilians that took place in the presence of MONUSCO. An official from a human rights organisation in the city of Bukavu explained: Two weeks before the Kamananga massacre, MONUSCO was deployed. The FDLR massacred citizens. The people revolted and drove MONUSCO out.

However, UN officials in South Kivu deny this. According to an official within the residual team of the United Nations Mission in Bukavu, there is a problem of understanding the mission's mandate: MONUSCO supports the Congolese government. It is impossible to achieve 100% security. We are trying to mitigate the risks of violence.

In this context, MONUSCO is assisting state structures in the transfer of capabilities so that the state can take over its role as soon as it leaves. But this explanation is inadequate, as summarised by a civil society official in Goma: *(There is a) glaring lack of communication on the part of MONUSCO, but also a lack of courage and communication on the part of*

the government. No official has come forward to explain. The failure of MONUSCO is shared between the organisation itself and the Congolese government.

Challenges in protecting civilians: the illusion of protection?

Although MONUSCO's deterrent presence and its actions in other areas such as stabilisation and even «development» are recognised, it is struggling to forge an image of an effective protection force: *[MONUSCO] built offices, supported the functioning of certain services, trained people in the protection of human rights, it has done a lot, but not really within the scope of its main mandate, which was to protect civilians. Unfortunately, today, civilians are not protected despite its presence.*

This report highlights three factors that influence the Congolese population's expectations of the mission in the DRC: its logistics, its duration, and its vulnerability to political manipulation.

1. Tension between visible resources and results in the implementation of the mandate

The population's frustration with MONUSCO's lack of action stems from the mission's visible projection of strength. This strength is in comparison with the Congolese security forces, who are under-equipped and depend on MONUSCO's logistical support. Through its visually impressive equipment and logistics, MONUSCO appears a powerful actor despite the force's limited actual operational capabilities. One interviewee stated:

We can understand the FARDC because they are very limited in many ways, but MONUSCO is a complete, structured entity. The FARDC lack everything; there are places they cannot access, and it is MONUSCO that sometimes facilitates their transport, but with no results.

The population sees MONUSCO as a powerful army equipped to put an end to the killings and insecurity. Public discourse tends to compare MONUSCO to the FARDC without taking into account the different mandates of each organisation. Speaking about the ADF massacres in the Beni region, informants for this study pointed to their perceived capability of MONUSCO's logistics and its inability to respond to attacks against civilians:

With the intervention brigade made up of Malawians, South Africans and, most recently, Kenyans, we thought that this might be one of the solutions to the problem of armed groups and, above all, to the killings of the population by ADF rebels because we thought that with all their military arsenal and technology, it would be easy for them to find out where the ADF were and attack them, by bombing their camps. But we have seen that for more than ten years.

Unfortunately, people have been killed, sometimes not far from the bases of the MONUSCO. The example of the Mavivi base, where people were killed less than 100 metres away from it, towards N'zuma, raised many questions.

2. Nexus between duration and perception of MONUSCO's performance

MONUSCO's long duration further hurts the public's perception of its mandate and track record: *It has been here for a very long time. I can say that MONUSCO raised hopes when it became involved in organising the elections in 2006 and 2011, and until 2012 and 2013, we saw MONUSCO at work.*

A member of civil society interviewed in Butembo said: *Look at the number of rebellions that have sprung up since it arrived. Instead of helping to put an end to them, they are multiplying; I don't know how many there are now. So it has become a force that no one fears. It has lasted so long that we don't know how long it was supposed to stay. A mission like this should come with a specific mandate. It acts within a predetermined timeframe, is evaluated, and then withdraws (...). It (MONUSCO) is not constrained by time. And that is one of the reasons for its failure.*

This long presence also fuels suspicions about a hidden agenda that MONUSCO might have in the DRC: *It's getting worse, and it makes people think they are here for business. It's work for them. It is in their interest that the situation remains unchanged. And perhaps in the interest of the states that send them too. I believe that many of the decision-makers in the MONUSCO force are asking themselves the question: should the mission impose peace here and thus impose unemployment on its agents?*

Since 2014, several thousand civilians have been killed by the ADF, an armed group from Uganda that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Given the human toll of the ADF massacres, the Congolese expected MONUSCO to use its military resources to combat this group, as it did against the M23 in 2013. Rumours of alleged complicity between the Pakistani contingents and the ADF quickly spread in Beni, where ADF killings occur on a regular basis.

At the beginning of the ADF crisis, civilians called on MONUSCO to take action to protect civilians. The population's demands of MONUSCO have evolved over time. These demands have ranged from «protect us!» to «protect us or leave!» and finally to «leave!». This anti-MONUSCO rhetoric culminated in demonstrations against the mission in cities across eastern DRC. In April 2021, anti-MONUSCO protests broke out simultaneously in Beni and Goma with a clear message: *MONUSCO must leave because of its failure to protect civilians affected by the ADF crisis.*

3. Risk of MONUSCO being exploited in internal political debates

Criticism of MONUSCO, by both the Congolese government and elements of civil society, intensified in the run-up to the 2023 elections. In the lead up to the elections, the Congolese government called for an accelerated withdrawal.

In his letter to the Security Council, Congolese Foreign Minister Christophe Lutundula stated that despite MONUSCO's mandate being Under Chapter VII since 2000, *it has been conciliatory, defensive, closer to the principles of Chapter VI [...] Faced with this umpteenth tragedy, MONUSCO has been powerless and unable to protect the civilian population, one of its main statutory missions.*

The United Nations in general, and the Security Council in particular, have not done enough to reassure the Congolese people and convince them of their genuine political will to help the Democratic Republic of Congo end the crisis, for which its citizens are paying a heavy price.

It is important to put this statement into context. In 2023, the Congolese President was seeking a new term of office while the east of the country faced foreign aggression. Demonstrations against the UN were organised in several cities across in the east. This speech was also aimed at Congolese domestic public opinion, which is largely critical of the UN presence.

Christophe Lutundula is not the only Congolese politician to exploit MONUSCO's unpopularity during election periods to win the sympathy of the masses. Bahati Lukwebo, then President of the Senate, declared during his visit to Goma: *We are even asking ourselves whether it is worth keeping MONUSCO on our territory. 20,000 men have been in the country for more than 22 years, and we still do not have peace. MONUSCO acknowledges the presence of anti-MONUSCO sentiment among the public, but is keen to defend its record and contribution to peace.* A UN official in Bukavu explained in an interview his view that the mission is a scapegoat.

He claimed that despite political interference, those who benefit from MONUSCO's services were against its departure: *«We have improved conditions in many areas. I cannot say that there will be a security vacuum. Otherwise, it would be disrespectful to the security services that are our partners. I would rather say that there is still concern about security.* Since the M23 took Goma and Bukavu, new discussions are being held on a possible redeployment of MONUSCO to areas which it withdrew in June 2024. In December 2024, the Congolese government asked the UN to postpone its departure in the face of the unfolding M23 crisis.

4.

Peace enforcement and regional forces: a viable alternative?

Criticism over mission mandate is at the centre of the controversies surrounding MONUSCO and the EAC-RF in recent years. The East African regional force found itself embroiled in controversy over the meaning of its mandate. The texts governing its mandate authorised it to engage in combat and eradicate armed groups, and this was the same understanding held by the informants interviewed in this study. However, this mandate was not the understanding of the troop contributing countries.

To the commander of the EAC-RF force, the mandate seemed to sometimes entail protecting the city of Goma and other times to simply provide a buffer zone following the withdrawal of the M23 in accordance with the Nairobi process. However, this study shows that MONUSCO, like the EAC-RF, is judged primarily on by the public's expectations of its protection mission derived from the missions stated objectives and long duration.

Increasingly, regional actors deploying mission under African Union mandates or under other regional designations. Once on the ground, they also face impatience from civilian populations who long for peace. These forces face challenges of funding, coordinating actions, adherence to international law, civilian protection, and supporting security reform. Efforts to address these challenges led to the adoption of Resolution 2719, which allows for the financing of African missions by the United Nations.

Interviews conducted for this report show that, contrary to the international community's enthusiasm, these regional missions raising even more public concerns in eastern DRC. These concerns are fuelled by the lack of transparency of the mission, mandate and activities; the composition of their troops; and the regional dynamics of the crisis in eastern DRC.

Those interviewed within civil society discuss MONUSCO's mandate readily, but their understanding of the corresponding mandates for the EAC-RF, SAMIRDC, Ugandan, or Burundian interventions remains limited. The mandate of these regional missions is unclear. Communication between regional missions and the population is not as regular or systematic as it is with MONUSCO. This lack of information fuels suspicion.

The big problem is that sometimes governments sign agreements that they hide from the public and its representatives. In principle, these should be win-win agreements (...) This reduces suspicion, which is an important factor in relations between the population and these foreign forces, which often do not enjoy the support of the population because of these so-called hidden agreements (...). Every effort must be made to ascertain the agendas of the States willing to participate in the composition of the force. We need to know what they are officially aiming for and what they are unofficially aiming for.

The theories about the interests of troop contributing countries were cited as key to informant's understanding of the missions. Interviewees came to two different conclusions about the role of regional interests.

Some informants believed that African missions were best placed to intervene because of their geographical and cultural proximity. Another opinion focuses on the interest that some countries in the region would have in maintaining insecurity in the eastern DRC.

5. Conclusion

This report focuses on perceptions of peace support missions in the DRC. The first part reviews the evolution of the UN presence in the DRC over the past 25 years. From MONUC to MONUSCO, it explains how UN missions have helped to stabilise the post-conflict DRC and support the establishment of democratic institutions. It also notes how failures to protect civilians cost the mission its reputation.

These limitations were due in part to the political marginalisation of peacekeeping missions that occurs when they are in tension with the host governments, as demonstrated by the rocky relationship between MONUSCO and the Congolese government.

In a second section, the report describes that despite many successes, the mission's inability to protect civilians defined the Congolese public's perception of the mission. The report concludes that three factors influence this perception: the impressive material presence of the mission, the duration of its stay, and the political exploitation by national actors.

The report also questions the idea that regional forces offer a viable alternative to large-scale UN peacekeeping missions. The lack of transparency and questions of interests plague these missions. As diplomatic processes continue, it is worth considering the role that MONUSCO

could play again in the DRC, despite the challenges outlined in this report.

MONUSCO could soon be called upon to monitor a possible ceasefire, serve as an interposition force, and provide security for the population.

On 25 April in Washington, D.C., the governments of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo committed to *protecting, facilitating and promoting the capacity of MONUSCO and regional forces and mechanisms to act in accordance with their mandate, including, where appropriate, for an agreed verification mechanism and an interposition force to facilitate the implementation in good faith of these principles by participants and non-State armed groups.*

For this to be possible, MONUSCO will need to address its structural weaknesses and present a clear time-bound mandate. Only by doing so, can the mission avoid backlash from the weary Congolese public.

6.

Dynamics of Peace Operations

The long presence of MONUC, which became MONUSCO, and other regional peace support operations has clearly not helped to fulfil the hopes placed in them by the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In order to better understand these dynamics, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), in partnership with the Ebuteli Think Tank, is working to construct a matrix of factors to serve as a compass for future peace support operations. This study is part of the FES's mission to enable a cross-country assessment of peacekeeping operations in Africa. Similar studies have been conducted in South Sudan, Mali, Mozambique, and across Africa.

The following matrix presents the Congolese public's perceptions of peace support operations (PSOs) in the DRC. This research aimed to understand the perceptions of Congolese men and women regarding peace support missions in the context of the DRC. The aim was to understand how Congolese men and women view the mandate of these peace support missions, the composition of the troops, the causes of their successes or failures, and finally, the conditions for a responsible withdrawal.

Modalities	Perceptions and expectations (Duration of the study)	Recommendations for the future (based on interviews)	Observations (by the authors)
<p>Type of mission/mandate?</p>	<p>The PSO does not take contextual factors into account and does not prioritise the protection of civilians through peace enforcement (Chapter VII) in the face of negative forces.</p> <p>«You cannot maintain peace that does not exist. The mandate must be offensive. On the military side, MONUSCO has failed; for example, more than 80 civilians were killed in Kamananga near a MONUSCO base in the Kalehe territory.»</p> <p>There are misunderstandings about the mandate.</p> <p>«The mandate has not fundamentally changed: to protect civilian populations, to assist the Congolese state in strengthening institutions, but also to protect humanitarian actors on the ground. I know there has been some confusion, some debate about the strength of the EAC, the Congolese government seemed to say that it came with an offensive mandate, which certain communications from this mission seemed to refute. As for the SADC, I don't know much about it. But I haven't heard that they have launched any offensive of any kind.» ETW B3</p> <p>The failure of the military component of MONUSCO</p> <p>«The population may well accept other services or offices: civil affairs, human rights, justice support, prison administration, political affairs, etc., but when it comes to the MONUSCO force, the population says, 'We cannot accept you in our entity because we have already seen that you do nothing.'» ETW B7</p>	<p>Mandate: protection of civilians</p> <p>«When we talk about protecting civilians, that means tracking down armed groups that can disrupt the security of the civilian population.»</p> <p>PSOs must have an offensive mandate with clear terms.</p> <p>«I think that first of all there is a problem with the mandate, which has not been properly negotiated or has not been negotiated in clear terms, with the result that the forces arrive with a different understanding from that of the Congolese government that invited them. I think that at this level, the government should be more serious in negotiating the terms of these agreements so that we know clearly What is the nature of the mandate? Is it just an intervention force? Is it just technical support? Or are these forces really committed to imposing peace? ETWB3</p> <p>A clear mandate</p> <p>«When we talk about protecting civilians, that implies tracking down armed groups that may threaten the safety of the civilian population.» ETW B9</p> <p>Protection through presence</p> <p>«In 2008, I fled to the MONUSCO base in Kiwanja; even without being able to enter the base, we felt safe because the CNDP couldn't come and harm us there under the eyes of the peacekeepers, even though they remained in their bases. This approach worked against organised armed groups.»</p>	<p>There is geographical tension when it comes to expectations and the mission's track record: while South Kivu is calling for more humanitarian and development efforts, in North Kivu and Ituri, the priority is peace.</p> <p>The other tension concerns the structure of the mission: how do the civilian and military branches collaborate? And how do the limitations (failures) of one negatively affect the other?</p> <p>While most of the negative criticism is mainly directed at the military component of the mission, the civilian component is not exempt. For example, the protection and civil affairs sections have been criticised.</p> <p>not to carry out their work over the long term but simply to position themselves as firefighters: when things heat up, they intervene and activate their structures, but once the situation calms down, they disappear, waiting for new outbreak of violence. MONUSCO, for example, has been criticised for presenting itself as a logistical support actor, even though this support has been crucial in dealing with various humanitarian crises, but also in supporting electoral processes (by transporting electoral kits).</p> <p>Among our interlocutors, some consider MONUSCO to be a travel agency with the MOPs, even though the United Nations agencies already have UNHAS, which handles humanitarian transport.</p>

		<p><i>hierarchical groups such as the M23. Faced with groups that do not comply with this concept of protection through presence, MONUSCO must evolve towards an offensive approach. For example, it is important to fight against the FARDC and CODECO. Meanwhile, we have become more demanding, and expectations of MONUSCO are high. ETW G FG</i></p> <p>The United Nations Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) is often highlighted as essential.</p> <p><i>«MONUSCO's greatest strength is its ability to thoroughly document and report on abuses committed by the enemy and even by loyalist forces.»</i> ETWB7</p> <p>Distinguish missions from other actors such as NGOs and United Nations agencies.</p> <p><i>«There is frustration among other United Nations agencies about MONUSCO. Development, child protection, etc. The trend is that MONUSCO has taken everything, so there is competition between agencies, which is not at all beneficial to the population.»</i></p>	
<p>Composition of troops and conditions for success</p>	<p>The composition of troops is not always based on judicious choices .</p> <p><i>«MONUSCO failed because of the Muslim contingents who do not accept orders and who only built mosques in the areas where they were deployed.»</i> ITW at BKV</p> <p>Cultural proximity can be a strength but also a weakness</p> <p><i>«Contributing countries provide personnel, but we do not know whether the DRC has a say in the composition of these forces, and that is a problem.»</i> ETWB8</p> <p>The countries that are part of the problem cannot be part of the solution.</p>	<p>Conflict sensitivity: contingents must not be linked to conflicts but must be sensitive to the need to resolve them resolve them.</p> <p><i>«The first condition should be to ensure that the state wishing to contribute troops has a good record of warfare. A country that has never been at war, how will he help us? It is important to look at his diplomatic history with the DRC. ETWB2</i></p> <p>The chain of command and rules of engagement must be clear.</p> <p><i>. «The second criterion would be to accept to come with a clear mandate and objectives. But also with the necessary ability to change the situation.»</i> ETW B8</p>	<p>One of the criticisms of the EAC regional force was Rwanda's presence in the community's decision-making bodies and possibly in the command, even though it was already established that it supported the M23.</p> <p>This did not allow for the creation of a climate of trust, which ultimately led to the withdrawal of the force.</p> <p>The Burundian and Ugandan forces seem to enjoy a certain positive image.</p> <p>These two forces have in common the fact that they are in the DRC on the basis of bilateral agreements, with a slightly clearer mandate: they are supporting government forces in</p>

	<p>«In the EAC forces, for example, there were also Rwandan forces. Or if Rwandan soldiers are not among the men on the ground, within the structure of the organisation, there are Rwandans.» ETW B1</p> <p>Favouring bilateralism over multilateralism.</p> <p>«The DRC should not rely on multilateral missions; it should sign win-win bilateral agreements with states that can help it combat armed groups.» ITW at BKV</p>	<p>The PSO must analyse the interests and role of foreign state actors who contribute troops or decide on mandates.</p> <p>«The country that wants to send its men here must not be part of the conspiracy.» ETW B8</p> <p>Active diplomacy</p> <p>«I believe that our diplomacy should be able to convince the states around us that they would be better off making peace with us than fighting us. Let us be a serious state.» and cooperate with others on an equal footing. When we negotiate from a position of weakness, that is, negotiating under the boot of our aggressors, it does not help us much. We end up with agreements that often justify the return war.» ETWB2</p>	<p>dealing with armed groups. For</p> <p>In Uganda, these are the Shujaa joint operations against the ADF. However, the presence of Burundian forces is somewhat complex : they are intervening alongside the FARDC against the M23, but they are also conducting operations in South Kivu with a less clear mandate.</p>
<p>What is the relationship with the host country? What role do they play in the construction of fragile states?</p>	<p>MONUSCO has given the state an excuse not to take responsibility responsibilities</p> <p>«The main reason for requesting the withdrawal of MONUSCO is that their presence has contributed to the government's failure to take responsibility government (...).»</p> <p>Contributing to the strengthening of state structures rather than starting from scratch.</p>	<p>Empowering the host state</p> <p>«Unlike missions that come in for a specific crisis, peace support missions should not replace but rather integrate into the security system of host countries. The government must strengthen its own capabilities'.</p> <p>The PSO must have the capacity to support the host state.</p> <p>For things to change, we need strong institutions. Relying on others is a mistake, especially if your opponent develops stronger ties with them than you.» ETW B2</p> <p>Support for security reforms</p> <p>«The biggest lesson is that we must build our own army. We are a continental country with over 100 million inhabitants. We have realised that depending on others does not help us to get rid of our problems. They come with a mission, and</p>	<p>MONUSCO representatives said they understood the population's anger, as insecurity persisted despite their presence. But they also acknowledged that the FARDC is the force best placed to tackle the security problem security in the country.</p> <p>Furthermore, with regard to DDR, MONUSCO has contributed to the repatriation of a significant number of foreign combatants, including the FDLR. However, the Congolese government has not been able to effectively implement DDR for Congolese combatants</p>

		<p>once on the ground they change it and want to impose their will on us. Logical. (On regional missions): There are two things: our government should launch campaigns to raise public awareness of the purpose of these foreign troops' presence. The second thing is that these African or regional forces must deliver results on the ground. ETB B2</p>	
<p>How can mission's manage public expectations?</p>	<p>Clarify the mission so as not to create more unrealistic expectations.</p> <p>«From the outset, MONUSCO forces presented themselves as armed protectors of the population, so they were judged on that basis. The protection of civilians is broad and also involves other mechanisms, notably the local peace committees that still exist today and which have inspired other actions by NGOs such as VNG, or which were already set up by organisations such as Oxfam in collaboration with local communities .</p> <p>The arrival of a mission must be a response to a perceived need.</p> <p>«The EAC and SAMIRDC missions are opportunistic missions that do not stem from a real need.»</p> <p>The mandate of the regional forces is not suited to the context of the conflict in the DRC.</p> <p>«SAMIRDC will also fail, just like the EAC regional force. The South African army is losing momentum and has no budget. Furthermore, regional forces are not suited to internationalised conflicts such as the one in the DRC and can only be effective in internal conflicts .»</p>	<p>The mandate must be specific, and the PSO must publicise it and be open to constructive criticism</p> <p>«The worst part is that in terms of security, it's terrible. But in other areas, it does a lot, but we first measure its contribution to the security.» ETW B2</p> <p>Need for transparency & even great suspicion:</p> <p>«In principle, these should be win-win agreements that are made public with the aim of reducing suspicion. This is an important factor in relations between the population and these foreign forces, which very often end up not enjoying the support of the population because of these so-called hidden agreements (...) it is to do everything possible to find out the agendas of the States willing to participate in the composition of force. It is important to know what they are officially aiming for and what they are aiming for unofficially.</p> <p>Effective collaboration will need to be established in monitoring the work of the PSO and evaluating its results.</p> <p>«We need to involve the population through civil society. When PSOs do this on their own, they always report positive results.» ETW B2</p>	<p>MONUSCO has been criticised for spreading itself too thinly where it was least needed, while failing where it was most needed. Several of our interviewees acknowledged that the mission had achieved a number of results in its non-military components, but that these could not compensate for its failures in protecting civilians, where there were higher expectations.</p> <p>Among the challenges facing SAMIRDC are financial difficulties: it has not been able to receive UN funding, which is seen as a real challenge to its effectiveness. The same expectations of the population that led to discontent with MONUSCO and the EAC are likely to affect SAMIRDC, given the deadlock in the M23 conflict and the slow that are slow to materialise.</p> <p>However, it is difficult to assess the SAMIRDC's performance given that since its arrival in December 2023, there have been a series of truces agreed as part of the Luanda process, which the SAMIRDC has respected. However, South African soldiers have been involved in clashes with the M23 on the Sake front and have even lost combatants there.</p>

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Reagan Miviri conducts research on violent conflicts in eastern DRC. Using quantitative and qualitative data collected by the Kivu Security Barometer, he analyzes the dynamics of conflicts in the provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. He also works on the influences and impacts of these conflicts in the African Great Lakes region.

He has several publications to his credit, and his analyses are shared in several media outlets and newspapers such as Le Monde, Al Jazeera, France 24, RFI, and TV5 Monde.

Reagan has over ten years of combined experience in research, human rights protection, public policy analysis, and project management. He previously worked with Front Line Defenders in Dublin and is a lawyer at the North Kivu Bar. He holds a Master's degree in Freedom Law from the University of Grenoble Alpes.

Fred Bauma is the Executive Director of Ebuteli. He is a prominent commentator and analyst on Congolese politics. Fred is also a Senior Fellow at the International Center for Cooperation. Fred Bauma is the executive director of Ebuteli. He is a prominent commentator and analyst on Congolese politics. Fred is also a senior fellow at the Center for International Cooperation (CIC) at New York University and a human rights activist.

Before joining Ebuteli in February 2022, Fred worked as a research director for the Congo Study Group (GEC), a research program based at the CIC at New York University. Fred is also a member of the citizen movement Lutte pour le Change-ment (Lucha), the largest pro-democracy social movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

He was arrested in March 2015 and spent 18 months in prison, where he faced the death penalty. Amnesty International declared Bauma a prisoner of conscience and awarded Lucha the Ambassador of Conscience Award in 2016. Fred is also a co-founding member of Afrikki, a network of more than 30 movements from Africa and its diaspora. Together with Jason Stearns, Fred co-hosts the Ukombozi podcast, a podcast about African social movements and the worlds they are trying to create. Fred Bauma holds a degree in business administration from the Free University of the Great Lakes (ULPGL) in Goma and a master's degree in public administration from the City University of New York.