

ONE YEAR ON

The Humanitarian Cost of a Failing Peace Agreement in DRC

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JULY 2026



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About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.

Cover Image: Refugees from eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo line up with buckets at a food distribution point at Nyarushishi Transit Camp in Rusizi district on December 11, 2025. Photo by Vivien Latour/AFP via Getty Images.

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Introduction

One year ago, the [Washington Peace Agreement](#) offered the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) something it had not seen in years: an international commitment – brokered and backed by the world’s superpower – to end a bloody and protracted conflict that has claimed the lives of more than [5 million](#) people since the late 1990s. The Agreement, spearheaded by the Trump administration and signed on June 27, 2025, laid out a clear framework: the Rwandan Defense Force (RDF) would withdraw from parts of eastern DRC; armed groups, including the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), would be dismantled; humanitarian access would be granted; and an inclusive regional economic framework would be developed. Twelve months on, none of the Agreement’s core obligations have been adequately met.

The failure to implement the Agreement has not only meant continued insecurity – but also further erosion of a catastrophic humanitarian situation in the region. The parties to the conflict continue to impede humanitarian access, and [3.8 million](#) people remain internally displaced in eastern Congo alone, accounting for roughly 71 percent of all internally displaced people in the country. The recent massive [outbreak of Ebola](#) has exacerbated the already precarious humanitarian conditions, laying bare the human cost of the failure to secure peace. As Refugees International has [warned](#), the ongoing conflict, alongside major aid cuts, makes the outbreak uniquely difficult to contain.

Instead of improving since the Trump-announced peace deal, the conflict has assumed a new and dangerous dynamic – the introduction of offensive drones that have given both the DRC military and rebels the ability to project power far beyond their immediate front lines, pushing the war into more densely populated areas. Despite further verbal and written agreements, the Washington Agreement – and complementary efforts led by Qatar – have failed to improve the reality on the ground.

The United States has been active in its role as guarantor of the Agreement, but has been inconsistent in wielding its leverage at a level sufficient to produce meaningful change. The Trump administration has convened high-level meetings and imposed sanctions at critical junctures, notably against the RDF in [March 2026](#) and against gold-smuggling networks in [June 2026](#). Yet Rwanda has continued its support for M23, and M23 incursions have contributed to a deteriorating security and humanitarian situation. Rather than clearly calling out the parties to the conflict for violations of the pact, the Trump administration has continued [publicly touting](#) the Agreement as having successfully ended a war – thereby undermining accountability for ongoing violations.

A closer look at the key aspects of the Agreement reveal that there is a widening gap between the optimism projected in Washington, DC, and the lived reality in places like Goma. A year after the peace agreement, humanitarian agencies working in eastern DRC interviewed by Refugees International say they have yet to see an improvement in security. Bridging the gap between the Agreement’s promises and conditions on the ground will require urgent action to address implementation shortfalls, local grievances, and warring parties’ motivations – and to ensure meaningful accountability.

Recommendations

To the U.S. Government and International Partners:

- The United States, Qatar, and the African Union, as guarantors of the process, must translate their diplomatic investment into enforceable consequences for non-compliance. Timelines with clear commitments need to be established for parties or face increased economic and political sanctions.
- The United States and the African Union must put pressure on Rwanda to immediately cease military support for the M23, including troop deployments, weapons supplies, and logistical support, in compliance with UNSC Resolution 2773 and the terms of the Washington Agreement. The United States and African Union must equally put pressure on the DRC government to ensure the disarmament of the FDLR.
- The United States must pressure Rwanda to ensure M23 reopens the Goma airport within 30 days and remains open for the delivery of humanitarian aid.
- The United States should reverse the \$361 million in cuts to UN peacekeeping funding that have undermined several peacekeeping missions, including in the DRC, and ensure the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) can carry out its mandate.
- Return humanitarian relief funding to the levels under the last U.S. administration, to ensure greater support for IDPs who suffer from conflict displacement and now live in overcrowded and under-resourced areas at risk of Ebola.

To the United Nations

- Reject, publicly and unequivocally, the framing of coerced returns from Rwanda into M23-controlled territory as ‘voluntary.’ Returns that take place under military control are prohibited under Article 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention and must be investigated by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the UN Human Rights Office.

Background

The Washington Agreement laid out six¹ key areas of focus for long-lasting peace, namely: Territorial Integrity and Prohibition of Hostilities; Disengagement; Disarmament and Integration of non-state Armed Groups; Joint Security Coordination Mechanism; Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, and Humanitarian Considerations; MONUSCO and Other Multilateral Support; and Regional Economic Integration Framework. None of these have been fully implemented, and the failure to bring security has had a compounding negative effect on the humanitarian and displacement situation.

Parallel efforts have reinforced the Washington Agreement, though with similar limitations. In December 2025, the leaders of DRC and Rwanda met in Washington, DC, to sign the Washington Accords, recommitting the parties to the terms of the original Agreement and linking it to the [Regional Economic Integration Framework](#) (REIF). Qatar led a second negotiating track between the DRC and the Rwanda-backed M23 rebels, resulting in the [Doha Framework for a Comprehensive Peace Agreement](#) in November 2025. The African Union has also led attempts at coordination mechanisms.

The Doha Framework includes several protocols that overlap with those of the Washington Agreement, including those related to security arrangements, verification mechanisms, humanitarian access, and the return of internally displaced people and refugees. Ongoing mediation efforts, most recently in Switzerland, aim to fully negotiate these protocols so they can be signed and fully implemented.

The Washington Agreement itself faces three interlocking obstacles that have prevented any real progress. First, the agreement's core security obligations have created a deadlock. Rwanda will not withdraw the Rwandan Defense Force (RDF) from eastern DRC until the government neutralizes the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). But the DRC government will not move against the FDLR until the RDF has withdrawn. Each obligation is dependent on the other, and neither side has moved. Second, the deal's economic framework cannot take effect until security guarantees are met. Sustained economic growth requires sustained peace.

Third, there is no enforcement mechanism to compel the parties to implement the agreement, and the United States has used its leverage selectively.

The clearest cost of the failure to implement the agreement lies in the humanitarian situation. Conditions on the ground, both humanitarian and security-related, have not improved. Despite the signing of the Agreement, Rwandan soldiers and M23 rebels continue to use [rampant](#) gender-based violence (GBV) as a weapon of war. Sexual violence has been prevalent amid the conflict in eastern DRC (see an [April 2024 report](#) from Refugees International) – and that prevalence has continued since the signing of the Agreement. According to the [United Nations Joint Human Rights Office \(UNJHRO\)](#), 80 percent of documented survivors in DRC throughout 2025 (both before and after the signing of the agreement) are in North and South Kivu in the country's east, and armed groups were responsible for 75 percent of incidents of conflict-related sexual violence. The report also highlights particular abuses including women and girls being forced into sexual slavery. Meanwhile, humanitarian conditions are

¹ The seventh, eighth, and ninth points of the agreement lay out the Implementation and Dispute Resolution and other procedural points that will not be discussed in this brief as it focuses on the functionality of the agreement.

worsening due to insecurity, limited humanitarian access, and cuts to global aid. The [World Food Program](#) has categorized the DRC as an emergency setting and has projected that at least 26.6 million people (about a quarter of the population) face acute food insecurity.

The following sections highlight the current security situation, the humanitarian and displacement conditions, and the consequences of failed implementation. They also examine the status of the agreement's six key pillars by looking at the status of hostilities, disarmament, coordination mechanisms, displacement and humanitarian considerations, multilateral peace monitoring efforts, and economic arrangements.

Ongoing Hostilities

The most consequential failure of the agreement – and one with huge humanitarian implications – is the parties’ failure to adhere to peace and security commitments. Hostilities have continued since the signing of the agreement, driven by continued Rwandan support for M23. Within days of the June 2025 agreement’s signing, heavy fighting erupted across North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri. [July 2025](#) alone saw between 140 and 300 civilians killed in M23-controlled areas, the deadliest single month in Rutshuru since 2021. The Doha Declaration of Principles, signed on July 19, committed M23 and Kinshasa to a ceasefire no later than July 29. That ceasefire collapsed within days. The [August 17 deadline](#) for a final peace framework was missed entirely. These early failures have a long history in the DRC. The current shortcomings reflect those of UN Security Council Resolution 2773, adopted to stabilize eastern DRC. Resolution [2773](#) called explicitly for the withdrawal of RDF from eastern DRC, an M23 ceasefire, and the opening of humanitarian corridors.

Throughout this period, the Washington Peace Agreement’s structural weaknesses have compounded each setback. Its language on the RDF withdrawals is ambiguous, offering no timelines, no monitoring system, and no verification mechanism. Meanwhile, the actions of the warring parties have created growing incentives to delay or avoid implementation. Resource exploitation has provided additional incentive for continued noncompliance. M23 looted over [\\$70 million](#) in gold between May and October 2025 alone, generating the financial windfall that makes withdrawal economically irrational.

Fighting in early 2026 reflects this deterioration. Offensive [drones](#) used by the Congolese Armed Forces and [M23 rebels](#), alongside [GPS](#) signal jamming by M23, have expanded the scope of military operations. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) has been [tracking](#) the increase in drone use in this new phase of the conflict, noting that February 2026 marked the “highest number of monthly air and drone strikes ever recorded in the DRC.” The [latest](#) reporting from the UN group of experts on the DRC reports that drone usage continues. This new dynamic has compounded the security environment and raises new challenges for humanitarian workers.



A displaced family from Sange has walked 40 kilometers due to the M23's advancement into eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

Photo by Joseph Mwisha / AFP via Getty Images

Refugees, Internally Displaced People, and Humanitarian Shortfalls

The failure to hold the parties to their commitments on prohibition of hostilities has resulted in a deterioration of the humanitarian situation and has undermined the pillar of the agreement dedicated to Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, and Humanitarian Considerations. The following sections detail the little that has been done on these elements and highlights the current reality.

Refugee Returns

The agreement commits both parties to facilitate the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees – including Congolese in Rwanda and Rwandan refugees in the DRC – in coordination with territorial and customary authorities. This is to be done in line with international legal obligations and the [2010 Kigali Tripartite](#) agreements between the DRC, Rwanda, and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

Some institutional progress has been made, albeit with limited effect thus far. The Tripartite Commission met from July 22-24, 2025, in Addis Ababa, pledging to accelerate returns and strengthen community consultations and explore ways to resume repatriation under the July 2025 Doha Declaration. [Parties committed](#) to preparing inclusive reintegration plans and agreed to hold regular technical meetings at the ministerial level. A meeting was [recently](#) held on June 20–21, 2026, where parties agreed to formal cross-border meetings to strengthen cooperation – and in which parties noted that voluntary repatriation has occurred.

However, the numbers of displaced people remains high, and – more troubling – there continue to be concerns of involuntary returns. Months after the signing of the Agreement, [Human Rights Watch](#) reported on more than 1,500 people forcibly deported from eastern DRC by M23. Likewise, humanitarians have expressed growing concerns that the so-called “voluntary” return of people who fled [from M23-controlled areas](#) into Rwanda continues unabated. More recent interviews conducted by Refugees International with humanitarians on the ground indicate a high likelihood that such forced returns are continuing – a clear violation of the principle of [non-refoulement](#) under Article 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Internally Displaced People

The agreement recognizes that ending the conflict is necessary to enable the return of internally displaced people (IDPs) to their places of origin. But the year since signing has produced a series of discrete displacement shocks, each tracing to a breakdown in the security terms the Agreement was meant to enforce. By August of 2025, renewed clashes in Rutshuru territory, North Kivu, pushed displacement in the east of the country to roughly [4.2 million](#), before easing to about 3.84 million by September as fighting paused. In December 2025, DRC and Rwandan leaders met in Washington to sign the Washington Accords. Days later, M23 forces [captured Uvira](#), displacing roughly 200,000

people and disrupting markets and farming across South Kivu. On December 16, 2025, M23 [announced a withdrawal](#) under international pressure (see below), but its fighters did not fully leave and clashes have persisted near Uvira. [OCHA](#) reports this wider fighting has displaced more than 500,000 people since early December 2025.

In early 2026, fighting spread along fronts distinct from the December Uvira crisis. Renewed clashes in North Kivu since early February 2026 have displaced [more than 96,000 people](#). The toll in Masisi territory alone reached [170,000 by mid-April](#). Separately, in South Kivu, intense fighting in the Minembwe highlands displaced [more than 200,000 civilians](#) within weeks. Fighting and access constraints emptied entire villages. Most fled to Fizi territory with limited access to basic assistance.

The situation continues to deteriorate. M23 has been [dismantling](#) displacement camps, pushing civilians back into areas under its control, and forcibly recruiting civilians into its ranks. Internal displacement in eastern DRC now stands at [3.8 million people](#) – accounting for the majority (71 percent) of the national total of 5.3 million internally displaced. This top line figure has stayed roughly constant over the past year but conceals successive waves of displacement that the Agreement failed to prevent.

These waves have now collided with disease. Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu, are the same provinces at the center of the Ebola outbreak declared in May 2026. At least two Ebola related deaths have been [reported](#) in an IDP site hosting 30,000 people in Ituri province. Additionally, essential medical supplies and personal protective equipment have been delayed in arriving due to logistical challenges. Of the roughly [5.3 million](#) IDPs, over nearly 4 million are in eastern DRC, in areas with poor sanitation and are at risk of contracting Ebola. These are some of the most vulnerable populations who need greater support.

Humanitarian Access

The Washington Agreement commits both parties, with the support of UN agencies and the international community, to guarantee safe and unimpeded humanitarian access to affected communities. That commitment is not being met, despite the commitments to humanitarian access in Section 4 of the Washington Agreement and the demands under UN Security Council Resolution [2773](#) to open humanitarian corridors and allow unhindered humanitarian access. In [April 2026](#), M23, backed by Rwanda, agreed to ease aid into eastern DRC, but have since been [accused](#) of seeking to extract money from relief organizations.

Rather than facilitating aid, ongoing hostilities have made the delivery of aid more difficult and dangerous for humanitarian workers. According to [OCHA](#), four humanitarian workers were killed between January and March 2026 alone, with three of those deaths occurring in March. The dominant forms of obstruction and robbery target humanitarian assets, and movement restrictions are imposed by armed actors. This combination restricts both physical reach and operational safety of humanitarian organizations. Under the control of M23, Goma airport has been essentially closed for 17 months, limiting medical evacuations in direct violation of both Resolution 2773 and the Washington Agreement's guarantee of unimpeded access.

The March 2026 [death](#) of a French UNICEF aid worker in a building housing humanitarian workers highlights the growing escalation and use of drone warfare in eastern DRC. This equates to an increasingly unsafe environment for humanitarian workers to operate, at a time when they are greatly needed.

The consequences of lack of progress on the humanitarian pillar of the agreement has come into yet sharper focus with the recent Ebola outbreak. When Bundibugyo Ebola surfaced in Ituri in May 2026 and spread into North and South Kivu, responders encountered the exact obstacles the agreements were supposed to remove: a closed Goma airport severing the humanitarian lifeline, surveillance teams blocked by active conflict, and over 3 million displaced people moving through the very health zones where the virus was circulating. The violence and humanitarian access challenges have hamstrung the response to what, as of July 2026, is already the third largest Ebola outbreak in history with more than [3,200](#) cases confirmed, including over 1,400 related deaths. The World Health Organization states this number could be possibly [four times as high](#).

Ebola is not the only health concern in this embattled region. Cholera has resurfaced, with [UNICEF](#) declaring it the worst in 25 years with North Kivu and South Kivu among that list of provinces most [affected](#). Meanwhile, Tuberculosis remains a severe public health crisis. Global Health Organizations [warn](#) that the withdrawal of USAID programs and other global funding and support has caused shortages of medicines, vital health care, and the withdrawal of healthcare workers has led to deteriorating health.



Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo refugee Akimali Mirindi, 40, at Nyarushishi Transit Camp
(Photo by Vivien Latour / AFP via Getty images)

Wider Challenges with Implementation of the Deal

Beyond these pillars, failures across the Agreement's other components have compounded displacement and humanitarian harm. The following sections highlight the status of the joint security and disarmament, multilateral support, and economic aspects of the agreement.

Joint Security Coordination Mechanism (JSCM) and Disarmament/Integration

Two of the six pillars of the agreement integral to security – and thus humanitarian improvements – are the establishment of a Joint Security Coordination Mechanism (JSCM) and Disarmament and Integration of non-State Armed Groups. The JSCM has been established with representatives of Rwanda and the DRC tasked with overseeing the security track between the DRC and Rwanda. This track calls for the neutralization of the FDLR, the disengagement of Rwandan forces, and an end to state support for all armed groups. In doing so, the Agreement lays out a pathway for disarmament and conditional reintegration of non-state armed groups through the implementation of the JSCM's core tasks.

The JSCM's success hinges on meaningful bilateral cooperation between the DRC and Rwanda. The body has met [six](#) times and taken up both technical discussions and repeated reaffirmations of intent to neutralize the FDLR and lift Rwanda's defensive measures. But significant gaps remain between the Agreement's ambition and the realities of its implementation. As a result, the disarmament pillar of the Agreement has continued to falter with fighters having little incentive to demobilize.

For example, Rwanda appears to have continued its material support for M23 rebels. A June 2026 [UN Group of Experts](#) report found sustained Rwandan support for M23. As a result, M23 has expanded its control days after the peace deal and continues building parallel administrative structures. A partial, unilateral [M23 withdrawal from northern Lubero](#) in late March 2026, linked to renewed U.S. pressure, has been limited. Goma and Bukavu remain under [rebel administration](#). [June 2026 U.S. Treasury sanctions](#) on M23 and FDLR commanders have raised the pressure to withdraw.

An additional challenge is that more than [100](#) armed groups continue to operate in eastern DRC. Most of these groups operate outside the rubric of the bilateral DRC-Rwanda agreement and have little incentive to comply with the commitments they did not make. Their continued presence keeps occupied territory outside government reach, blocking IDP return and prolonging exposure in overcrowded, disease-vulnerable displacement sites.

In short, with repeated commitments, but little implementation by the JSCM and slow progress on disarmament and integration, two of the Agreements six main pillars remain unfulfilled.

MONUSCO and Other Multilateral Support

Another key pillar of the Agreement focuses on external support to the peace and security efforts, particularly the role of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). MONUSCO has long been mandated to protect civilians and support the implementation of Resolution 2773. The Agreement calls on Rwanda and the DRC to protect, facilitate, and promote the ability of MONUSCO to carry out that mandate.

However, MONUSCO's freedom remains obstructed by parties to the conflict to perform its mandate to protect civilians is also being undermined by a lack of funding.

In a June 2025 UN Security Council meeting, the United States [characterized](#) MONUSCO as a “constant and constructive presence.” But broader cuts in U.S. support for UN peacekeeping have undermined several peacekeeping missions, including in the DRC. Despite traditionally covering approximately [25](#) percent of global UN peacekeeping costs, the United States is now cutting \$361 million from its global peacekeeping [contributions](#).

MONUSCO reports that July 2025 was the deadliest month in Rutshuru since 2021. A key component of peacekeeping and the prevention of escalated violence is conducting patrols. This is often referred to as protection by presence. To conduct these patrols and to fulfill its mandate, MONUSCO needs to be fully supported financially and politically.

Constrained support for MONUSCO has meant drastic cuts in personnel and resources. A March 2026 [report](#) of the UN Secretary General noted that overall cuts in UN peacekeeping funding led to a 27 percent cut in MONUSCO's operational funding and loss of 23.4 percent of its uniformed personnel and 29 percent of its civilian staffing. The consequences in DRC are already visible: as the Secretary General's report noted, the cuts had “operational impacts across protection, mobility, intelligence and coordination functions” and reduced troops and base closures “narrowed geographic reach, diminished deterrence and affected sustained presence in high-threat areas.” Despite MONUSCO being a key part of the Agreement, ongoing access constraints and sharply reduced capabilities have effectively weakened the mission since its signing.

A Regional Economic Integration Framework

A final pillar of the Washington Agreement deals more directly with the economic incentives behind the deal. The Regional Economic Integration Framework (REIF) represents the Washington Agreement's most ambitious element. Signed by Presidents Tshisekedi and Kagame at the December 2025 Washington, DC, ceremony, the REIF establishes a joint framework for cooperation across minerals, energy, infrastructure, tourism, and public health, with U.S. private-sector investments as the primary engine.

The underlying logic is that ending Rwanda's proxy support for M23 and the DRC's tolerance of the FDLR will unlock the benefits of this economic framework. However, the failure of the parties to date to make progress on the security track draws into question this logic. [The illicit mineral economy](#)

continues to generate tangible returns for the parties beyond what the formal framework offers. As a result, the REIF has yet to create meaningful leverage to drive forward compliance with the terms of the agreement.

While this pillar of the Agreement does not directly affect the humanitarian and displacement situation in eastern DRC, it does affect the underlying motivations behind the deal and undermine the ability to reach the kind of security that would be needed to improve both the humanitarian and broader economic conditions in DRC.

U.S. Engagement

The United States as the backer to the agreement has and continues to engage with all parties to the agreement. As part of the Joint Oversight Committee, together with Qatar and the African Union, the United States has maintained high-level engagement between the parties.

To its credit, the United States has convened a series of high-level meetings and responded with high-level statements and robust sanctions at a few critical moments. For example, three days after the leaders of the United States, DRC, and Rwanda met in December 2025, M23 captured the town of Uvira, leading to civilian deaths and the new displacement of thousands of people. This prompted [condemnation](#) by the U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and promises of withdrawal by M23. However, as noted by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, the withdrawal was unsatisfactory and followed by further M23 incursions supported by Rwanda in the months that followed. This prompted the United States to impose [sanctions](#) on the Rwanda Defence Forces (RDF) for supporting M23 in March 2026.

A series of targeted sanctions have continued since. As recently as June 25, 2026, the U.S. State Department announced sanctions on [networks](#) smuggling conflict materials out of the DRC.

The promises and partial withdrawals following the use of U.S. diplomatic pressure and sanctions show that leverage exists, but the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation on the ground show that further and more consistent attention and pressure is needed. Meanwhile, the outward [communication of success](#) in obtaining peace coming from the Trump administration belies the realities on the ground

The United States must endeavor to use sustained diplomatic pressure to complement the sanctions that have been implemented and lay out a compliance roadmap for the Agreement. This should include predetermined dates and evidence of operational progress from both parties in adherence to the agreement and UN resolution, particularly around humanitarian access and the reopening of the airport in Goma.

Conclusion

The Trump administration presented the Washington Agreement as a signature African foreign-policy achievement and as the foundation for a fundamentally different reality in eastern DRC. Yet, one year later, the agreement's implementation on the ground tells a very different story.

Despite its initial promise, numerous aspects of the Washington Agreement are faltering. The consequences of these failures are seen most clearly in the humanitarian situation on the ground – a reality exacerbated by the recent Ebola outbreak.

If the promise of the Agreement is to be restored, and the current humanitarian and displacement trajectory stemmed, the United States and its partners must clearly acknowledge the realities on the ground and respond with the requisite diplomatic and humanitarian urgency.

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