

War in the Congo: Children, young men flee M23 recruitment

By [Global Research](#)

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Thousands of children and young men are fleeing rebel-held areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo's eastern North Kivu Province to escape forced recruitment by the insurgents, NGOs say.

"One day, five rebels of M23 stormed our town [Rugari, north of Goma, the capital of North Kivu]. They went to the chief asking him to show them all houses where they can find young men. The chief resisted, they tied him up and went on searching into houses until they arrested 36 children and [took] them away to train as fighters," said Barthelemy Schilogolo, head of local the NGO, Paix et Justice pour la Reconciliation, told IRIN.

M23 – a group of former DRC national army (FARDC) soldiers who mutinied in April – is fighting government troops in North and South Kivu; the conflict has caused the displacement of close to half a million people. A number of other local militias – known as Mai Mai – are involved in the conflict and have also been accused of human rights abuses.

According to Schilogolo, M23 fighters are under pressure to increase recruitment. "Every two days, commanders of M23 come from Bunagana [an M23-held town on the DRC-Uganda border] to Rugari for regular patrols to control how their fighters are keeping positions. I've witnessed areas where a front commander is forcefully picked up when he failed to show how many recruits he recruited," he said.

The NGO World Vision recently highlighted the issue, reporting that nearly 200 children had been forced to join the fighting. The group says the majority of refugees – an estimated 57,000, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – fleeing into neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda are children, with some reporting that they were fleeing recruitment into armed groups.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has also documented over 100 civilians forcibly recruited by M23 over the past four months, most of whom were young men aged 24 and under.

Auguy Sebisimbo was forcefully recruited alongside 15 other youths – including children as young as 12 – by M23 in July in his home area of Rutshuru, the main town in the area controlled by M23.

"They took us to Bunanga, gave us arms and military uniforms without any training apart from a few exercises to show us how to shoot a gun," he told IRIN.

A week into his capture, he fled during a fierce, day-long battle between M23 and FARDC forces; now back at home, he says the conflict continues to make his life difficult. "We are existing but feeling like we are not, because if the rebels recruit you by force and send you to the front line you may die. If not, it is not easy to endure the heavy gunshots that traumatize you. It is like you are dead," he said.

They took us to Bunagana, gave us arms and military uniforms without any training apart from a few exercises to show us how to shoot a gun According to a statement by the UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), at least 26 children are documented as having been forcibly recruited by M23 since April 2012, although reports indicate that the actual number is significantly higher; overall, the mission reports that more than 150 children have been recruited by armed groups in eastern DRC since the beginning of 2012. Individuals interviewed described how they were forced to carry looted goods, supplies and ammunition over long distances. Upon arrival at their destinations, they were handed uniforms and weapons and underwent military training in camps.

It added that there were also reports of the execution of civilians who resisted recruitment.

"Whilst forced recruitment by various armed groups has long characterized conflict in the DRC, numbers have increased substantially since the upsurge of recent hostilities in the east, and in particular the actions of the M23 in Rutshuru territory, North-Kivu Province," Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of MONUSCO Roger Meece said in the statement. "Using children and youth in armed conflict will create generations trained in violence, tearing apart the fabric of Congolese society."

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