



SHAFTED

THE SCRAMBLE FOR CRITICAL MINERALS IN THE DRC



The Oakland Institute

Acknowledgements

This report was authored by Andy Currier and Frédéric Mousseau. Research support was provided by Eric Heilmann and Edgardo Letona.

The views and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the Oakland Institute alone and do not reflect opinions of the individuals and organizations that have supported the work of the Institute.

Design: Doug Crissman

Cover (front): Displaced children in the camp in Roe, 80 km from Bunia. At the time, the largest camp in Ituri with between 65,000 and 70,000 IDPs, February 2022. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe.

Cover (back): Internally displaced people at Rusayo 2 Camp, November 2024. FAO/ Alessandra Benedetti.

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info@oaklandinstitute.org
The Oakland Institute
PO Box 18978
Oakland, CA 94619 USA

www.oaklandinstitute.org

The Oakland Institute, 2025

List of Acronyms

ADF	Allied Democratic Forces	IRC	International Rescue Committee
AFDL	Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire	M23	March 23 Movement
AFC	Alliance Fleuve Congo (Congo River Alliance)	MONUSCO	Mission de l’Organisation des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en République Démocratique du Congo (UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC)
CIPA	Contributions to International Peacekeeping Activities	MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)
CNDP	Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (National Congress for the Defence of the People)	MOSSAC	Mobilization for the Safeguarding of Congolese Sovereignty and Autonomy
CRP	Convention for the Popular Revolution	NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
CSPA	Child Soldiers Prevention Act	OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (United Nations)
DFC	US Development Finance Corporation	PARECO-FF	Patriotes Résistants Congolais Forces du Front (Congolese Resistant Patriots Front Forces)
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo	RDF	Rwandan Defence Force
FDLR	Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda)	RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
FARDC	Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (Congolese Armed Forces)	SADC	Southern African Development Community
IDP(s)	Internally Displaced Person(s)	UN	United Nations
IMET	International Military Education & Training	USGS	United States Geological Survey

Executive Summary

After three decades of deadly wars and atrocities, the June 2025 “peace” deal between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) lays bare the United States’ role in entrenching the extraction of minerals under the guise of diplomacy. For decades, US backing of Rwanda and Uganda has fueled the violence, which has ripped millions of Congolese lives apart while enabling the looting of the country’s mineral wealth. Today, Washington presents itself as a broker of peace, yet its longstanding support for Rwanda made it possible for M23 to seize territory, capture key mining sites, and forced Kinshasa to the negotiation table with hands tied behind its back. By legitimizing Rwanda’s territorial advances, the US-brokered agreement effectively rewards aggression while sidelining accountability, justice for victims, and the sovereignty of the Congolese people.

The incorporation of “formalized” mineral supply chains from eastern DRC to Rwanda exposes the pact’s true aim: Securing access to and control over minerals under the guise of diplomacy and “regional integration.” Framed as peacemaking, this is part of United States’ broader geopolitical struggle with China for control over critical resources. Far from fostering peace – over a thousand civilians have been killed since the deal was signed while parallel negotiations with Rwanda’s rebel force have collapsed – this arrangement risks deepening Congo’s subjugation. Striking deals with the Trump administration and US firms, the DRC government is surrendering to a new era of exploitation while the raging war continues, driving the unbearable suffering of the Congolese people.

Introduction

The conflict in eastern DRC, which dates back three decades to the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and subsequent Congo Wars, has claimed over six million lives, displaced millions more, and inflicted widespread suffering. Since late 2021, Rwanda and its proxy militia, M23, have stormed through mineral-rich lands and regional capitals, inflicting brutal violence and triggering mass displacement. While billions of dollars in natural resources are extracted from the area, Congolese communities toil in extreme poverty.

On June 27, 2025, a “peace” agreement was signed between Rwanda and the DRC under the auspices of the Trump administration, with diplomatic assistance from Qatar.¹ The deal included pledges to respect the territorial integrity of both countries, to promote peaceful relations through the disarmament of armed groups, the return of refugees, and the creation of a joint security mechanism. A key clause commits the countries to launch a regional economic integration framework that would entail “mutually beneficial partnerships and investment opportunities,” specifically for the extraction of the DRC’s mineral wealth by US private interests.

Placing the deal in a historical perspective – after three decades of conflict and over seven decades of US chess game around Congolese minerals – this report examines its implications for the Congolese people as well as the interests involved in the plunder of the country’s resources.

The report begins by retracing 30 years of war, fueled by the looting of Congo’s mineral wealth and devastating for the people of eastern DRC. It then examines how US policy in Central Africa, from the Cold War to the present, has been shaped by its interest in Congolese minerals, sustained alliances with Rwanda and Uganda, and a consistent pattern of overlooking atrocities in support of these allies.

The report then analyses the implications of the regional economic integration aspect of the deal, which aims to link mineral supply chains in the DRC and Rwanda with US investors. The last sections examine the prospect for lasting peace and security resulting from the deal and the impact of growing involvement of US private actors in DRC and Rwanda.

Three Decades of War Over Blood Minerals

Violence in eastern DRC traces back to the 1994 Rwandan genocide when Hutu militias killed over 800,000 people – including 70 percent of the Tutsi population.² During the widespread violence, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a rebel movement led by Paul Kagame and other Tutsi exiles in Uganda since 1990, launched a military offensive and seized power in Kigali by early July 1994.



In the aftermath, over two million Hutu refugees scattered into neighboring countries, primarily settling in camps in the North and South Kivu provinces in what was then eastern Zaire (the country was renamed DRC in 1997).³ Some of the Rwandan refugees were Hutu extremists who began organizing militias, which was a major concern for the new RPF government and the trigger for the next stage of war.⁴

In 1996, the First Congo War erupted – the deadliest conflict since World War II. Rwanda and Uganda backed the rebel Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL), led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, as they fought for control of the country. By 1997, the AFDL had overthrown President Mobutu. Far beyond clearing Hutu militias, Rwandan forces carried out a slaughter of the Hutu populations that had previously fled into Congo.⁵

The AFDL conquest of eastern Zaire reshaped both the regional balance of power and control over the country’s rich natural resources.⁶ During the conflict, the UN documented how Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi carried out “mass-scale looting” and “systematic exploitation” of Congolese minerals, diamonds, timber, and ivory.⁷ Numerous

rebel proxies of these countries occupying eastern DRC financed themselves through the exploitation of minerals, such as diamonds, coltan and cassiterite (tin ore).⁸ Western countries and companies were also quick to strike deals under the new system in order to access gold and coltan.⁹

Kabila became president in 1997 and the following year ordered all foreign troops out of the country, turning his back on the countries that brought him into power.¹⁰ In response, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, and their militias invaded eastern DRC, kicking off the Second Congo War that would last until 2003. Several UN reports have documented how Rwanda and Uganda deliberately instigated violence in order to tighten their grip on mineral resources.¹¹

The end of the Second Congo War in 2003 did not stop Rwanda and Uganda’s military influence and resource exploitation in eastern DRC. Rwanda-backed armed groups kept control of much of North Kivu, as violence continued. By 2004, Rwanda became a hub for the smuggling of minerals, “exporting five times more cassiterite than it produced” according to the NGO Global Witness.¹² Uganda similarly benefitted from looted resources, particularly gold.¹³

This plundering kept fueling violence in the area as Rwanda supported proxy militias that wreaked havoc and sought to overthrow the Kabila government. One, led by Laurent Nkunda, “Congo’s most notorious warlord,” the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP) rebel group massacred entire villages, committed mass rapes, and displaced hundreds of thousands between 2006 and 2009.¹⁴ Rwanda reaped enormous benefits from the exploitation of “blood minerals,”¹⁵ which left the region plagued by violence and insecurity.



▲ Rwandan refugees set up camps outside Goma amidst a cholera epidemic in July 1994. | UN PHOTO/JOHN ISAAC

◆ Women collect water at Rusayo 2 IDP Camp, November 2024. | FAO/ALESSANDRA BENEDETTI

▼ Rwandan refugees returning from Goma near Gisenyi, July 1994. | UN PHOTO/JOHN ISAAC



M23, Rwanda’s Proxy to Secure Control of Congolese Wealth

The March 23 Movement (M23) was formed in April 2012 with a mutiny of former CNDP Tutsi soldiers, who had been integrated into the Congolese army.¹⁶ After gaining control of parts of Kivu, M23 lost control of the town of Goma in November 2013, when the Congolese army (FARDC) and UN peacekeepers won a series of battles that ultimately drove the rebels out of the DRC.¹⁷

The defeat of M23 did not end the looting of minerals by Uganda and Rwanda in the following years.¹⁸ Between 2013 and 2021, successive reports by the UN Security Council Group of Experts on the DRC documented widespread mineral smuggling from eastern DRC into neighboring countries.¹⁹ The experts identified Rwanda as an important transit and export point for Congolese tin, tantalum, and tungsten (3T minerals), and Uganda and Burundi as key hubs for gold. Localized violence and insecurity continued during this period as various groups, including the Congolese army, competed for mineral wealth.

After nearly a decade of dormancy, M23 launched a fresh rebellion in eastern DRC in November 2021 – the fifth Rwanda-backed insurgency to occur in the last thirty years.²⁰ In January 2025, M23 and the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF) jointly captured strategic and mineral-rich areas in North and South Kivu provinces, including Bukavu and Goma – the two provincial capitals home to over three million people.²¹ This has triggered massive suffering – including massacres, rapes, torture, and population displacement.²²

Rwanda exercises command and control over M23 and provided significant support in the latest 2025 offensive.²³ This support to M23 has been widely documented for years. Reports by the UN Group of Experts in 2023, 2024, and 2025, chronicle the weapons, military

equipment, supplies, training, coordination, and troops on the ground that crossed the border from Rwanda to accompany M23 rebels.²⁴

Despite overwhelming evidence, Rwandan officials claim their actions are limited to “defensive measures” aimed at preventing regional instability from reaching their borders and countering what they claim to be a critical threat posed by a rebel group called the Forces Democratiques de Liberation du Rwanda (FDLR).²⁵ Another justification is the protection of Tutsis and Congolese of Rwandan descent from discrimination. Yet, while the Congolese Tutsi have been a frequent target of abuse and discrimination, there was little evidence of an upsurge in anti-Tutsi violence prior to the reemergence of the group.²⁶ Many analysts assert that the FDLR no longer poses a real threat to Rwanda’s security.²⁷ Nevertheless, Kigali continues to use the group as a pretext for its aggressive expansion.

The July 2025 UN Group of Experts report²⁸ shattered Rwanda’s lies and exposed the myth of “defensive measures,” pointing out that “RDF’s successive military engagements did not primarily aim at neutralizing the FDLR, or halting an alleged existential threat posed to Rwanda... Instead, RDF reinforcements and decisive military operations aimed at conquering additional territories, while RDF’s continued presence enabled AFC/M23²⁹ to consolidate control.”

The experts made it clear that the goal was control over strategic mining sites: “AFC/M23’s control over eastern DRC secured Rwanda’s access to mineral-rich territories and fertile land, decimated FDLR ranks, and guaranteed political influence in the DRC. RDF sources, and sources close to the Rwandan government reported that the final objective of Kigali was to control the territory of the DRC and its natural resources.”³⁰ Since taking control, M23 has established a “centralized parallel government” to become the “de facto state authority in the eastern DRC,” including economic initiatives that seek to formalize its control over the local economy, including critical minerals.³¹

Uganda also continues to impede Congolese territorial sovereignty and exploit its mineral wealth. Early 2025, Uganda doubled its military presence in the DRC, deploying thousands of soldiers to North Kivu and Ituri provinces.³² The UN has also documented Uganda’s past support to M23 and raised questions about its real objectives.³³

Through alternating periods of being allies and adversaries, Rwanda and Uganda have turned the area into a theater of proxy warfare where civilian lives are devastated in the pursuit of economic gains. These actions are not defensive, but deliberate efforts to control mineral-rich regions and assert dominance in Congolese affairs. The impact has been dire for communities living in eastern DRC.

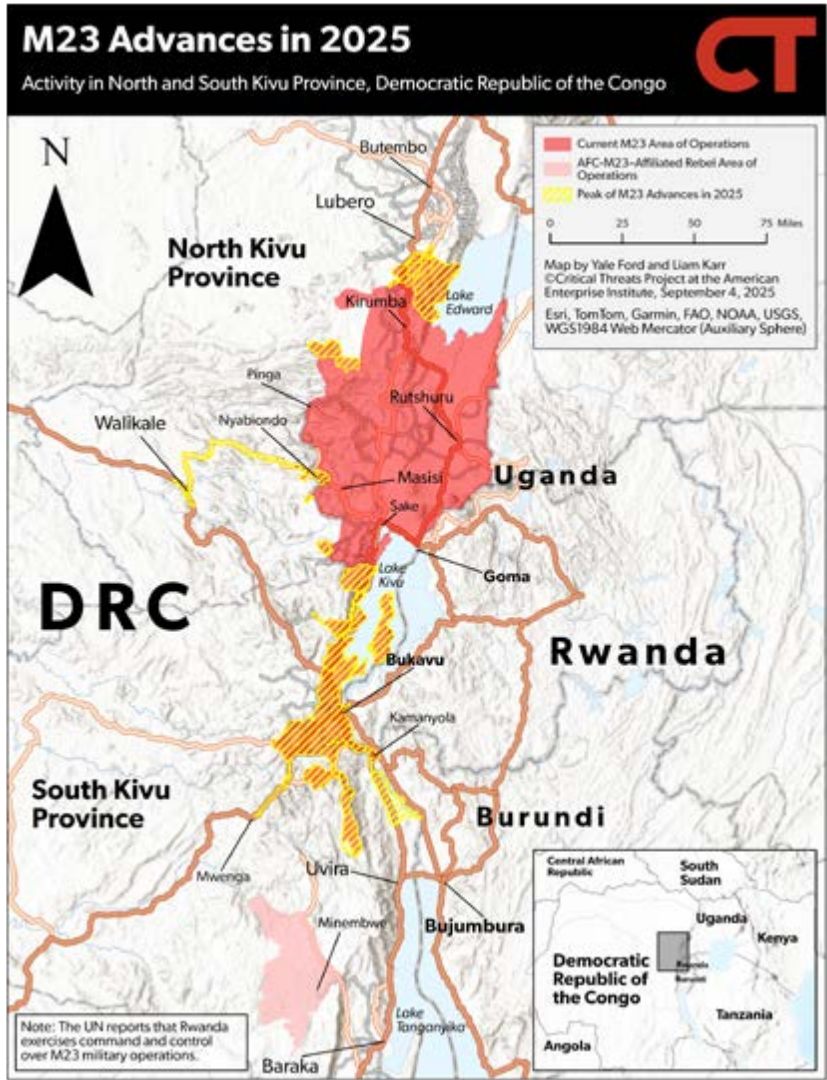


▲ M23 in Goma, 2012. | UN PHOTO/SYLVAIN LIECHTI

► Map of M23’s territorial advances into the DRC during 2025. | YALE FORD AND LIAM KARR, CRITICAL THREATS

“Rwandan Defense Force’s successive military engagements did not primarily aim at neutralizing the FDLR, or halting an alleged existential threat posed to Rwanda... Instead, RDF reinforcements and decisive military operations aimed at conquering additional territories, while RDF’s continued presence enabled AFC/M23 to consolidate control...AFC/M23’s control over eastern DRC secured Rwanda’s access to mineral-rich territories and fertile land, decimated FDLR ranks, and guaranteed political influence in the DRC. RDF sources, and sources close to the Rwandan government reported that the final objective of Kigali was to control the territory of the DRC and its natural resources.”

— UN Group of Experts, July 2025





The Unbearable Toll of Blood Minerals on People

Three decades of war have left a devastating toll on the Congolese people. The estimated death toll is about 6 million, based on an International Rescue Committee (IRC)'s conservative estimate of around 5.4 million excess mortality during the period 1998 to 2007.³⁴ IRC's count did not include the atrocities committed by the AFDL in their attacks on Hutu refugees during the First Congo War, which resulted in up to 200,000 "disappeared."³⁵ In 2010, the OHCHR separately identified over 600 incidents of mass atrocities including massacres, gang rapes, and cases of forced disappearance between 1993 and 2003.³⁶ Though there is no comprehensive estimate of the numbers of victims since

this period, NGOs have documented how violence along with malnutrition and diseases have killed tens of thousands in the following two decades.³⁷

Violence has also resulted in massive displacement of people over the years. In 2003, there were over 400,000 Congolese refugees³⁸ in neighboring countries and over three million IDPs³⁹ in the eastern provinces. More than half a million people⁴⁰ were displaced by war in 2007, 2.7 million⁴¹ – most of them in Kivu – in 2012, and 4.5 million again in 2017.⁴² The latest violence brought the number of IDPs to 6.9 million in 2025⁴³ with over 21 million people in need of emergency assistance.⁴⁴

For those who survive the violence, displacement comes with the loss of homes, farms, livelihoods, and life in the harsh conditions of IDP camps, where humanitarian assistance is scarce and never to an adequate level to address the massive needs.

Another dire feature of the war is sexual violence. In 2011, CNN dubbed eastern DRC as the "rape capital of the world"⁴⁵ because of the horrific scale of sexual violence. Hundreds of thousands of women and young girls have been victim of rape,⁴⁶ primarily perpetrated by armed men when villages are attacked or people are on the run.⁴⁷ MSF reported a more than double increase in victims

▲ Displaced children in the camp in Roe, 80 km from Bunia. At the time, the largest camp in Ituri with between 65,000 and 70,000 IDPs, February 2022. | UN PHOTO/ESKINDER DEBEBE

◆ Rusayo 2 IDP camp, November 2024. | FAO/ALESSANDRA BENEDETTI



▲ Based in Bukavu, the Panzi Foundation helps survivors of sexual violence rebuild their lives. | PANZI FOUNDATION

of sexual violence treated in their Kivu facilities after the latest M23 offensive, from an average of 10,000 victims per year⁴⁸ before 2022 to 25,166 victims⁴⁹ in 2023 and nearly 40,000 victims⁵⁰ in 2024. While these numbers are staggering, they represent a small proportion of victims that accessed medical services as the majority do not reach medical facilities due to transportation challenges, lack of awareness, and fear of stigma within their communities. Analysts have explained the systematic use of rape⁵¹ as a weapon of war to submit and terrorize communities. Dr. Denis Mukwege, the gynecologist who received the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize for his work on the victims of sexual violence in DRC, points with no ambiguity to the extraction of resources as the underlying factor.

“The DRC’s vast wealth in natural resources – especially minerals like coltan, diamonds, and gold – has played a central role in driving the conflict. Armed groups have sought to control these resources to fund their operations, and sexual violence has become one of their primary tactics to maintain power over mining areas. By terrorizing local populations through rape, militias and rebels can more easily control and exploit valuable mineral-rich regions. The link between sexual violence and resource extraction is particularly pronounced in the eastern DRC, where some of the country’s most valuable mines are located. The struggle for control over these areas has made this region a hotbed of violence, with women and girls bearing the brunt of the atrocities.”

— Dr. Denis Mukwege⁵²



▲ At the Kanyaruchinya camp near Goma, a young boy waits to fill his containers with water, August 2012. | UN PHOTO/SYLVAIN LIECHTI

Another group of victims of violence and extraction are children, who bear a large brunt of the conflict in eastern DRC. All armed groups recruited children, particularly in refugee settlements. The UN has documented numerous grave violations against children including systematic recruitment and use in combat, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools, and denial of humanitarian access by all parties.⁵³ A 2003 report provided grim figures: Over 12 percent of children⁵⁴ do not reach their first birthday. In 2017, MONUSCO estimated that approximately 6,000 children⁵⁵ were recruited and used in combat between 2014 and 2017. According to the latest children and armed conflict⁵⁶ report of the UN Secretary-General, 4,043 grave violations against 3,418 children were verified in the DRC during 2024. Thousands of

children are also employed in the mines, for coltan in eastern DRC⁵⁷ as well as for cobalt mining in other areas. Some estimates allege that out of 255,000 Congolese mining cobalt, at least 40,000 are children.⁵⁸

According to the OHCHR,⁵⁹ a large number of war crimes and crimes against humanity were committed by all parties of the conflict during the early 2025 M23 offensive. The UN Group of Experts⁶⁰ reported seven refugee camps in and around Goma were dismantled by M23, which led to the forced displacement of at least 700,000 individuals and the forced transfer of over 1,500 people to Rwanda.⁶¹ Around 2,000 civilians were killed during the capture of Goma alone. In addition, M23 operates training centers where detainees are subjected

to torture and inhumane conditions.⁶² Through these centers, M23 deployed population control techniques to assert dominance and social order including summary executions,⁶³ forced disappearances, torture and widespread cases of mob justice in the newly conquered territories. As the FARDC retreated, soldiers were also responsible for systematic looting and sexual violence. The near total collapse of the rule of law in this territory allowed all parties to act under conditions of impunity.

Given this context, to understand if the July 2025 US-brokered “peace deal” has the potential to put a stop to this nightmare, it is necessary to examine the long-standing role of the US in the region and its current agenda.



From Hiroshima to Goma: US Chess Game in Central Africa

The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs were made of uranium from Congo Belge, an illustration of how critical the supply of Congolese minerals has historically been to the US. For decades, maintaining access to these minerals, including cobalt, a key commodity for the defense industry, has thus defined US foreign policy in the region. In 1960, the CIA orchestrated the coup to overthrow and murder Congo's democratically elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba,⁶⁴ partly due to fears he would nationalize the country's mineral resources or make them available to the Soviet bloc during the Cold War.⁶⁵

Over the next three decades, the US and other Western countries backed dictator Mobutu Sese Seko as he siphoned off Zaire's wealth through billions of dollars in corruption and embezzlement of mineral revenues.⁶⁶ This support included more than US\$400 million in US military aid that helped Mobutu repress opposition to his autocratic rule.⁶⁷ During this period, a number of US and other Western corporations gained control over large mining concessions in the DRC. The largest among them at this juncture was Freeport-McMoRan, which later sold off its assets to Chinese firms in the 2010s.⁶⁸

▲ US Army trains members of the Rwanda Defense Force and Rwanda National Police in 2019 during Exercise Shared Accord conducted by the US Africa Command (AFRICOM). | DEVEN SCHULTZ/US AIR FORCE

► Members of the Nebraska Air National Guard and Rwanda Defence Force pose for a group picture, March 20, 2022, during Justified Accord exercise at Gako Military Academy, Rwanda. | US AIR NATIONAL GUARD, MAJ. ANGELA LING

Rwanda and Uganda: American Proxies Leading Regional Chaos

The US pulled support for Mobutu in the early 1990s and pressured him to resign in 1997,⁶⁹ while supporting Uganda and Rwanda, who had moved into eastern DRC in 1996 as allies in Kabila's war to overthrow Mobutu. Researchers have pointed to the key support provided by US military advisers to Kabila's rebel movement at the time.⁷⁰ The US agenda was driven in part by motivations to secure access to copper and cobalt, whose exports to the US had severely declined in the final years of Mobutu's regime.⁷¹ As a matter of fact, in April 1997, a month before the fall of Mobutu, America Mineral Fields Inc. – a corporation based in Hope, Arkansas, the home town of then US President Clinton – signed a US\$1 billion contract with Kabila to explore copper and cobalt deposits and build several smelting and refinery facilities in the DRC.⁷²

US support to Rwanda and Uganda has been critical in the war. For decades, Uganda had been a close American ally,⁷³ receiving substantial foreign aid and military support under President Museveni.⁷⁴ Current Rwandan President Paul Kagame fought alongside Museveni in the war that brought him to power in 1986. He then became Museveni's head of military intelligence, one of the highest-ranking positions in the Ugandan army.

Like many of the Rwandan and Ugandan officers later active in regional conflicts, Kagame received American military training. He studied at the US Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, before returning in 1990 to take command of the RPF.⁷⁵ The force – made up of exiled Rwandans who had served in the Ugandan army – launched an invasion of Rwanda in 1990, sparking a four-year war to overthrow the Hutu regime in Kigali. Studying the US role in the Rwandan genocide, Professor Helen C Epstein⁷⁶ noted that, after 1990, while Uganda supported the

RPF, “western donors including the US doubled aid to the [Museveni] government and allowed his defense spending to balloon to 48% of Uganda's budget, compared with 13% for education and 5% for health, even as AIDS was ravaging the country. In 1991, Uganda purchased 10 times more US weapons than in the preceding 40 years combined.”

During the Congo Wars (1996-2003), the US continued to provide weapons and military training to both countries,⁷⁷ overlooking widespread atrocities committed by their troops and their proxies.⁷⁸

Despite rampant human rights abuses committed in the Ugandan-controlled region of the Congo, the US largely avoided criticizing or holding Museveni accountable.⁷⁹ In 2022, the International Court of Justice ordered Uganda to pay US\$325 million in reparations after finding it is “responsible for violating DRC's borders, the deaths of up to 15,000 people, displacement, rape, child soldier recruitment, and the looting of natural resources.”⁸⁰ Undeterred by these egregious crimes, the US maintains close ties with Uganda, who it hails as a “key security partner and a reliable player in the stability and integration” of the region.⁸¹ From 2001 to 2025, the US provided more than US\$12 billion in aid to Uganda and allocated US\$673 million just over in 2024.⁸²

Similarly, the US has turned a blind eye to three decades of aggression of Rwandan forces in the DRC. In 2012, despite massive evidence pointing to Rwanda's direct involvement in the violence and support to M23, the US was reluctant in taking action and was criticized internationally for a “muted response.”⁸³ US officials successfully delayed the release of a crucial UN report⁸⁴ and temporarily prevented a UN Security Council resolution from explicitly naming Rwanda and Uganda's role in the war.⁸⁵

The restrictions that the Obama administration was supposed to apply on its military aid to Rwanda were also largely circumvented. Even after mounting pressure and the suspension of financial support from the UK and other countries⁸⁶ in 2012, the Obama administration cut only US\$200,000 in military funding – in a symbolic move.⁸⁷ In the following years, although the US State Department found that Rwanda violated the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (CSPA) in 2014 and 2016, President Obama waived restrictions on over US\$1.3 million in International Military Education & Training (IMET) funds and arms sales to the country.⁸⁸ In total, a mere US\$1,464 was prohibited to Rwanda under the CSPA.⁸⁹



In the years prior to the latest M23-Rwanda offensive, Washington funded military training and exercises in Rwanda under the stated goal of advancing “regional peace and security.”⁹⁰ In 2020, the two countries signed a Status of Forces Agreement to “strengthen the military cooperation.”⁹¹ As its largest bilateral donor,⁹² the US disbursed over US\$197 million in foreign aid to Rwanda in 2024 and over US\$2.2 billion between 2013 and 2023.⁹³

However, at the end of 2023, during the latest offensive, the US appeared to be taking more tangible measures vis a vis Rwanda. In October, the Biden administration blacklisted the country for violating the CSPA, barring it from accessing IMET funds.⁹⁴ This was the fourth time that the US placed Rwanda on the CSPA list, but the first time since 2012 that military aid was actually stopped. While a firmer stance, the overall timing and substance of the US response failed to stop Rwanda’s territorial conquest.⁹⁵

US officials have often invoked the 1994 genocide to justify three decades of unwavering support to Uganda and Rwanda. Yet guilt over failing to stop the bloodshed or fears of renewed violence from Hutu militias cannot explain Washington’s backing, which not only predates the genocide but has endured for more than 30 years.⁹⁶ Visiting the region in 1996, Susan Rice, then the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, said that “Museveni [of Uganda] and Kagame [of Rwanda] agree that the basic problem in the Great Lakes is the danger of a resurgence of genocide and they know how to deal with that. The only thing we [the US] have to do is look the other way.”⁹⁷ As detailed above, the US has done much more than look the other way. It has allowed both allies to run predatory wars in the DRC along with advancing its own mining interests.

Pyromaniac Firefighter – Fueling War while Funding Peacekeeping & Relief Aid

While supporting the countries waging a decades long campaign of aggression, the US has concurrently provided military aid to the DRC – fueling the conflict on multiple sides. At the same time, it has funded significant humanitarian and peacekeeping operations to address the fallout of the conflict.⁹⁸ The vast majority of US aid to the DRC has been through humanitarian assistance. The country, consistently one of Africa’s top recipients of American foreign aid, has received billions primarily targeting health and emergency food relief.⁹⁹

The US has also been the largest financier of the *Mission de l’Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo* (MONUSCO),¹⁰⁰ the UN peacekeeping force active in the DRC since 1999. The US has spent billions on the force since 2008, as illustrated in Figure 1. The MONUSCO was initially established to monitor parties’ compliance with peace accords during the Second Congo War and its mandate has expanded in recent years.

Despite an annual budget roughly between US\$1 and US\$2 billion, the peacekeeping force has failed to achieve stability in eastern DRC. Notwithstanding

a victory over M23 in 2013, the security situation has only worsened since it was deployed. In recent years, MONUSCO has come under heavy criticism by the DRC government and the Congolese public for its inability to protect civilians from armed groups, in particular M23.¹⁰¹

The mission’s budget and personnel have gradually shrunk in recent years. Between 2010 and 2024, MONUSCO’s budget fell by 54 percent and the total mission force decreased by 38 percent.¹⁰² These cuts were in large part triggered by the 25 percent decrease in US contributions to the mission during this time.¹⁰³

In addition to funding MONUSCO, the majority of US military aid to the DRC has been allocated to Congolese peacekeeping efforts, which constituted the bulk of the US\$54.17 million in military assistance to the DRC between 2011-2024,¹⁰⁵ mostly for domestic peacekeeping operations, focused on the professionalization of security forces and training on counter terrorism operations and military education and training (US\$4.46 million). During this time, commercial sales of US weapons to the DRC government totaled US\$18.36 million.¹⁰⁶



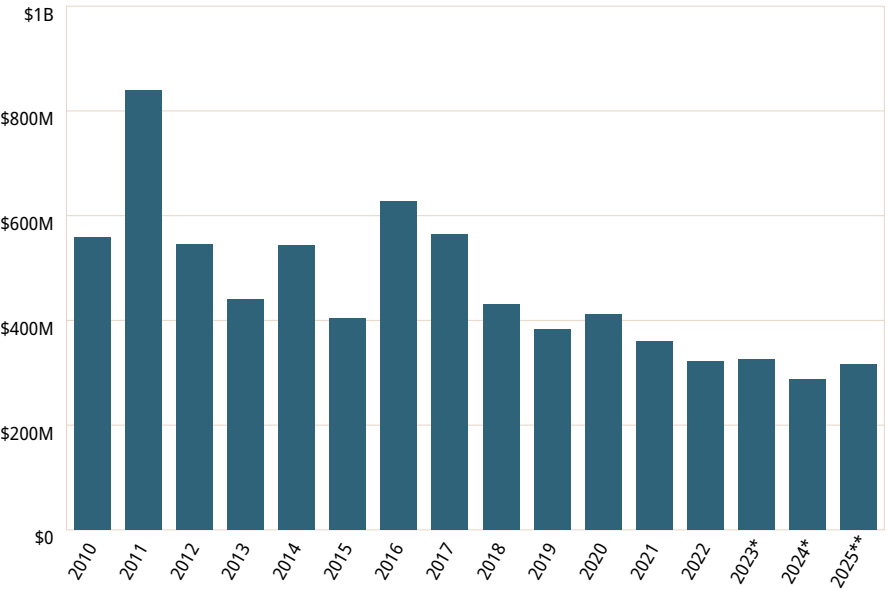
▲ MONUSCO helicopter operates in Mutwanga, June 2021. | UN PHOTO/MICHAEL ALI

This support has continued despite the fact that the DRC has appeared on the CSPA list for fifteen consecutive years after the State Department determined that the Congolese National Army (FARDC) recruited children for use as combatants, escorts, and porters in 2010. This designation led to US\$15 million in domestic peacekeeping funds being prohibited over the years. However, waivers to circumvent the CSPA designation were granted by President Obama, Trump, and Biden, allowing sales and military aid to continue.

Since the assassination of Lumumba, the US has played a significant role in central Africa’s balance of power. Even with the billions it has spent on peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance in the DRC, America’s simultaneous alliances with Rwanda and Uganda have allowed both countries to destabilize the country and prey upon its resources. The following section explores to what extent this predation helped secure American access to critical minerals.

Figure 1.
Annual US contributions to MONUSCO (2024 US\$)

Source: US Department of State Congressional Budget Justifications, FYs 2010-2025¹⁰⁴
*Estimates; **Request



US Imports of Smuggled Congolese Coltan

The main strategic minerals from the DRC for US industry – especially the defense sector – are copper, cobalt, and coltan. Of these three, coltan is the only one that is found in the conflict areas of eastern DRC, with copper and cobalt being mined industrially in the southern part of the country, close to the Zambian border.

The US does not produce coltan domestically and relies on imports of the strategic mineral, critical for electronics, jet engines, missiles and other defense weapons systems used by the military.¹⁰⁷ In the DRC, coltan (the raw material for tantalum) is mostly extracted by artisanal miners and has been for years smuggled into Rwanda and fraudulently exported as if produced there. While Rwanda officially mines tin, tantalum, and tungsten (known as 3T minerals), the UN Group of Experts and Global Witness have documented how it falsifies its domestic production data to cover up the inclusion of laundered Congolese minerals within its exports, the vast majority of which are smuggled from the DRC.¹⁰⁸

Data from US Geological Survey (USGS) reveals the troubling involvement of the US in this laundering scheme.¹⁰⁹ As shown in Figures 2 and 3, there was a very significant surge in US imports of tantalum ores and concentrates from Rwanda after 2013. Rwanda’s overall tantalum exports to the US extraordinarily increased 15-fold between 2013 and 2018, at the same time that the US administration waived its own sanction mechanism against Rwanda.

Whereas the vast majority of Rwanda’s exports of tantalum¹¹⁰ were smuggled minerals from DRC, the comparison of the level of exports to the US from the two countries is striking. Between

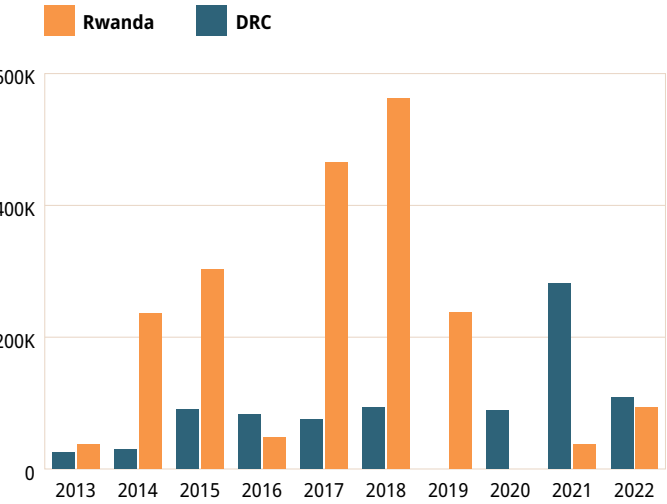
2013 and 2022, Rwanda shipped to the US over 2,000 tons of tantalum worth over US\$135 million – more than double the DRC’s exports over the same period – 878 tons, worth US\$53.6 million. Through its looting of eastern DRC, Rwanda became a major supplier of the mineral to the US – at its peak supplying over half of all tantalum imported to the US.

Interestingly, USGS’ data suggests a shift of sourcing of US imports from 2020, with an increased share of imports from the DRC and decrease of imports from Rwanda. From 54 percent of US imports in 2018, the share of Rwanda as a supplier of tantalum dropped to zero in 2020 and to only three percent in 2021. In just three years, Rwanda’s role as a key US supplier of tantalum was essentially erased. US tantalum imports from DRC appear to have also stopped since 2023. Washington has come to rely increasingly on imports from other countries, primarily Australia, as an alternative of imports from the two countries.¹¹¹

Given the history of US mining interests in the region, it is troubling that this recent evolution coincides with M23’s reemergence in 2021, with Rwanda’s proxy militia specifically targeting major coltan mines in eastern DRC during the following years (see Box).

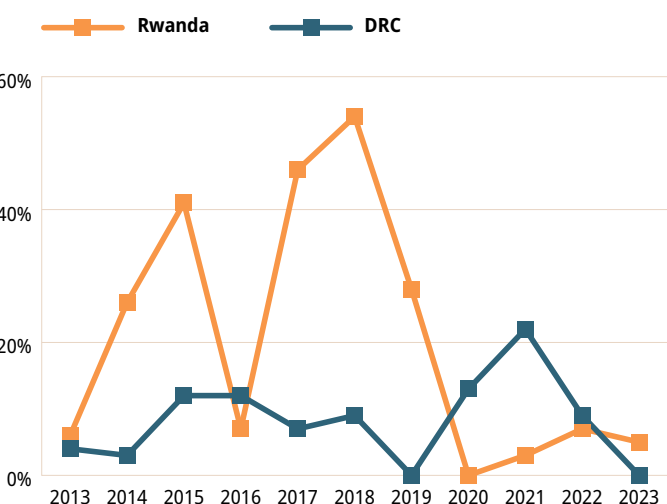
Trump made clear that the US-brokered “peace” process is intended to serve US mining interests.¹¹⁵ Coltan is a high prize for some of them, notably America First Global, led by close Trump associate Gentry Beach who is vying for rights to the Rubaya mine and intends to bring back Congolese coltan as a major US import, but through a scheme in which tantalum ores will be processed in Rwanda.¹¹⁶

Figure 2.
Amounts of tantalum ore and concentrate exports from the DRC and Rwanda to the US (kgs)



Source: Mineral yearbooks: Niobium and Tantalum - National Minerals Information Center (USGS)

Figure 3.
Percentage of US imports of tantalum ores and concentrates from the DRC and Rwanda



M23 & Rwanda’s Conquest of the Rubaya Coltan Mines

In April 2024, M23 took control of the Rubaya coltan mines in southern Masisi territory to exploit one of the world’s largest coltan deposits. The mines generate substantial income for the group and help sustain its military operations. In a December 2024 report, the UN Group of Experts documented how M23 ensured a monopoly on the export of coltan from Rubaya to Rwanda to collect an estimated US\$800,000 monthly from the taxation of coltan production and trade.¹¹² An “unprecedented boost” in smuggled coltan has since been reported, with M23 fraudulently exporting at least 150 metric tons of coltan to Rwanda in 2024 and up to 120 metric tons per month in 2025.¹¹³ According to the Rwandan government, coltan exports increased by 42 percent in the third quarter of 2024.¹¹⁴



▲ Coltan mined from DRC. | RESPONSIBLE SOURCING NETWORK, “Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Coltan/Tantalum,” Attribution-Noncommercial 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC 2.0)

► Luwowo Coltan mine near the North Kivu town of Rubaya, captured by M23 in May 2024. | MONUSCO/SYLVAIN LIECHTI, “SRSG visits coltan mine in Rubaya,” Attribution-ShareAlike (CC BY-SA 2.0)





Pax Americana: Policy Shift or End of Game?

In February 2025, the US Treasury issued sanctions on two individuals – James Kabarebe, Rwanda’s Minister of State for Regional Integration and Lawrence Kanyuka Kingston, an M23 and Congo River Alliance senior member and spokesperson.¹¹⁷ The Treasury’s statement explained that Kabarebe orchestrated RDF support to the M23, managed revenue generated from illegally occupied mines, and coordinated the export of extracted minerals from mining sites in the DRC for eventual export from Rwanda.

This was remarkably the first time that the US applied sanctions against a high-level Rwandan official after thirty years of unwavering support to the country.¹¹⁸ Whether the measure marks an actual policy shift or is a mere symbolic diplomatic gesture during on-going negotiations is a question to which the analysis of the US-brokered peace agreement brings some answers.

The first point of the deal signed in June 2025 is “Respect for the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s Territorial Integrity.”¹¹⁹ The text explicitly calls on Rwanda to lift its “defensive measures,” which ostensibly refers its 7,000-12,000 troops reportedly

deployed in the DRC.¹²⁰ It also stipulates that both countries will “cease any state support to non-state armed groups.” M23 – the main aggressor in the conflict currently – is scarcely mentioned in the deal, which fails to specifically call on Rwanda to end its support to the militia in the same terms it calls on the DRC to neutralize the FDLR. As previously noted, the FDLR was largely decimated by the latest offensive and the current security threat it poses appears exaggerated to serve Rwanda’s strategic goals.¹²¹ Yet, Rwandan President Paul Kagame stressed that his forces will not retreat until the FDLR has first been subdued.¹²²

Unlike the UN Group of Experts’ 2025 report – which explicitly calls on Rwanda to cease all support to M23, withdraw troops, and stop training armed groups, the US-brokered deal avoids directly confronting Rwanda’s role in the conflict, capitulating to their language of “defensive measures.”¹²³ Instead, the deal encourages separate negotiations between M23 and the Congolese government, a puzzling plan given the sum of evidence demonstrating the rebel movement is a Rwanda proxy.

M23 engaged in turbulent parallel negotiations with the Congolese government in Qatar. In July 2025, both sides signed



▲ Gen. James Kabarebe, Rwandan Defense Force Chief of Defense Staff (left), greets Gen. William E. “Kip” Ward, commander of U.S. Africa Command (center), and U.S. Africa Command Sgt. Maj. Mark Ripka (right) in Kigali, April 20, 2009. | US ARMY

a Declaration of Principles as a roadmap towards a final peace accord, aligned with the US agreement to be signed in August.¹²⁴ However, no deal was reached after both sides accused one another of not wanting peace and violating the terms of the ceasefire agreement.¹²⁵ The suspension of the talks in August 2025 confirmed doubts that the deal will ever be reached. In the days after the ceasefire was signed, the DRC’s spokesperson said the agreement will include the “non-negotiable withdrawal” of M23 from Congolese territories. This claim was immediately denied by the M23’s chief negotiator, who shot back: “AFC/M23 will not retreat, not even by one meter. We will stay where we are.”¹²⁶

In September, when asked in an interview on CNN if M23 will respect the peace deal signed at the White House, Corneille Nangaa, leader of the Congo River Alliance (which includes M23), firmly replied, “I don’t recognize the [DRC President Felix Tshisekedi] regime. So, whatever he signs, I’m not concerned. He is illegitimate...So, whatever they sign over there, and so far as we are not part of it, we don’t care.”¹²⁷ It is unclear how Kinshasa could accept a final deal that does not require M23 to cede control of the Congolese territories and natural resources it seized by force.

While the US has publicly condemned Rwanda’s role in backing M23, sanctioned the rebel group in 2013,¹²⁸ suspended military aid in 2023, and applied sanctions on a government official in 2025, its response has fallen far short of what the crisis in eastern DRC demands. US sincerity is further put in doubt by the new US Treasury sanctions on PARECO-FF that were announced in August 2025. Treasury oddly justified the sanctions of the pro-government militia by its illegal mining activities in Rubaya though the group did not control the mine since it was taken over in 2024 by M23.¹²⁹

Decades of military and financial support, along with a consistent pattern of waivers and selective enforcement of aid restrictions, have allowed Rwanda to act with impunity while increasing its own military capacity. M23’s control of key mining sites has largely fueled its own operations and expansion in recent years. The US only stepped in as a self-styled “peacemaker” after M23 had already expanded its territorial control – offering a deal that, on closer examination, caters to the interests of Western mining firms and Rwanda, while sidestepping the root causes of the conflict.

Regional Integration Formalizes Exploitation

The deal is not just a “peace” agreement between two warring countries – it unusually also involves the expansion of mineral exploitation in partnership with the US government and investors. President Trump stated at the signing of the deal: “We’re getting, for the United States, a lot of the mineral rights from the Congo as part of it.”¹³⁰ Trump’s claim is expected to materialize through a key element of the deal – the “phased regional economic integration framework” that Rwanda and the DRC agreed to implement within three months under a separate agreement. This commits both nations to regional and bilateral integration, which includes “derisking of mineral supply chains... transparent, formalized end-to-end mineral value chains (from mine to processed metal) that link both countries, in partnership, as appropriate, with the U.S. government and U.S. investors.”¹³¹

“We’re getting, for the United States, a lot of the mineral rights from the Congo as part of it.”

– Donald Trump, June 2025

▼ President of Rwanda Paul Kagame addresses UN General Assembly, September 2023. | UN PHOTO/CIA PAK



On August 1, 2025, the US State Department announced that Rwanda and the DRC had completed a first step of this regional integration process by signing a “Statement of Tenets for the Regional Economic Integration Framework.”¹³² Released as a “living platform” to be solidified in a follow-up agreement, the statement commits both countries to “work jointly with relevant stakeholders to progressively eliminate barriers – whether reputational, technical, or commercial – that obstruct the direct and lawful export of minerals sourced in the region, notably tin, tantalum, tungsten, niobium, gold, and other minerals.”¹³³ As a result, ores from what are now artisanal mining zones in eastern DRC are expected to be refined and marketed from Rwanda.¹³⁴

The countries agreed to a draft framework on September 14, 2025. According to the document,¹³⁵ they pledge to work with the US and other international partners to implement reforms “necessary to de-risk private sector investment in a cost-effective manner” and work with the private sector to “develop cross-border special economic zones.” The framework was submitted for review by stakeholders – including the private sector, development banks, and donor governments – and is expected to be finalized in October.

Regional integration, i.e. the formalization of mineral supply chains from the DRC’s mines to Rwanda, raises questions about the deal’s true intent, as it appears to legitimize Rwanda’s control over Congolese resources. It is revealing that Rwanda’s Minister of State for Regional Integration is none other than James Kabarebe, the same official sanctioned by the US Treasury in early 2025 for orchestrating Rwanda’s support for the M23, coordinating the export of extracted minerals from DRC and managing the revenue generated by this extraction.

The agreement thus formalizes the exploitation of Congolese minerals after decades of Rwanda’s mineral smuggling from the DRC. Entrenching the current system has significant economic

ramifications for both nations. Rwanda has seen enormous growth from the mining sector. Between 2017 and 2024, Rwanda’s mineral exports increased by nearly 500 percent – from US\$373 million to US\$1.75 billion – with gold the main export commodity, representing US\$1.5 billion in 2024. This could just be the tip of the iceberg. As a major transit hub for illegal Congolese gold, Rwanda’s official export figures represent just a fraction of the total amount it actually sends to other countries.¹³⁶

The Tshisekedi government claims to lose US\$1 billion in revenue from natural resources smuggled through Rwanda each year.¹³⁷ While the formalization of trade may decrease this loss, the reality is that with its far larger mineral deposits, the DRC will likely continue being the place of extraction at an enormous social and environmental cost,¹³⁸ while Rwanda will benefit from processing and exporting minerals around the world.

Regional integration under the deal could also benefit Uganda, which has taken advantage of a military partnership with the DRC to exploit gold and timber.¹³⁹ With nearly US\$3.5 billion exported in 2024,¹⁴⁰ gold is one of Uganda’s most profitable exports – a substantial share of which originates in the DRC and is smuggled across the border before being laundered through Ugandan markets.¹⁴¹ Uganda is also a major destination for timber illegally extracted from eastern DRC.¹⁴² While absent from the US “peace” deal, Uganda could benefit from the formalization of this exploitation through regional integration.

In June 2025, the Mobilization for the Safeguarding of Congolese Sovereignty and Autonomy (MOSSAC), a coalition of Congolese civil society organizations, warned that the “peace” deal will “normalize the current illicit resource and power grabs underway by Rwanda, the M23, the AFC and their other allies, including Western powers that covet the DRC’s minerals and support Rwanda with financial aid.”¹⁴³ The analysis above points to these concerns being well founded.

Rwanda’s Minister of State for Regional Integration is none other than James Kabarebe, the same official sanctioned by the US Treasury in early 2025 for orchestrating Rwanda’s support to the M23, coordinating the export of extracted minerals from DRC, and managing the revenue generated by this extraction.



US Deals Already Underway

In July, the Oakland Institute released *Profit off Peace?* exposing the corporations, billionaires, and close Trump associates poised to benefit from a “peace” deal tailored to their interests.¹⁴⁴ Even before the ink was dry, several mining agreements were already being finalized.

On July 18, 2025, California-based KoBold Metals signed an agreement with the DRC government to explore critical mineral resources on over 1,600 km².¹⁴⁵ In May 2025, KoBold announced the acquisition of rights to the Manono lithium deposit through a US\$1 billion agreement with Australian miner AVZ Minerals.¹⁴⁶

Another US consortium, featuring Orion Resources and Virtus Minerals – led by former US military and intelligence personnel – has become the frontrunner to acquire Chemaf Resources, a significant Congolese copper and cobalt producer.¹⁴⁷ The opportunity came after the DRC government’s decision to block its sale to a Chinese state-owned enterprise, allegedly following pressure exerted by the US government.¹⁴⁸

Crucially, neither the Manono deposit acquired by KoBold nor the Chemaf concessions are located in eastern DRC. They lie in the southern provinces, far from the conflict zones. The

timing of these deals suggests they are a direct outcome of the US-brokered agreement, despite having no connection to resolving the violence or instability in the east. Instead, they reflect how the “peace” framework is being used to unlock strategic mining access for Western interests.

Mining deals are also being negotiated in the conflict areas of eastern DRC. As mentioned earlier, America First Global, led by close Trump associate Gentry Beach,¹⁴⁹ is vying for rights to the Rubaya mine – which produces half of the country’s coltan. Beach’s consortium plans to export some of Rubaya’s coltan to be processed in a new smelter it will reportedly help construct in Kigali.¹⁵⁰ Called the “biggest prize” in the conflict, the mine relies on manual labor from impoverished men, women, and children.¹⁵¹



▲ Gentry Beach, Chair of America First Global and close Trump associate | RAMI LUDO, CC BY-SA 4.0

US mercenary Erik Prince, founder of the infamous private military firm Blackwater and a longtime ally of President Trump,¹⁵² signed an agreement with Kinshasa in early 2025 to assist in enforcing taxation and reducing smuggling of minerals.¹⁵³ In May, he was reportedly recruiting mercenaries for the DRC.¹⁵⁴ Prince is behind serious human rights abuses over the past two decades.¹⁵⁵ His presence in the country raises fears that while mines may be better protected, communities will continue living in a war zone. For example, the Bisie tin mine in North Kivu temporarily closed in March 2025 after M23 rebels advanced near its operations. After the US government helped broker the withdrawal of insurgents near the mine,¹⁵⁶ it began a phased re-opening in April 2025.¹⁵⁷ US pressure may have secured the mine, but instability and violence continue to rock the region.

In addition to facilitating mining and security deals, the US government finances transport infrastructure to ensure mineral exports through the Lobito Corridor, a railway that runs from strategic mining areas of the DRC, through Zambia to Angola.¹⁵⁸ In 2024, the US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) loaned Angola US\$553 million to upgrade the railway that provides a key export route to the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁵⁹

The aim of the deal appears therefore to build two separate export routes for Congolese minerals – the Lobito Corridor for copper and cobalt mined in the South of the country, and Rwanda as a hub for minerals extracted in the conflict areas of eastern DRC.

New Investors, Same Exploitation?

Through signing the “peace” deal, the DRC government likely sought an economic lifeboat to its current struggles and a reprieve from the incessant violence within its borders.

China currently plays a major role in the DRC’s mining sector, controlling significant portions of the country’s production of cobalt, copper, and other critical minerals. In 2008, China signed “the deal of the century” with former President Kabila, granting Chinese companies access to extensive copper and cobalt mines in exchange for developing Congolese infrastructure.¹⁶⁰ According to the Council on Foreign Relations, nine of the world’s ten largest cobalt mines are now located in the DRC’s southern Katanga region, and half of them are owned by Chinese firms.¹⁶¹ Chinese firms additionally own over 80 percent

of Congo’s copper mines.¹⁶² The value of trade between the China and the DRC stood at US\$27 billion in 2024, far outpacing Congo’s US\$1 billion trade total with the US the same year.¹⁶³

The Chinese minerals-for-infrastructure deal has come under criticism for failing to equitably benefit the DRC.¹⁶⁴ Several Chinese mining firms have also been accused of community displacement, environmental damages, and poor labor conditions in addition to “financial malfeasance.”¹⁶⁵ In October 2024, the DRC’s top mining official publicly stated that the country was looking to “attract better investors, more investors and diversified investors,” to pivot away from Chinese dominance in the mining sector.¹⁶⁶ In February 2025, Congolese President Tshisekedi issued a temporary ban on cobalt exports – in a direct challenge to Chinese firms whose high outputs had tanked the mineral’s price.¹⁶⁷ Tshisekedi has publicly compared the current agreement being negotiated with the US to the existing “strategic partnership” the DRC has with China, raising questions about the scale of the future deals on the table.¹⁶⁸

At the launch of the Declaration of Principles that preceded the “peace” deal in April 2025,¹⁶⁹ Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated, “Our firms are good corporate citizens, American firms, and they’ll bring good governance and ensure responsible, reliable supply chains for things like critical minerals...”¹⁷⁰ However, as revealed in the Institute’s recent policy brief, several mining firms with dubious records around human rights violations, environmental damages, financial fraud, bribery, and tax evasion are now reportedly linked to assets stemming from the deal.¹⁷¹

US interest in Congolese affairs remains motivated by securing access to critical minerals while countering China’s current dominance over supply chains. Nearly all of the supply chains for critical minerals used by the Pentagon depend on at least one Chinese supplier, giving Beijing considerable power.¹⁷² In 2025, the US announced plans to invest billions in efforts to improve its development of critical minerals,¹⁷³ but is still “decades” behind China.¹⁷⁴ After the Declaration of Principles was signed, the US State Department stated, “China’s control over critical mineral supply chains poses a significant threat to US industrial and technological capacity and cannot continue.”¹⁷⁵

The US – after decades of enabling violence in the Congo – is now seeking to secure greater access to the country’s resources. However, the DRC government must be weary of the promises made by American diplomats and companies. Like the Chinese minerals-for-infrastructure deal, a minerals-for-security deal may provide short-term stability and financing. However, research across the continent shows that the cost of such deals is often felt over the long-term as they erode sovereign control and actual benefits for the country.¹⁷⁶ The “development” that the US promises to follow massive mining, processing and transportation of minerals outside the country is far more likely to benefit corporations instead of Congolese communities.



Peace Remains Elusive, Violence Rages On

While Trump has already celebrated the end of the conflict, violence continues to rage. Since June, MONUSCO has recorded over 1,000 civilian deaths in Ituri and North Kivu, a number that continues to grow by the day.¹⁷⁷ In July alone, the UN estimated that at least 319 civilians, including Hutu farmers, women, and children, were executed by the M23 near the Virunga National Park.¹⁷⁸ The surge in violence across Ituri Province claimed lives of dozens of civilians in July after the armed group Convention for the Popular Revolution (CRP) targeted positions held by the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) in the province.¹⁷⁹ On July 29, M23 fighters seized two more villages in North Kivu, further calling into question the efficacy of the “peace” deal.¹⁸⁰

The Islamic State-linked Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebels have also killed approximately 100 civilians in attacks between July and September.¹⁸¹ M23 and Wazalendo armed groups – many of which are supported by the FARDC – have continued to clash in North and South Kivu provinces, resulting in more civilians deaths in July, August, and September.¹⁸² Some of the Wazalendo leaders have stated that they will keep fighting

regardless of the outcome of DRC-M23 peace talks since they were not directly included in negotiations.¹⁸³ The inability of the DRC government to control allied armed groups and Kagame’s ongoing support to M23 will likely lead to further violence.

As of October 2025, Goma and Bukavu remain under M23 authority and civilians are reportedly “regularly arrested, kidnapped, interrogated, forced to fight alongside the M23, imprisoned, tortured, and/or killed.”¹⁸⁴ The Congolese government has also alleged widespread sexual violence, torture, and recruitment of child soldiers by M23 in their occupied territories.¹⁸⁵

It is estimated that over 120 armed groups are active in eastern DRC, many funding their activities through the trade of “conflict minerals,” as well as other resources such as charcoal and timber, and the taxation of businesses.¹⁸⁶ While the US deal commits Rwanda and the DRC to “take all possible measures to ensure that all armed groups within the conflict area cease engaging in hostilities,” this will likely be a challenging process. Armed groups not directly aligned with either government



◀ A boy with a cart rides down the street at the Kanyaruchinya camp in Goma, with MONUSCO peacekeepers behind him, August 2012. | UN PHOTO/SYLVAIN LIECHTI

▶ MONUSCO peacekeepers from Malawi protect population of Kamango, in the North Kivu Province, May 2020. | UN PHOTO/MICHAEL ALI

– most of which were excluded from the US-brokered deal – are unlikely to relinquish their source of funding, ensuring that cycles of violence and instability persist.

While conflict continues, the “peace” deal contains a planned “joint security coordination mechanism” run by the two countries. Such mechanisms have been heavily criticized by Congolese civil society for their past failures to prevent violence against civilians and mineral exploitation.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, analysts warn that without a “credible military deterrent” against Rwanda and M23, there is little incentive for them to give up their territorial gains.¹⁸⁸ The FARDC is widely corrupt and currently lacks the capacity to defend the DRC and relies on support from MONUSCO, the UN peacekeeping mission in the country that is threatened by massive cuts from the Trump administration.

In July 2025, Congress approved Trump’s US\$9 billion rescissions package targeting foreign aid – which included a cut of over US\$361 million in undisbursed funds to UN peacekeeping missions.¹⁸⁹ While the law did not specify which

countries would be impacted, Trump’s initial request singled out MONUSCO as an example of a problematic mission.¹⁹⁰ On August 29, Trump announced another US\$5 billion in cuts to “woke, weaponized, and wasteful spending” that slashes US\$393 million to Contributions to International Peacekeeping Activities (CIPA), the fund that provides US commitments to all peacekeeping missions, including MONUSCO.¹⁹¹ The administration’s 2026 fiscal year budget request goes even further, proposing to terminate all US support to “wasteful United Nations (UN) and other peacekeeping missions” through a US\$1.6 billion cut.¹⁹²

Trump’s attacks on MONUSCO directly contradict the language of the US-brokered agreement that states the mission “plays an important role in local peace and security.”¹⁹³ MONUSCO’s mandate is currently scheduled to end in December 2025. In June, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) started the second and final phased withdrawal of its own peacekeeping troops from eastern DRC.¹⁹⁴ While MONUSCO’s mandate might be extended given the ongoing violence, the possible withdrawal of peacekeepers amid continued unrest raises serious doubts about the prospects for lasting peace.

The Way Forward

The ongoing conflict in eastern DRC is a calculated campaign of aggression, territorial conquest, and resource exploitation, driven primarily by Rwanda and Uganda. Since the mid-1990s, both countries have attempted to claim their military involvement in the DRC was essential to their own security, despite overwhelming documentation of their true economic motives.¹⁹⁵ For over three decades, these countries have supported militias in order to loot Congolese minerals before exporting them as their own.

This regional plunder has never occurred in isolation. Dating back to the Cold War, American foreign policy toward the DRC has been driven by strategic and economic interests at the expense of peace and justice. From the onset of independence to today’s scramble against China for critical minerals, Washington has continuously interfered in Congolese affairs to secure the supply of natural resources. Close partnerships with Rwanda and Uganda have driven instability in the region. Today’s efforts – dressed up as regional economic integration led by private western firms – are a continuation of past plans that prioritize profits over Congolese peace and prosperity.

The DRC urgently needs a new path forward free from exploitation by global powers. As MOSSAC asserts, “The DRC must not be forced into the position of being held hostage to a choice between continued war and occupation on the one hand, versus a business deal that is not beneficial to the people of the DRC on the other hand. They must instead be allowed the time and political space needed to develop their own plan for an economy based on sovereign control over their own lands, resources, environment and labor force.”¹⁹⁶

Far from delivering peace, the US deal deepens the cycle of exploitation that has long burdened the Congo. Real peace and prosperity will come when Congolese voices – not foreign powers – set the terms of the country’s future.

► Displaced child in Kanyaruchinya camp, near Goma, August 2012 | UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti



“The DRC must not be forced into the position of being held hostage to a choice between continued war and occupation on the one hand, versus a business deal that is not beneficial to the people of the DRC on the other hand. They must instead be allowed the time and political space needed to develop their own plan for an economy based on sovereign control over their own lands, resources, environment and labor force.”

— Mobilization for the Safeguarding of Congolese
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