

Militarisation, regional failure and the mirage of peace in E. Congo

Every few years, eastern Congo reminds us that war there never really ends; it merely pauses to catch its breath. The latest escalation, centred on renewed confrontation with the M23 rebel movement, has revived a familiar confidence in military solutions. Guns roar, commanders fall, statements are issued, and the word “progress” re-enters the diplomatic vocabulary. Yet Congo’s history urges restraint before we celebrate.

The assumption underlying each new military push is a simple one: that force can resolve what decades of experience show to be a deeply political, social, and historical crisis. Certainly, military operations can reduce gunfire for a time, reclaim towns, or neutralise prominent rebel figures. But Congo’s tragedy is that such moments rarely add up to peace. They add up to another chapter.

The recent killing of senior M23 commander and spokesperson Lt Col Willy Ngoma has been widely interpreted as a turning point. Perhaps it is, tactically. But strategically, the Congolese conflict has taught us to be wary of reading too much into the fate of individuals. Armed groups in eastern Congo are rarely built around a single figure. They are decentralised, economically embedded, and sustained by cross-border networks. Remove one leader and the structure adapts, fragments, or mutates. The question, then, is not whether commanders can be killed, but whether their removal heals mistrust, reconciles communities, or persuades citizens of different ethnic identities that the state belongs to them equally. On that score, history has not been encouraging.

None of this is to argue that force has no place. Armies exist for a reason, and civilian

Armed entrepreneurs extract value from disorder



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Regional Politics



protection sometimes requires the credible threat of violence. Military pressure can deter expansion and create space for negotiation. The problem arises when militarisation is mistaken for strategy rather than treated as one tool among many. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, force has too often been deployed without comparable effort to reform governance, restore justice, or repair the social contract. Tactical success, in such circumstances, becomes strategically empty.

This pattern also exposes uncomfortable truths about regional leadership. African institutions regularly invoke the language of African solutions to African problems. The East African Community, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, and the African Union have all, at different times, claimed a stake in Congo’s peace. Yet their interventions have been uneven, fragmented, and constrained by competing national interests. The EAC’s security engagement has struggled with legitimacy and coordination. IGAD’s role has been peripheral, shaped by

its primary focus elsewhere. The African Union, for all its normative authority, remains limited by its dependence on member states for enforcement. The result is not a lack of frameworks, but a surplus of processes and a shortage of outcomes.

Still, it would be convenient and misleading, to place all responsibility beyond Congo’s borders. The Congolese state is not merely a victim of regional failure; it is also an actor in its own right. Years of corruption, elite capture and politicised identity have weakened state legitimacy and fed local grievances. Military campaigns conducted without parallel reforms in justice, decentralisation and service delivery often deepen rather than heal alienation. Peace, in this sense, cannot be imported. It must be built on a domestic political project that convinces citizens the state is worth believing in.

Ordinary Congolese continue to pay the price. Displacement remains widespread. Children grow up knowing conflict as normality. Sexual violence persists with numbing regularity. And while civilians suffer, war quietly becomes an economy. Armed entrepreneurs, political elites, and transnational networks extract value from disorder through smuggling, illicit taxation and control of trade routes. In such an environment, peace is not merely difficult; it is disruptive.

If regional and continental institutions wish to retain credibility, they must move beyond managing crises towards resolving them.

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