

USGIF INTELLIGENCE BRIEF

Central Africa Edition | Democratic Republic of the Congo

July 24th, 2026



M23 is Likely to Use Drones to Protect Its Mining Infrastructure by 2028

Key Judgment

The March 23 Movement (M23), a Rwandan-backed rebel group, is likely (55-80%) to use drones to protect its established mining infrastructure in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) within the next two years due to the group's sustained involvement in the mining industry, drone use against other critical infrastructure, willingness to take financial risks, and a permissive operating environment created by a weak DRC governance.

Sustained Involvement in Mining

M23 is LIKELY to continue exploiting mining infrastructure in the DRC through mineral extraction, taxation, and trafficking due to the group's sustained territorial occupation in the Kivu provinces, southern expansion to nearby mineral deposits, and increasing global demand for critical minerals. M23 occupies territory in the North and South Kivu provinces, outlined in **Figure 1**, and maintains control of major mines, such as the Rubaya coltan mine, as shown in **Figure 2**. M23 significantly expanded mining operations at the Rubaya mine from 2021 to 2025, resulting in the export of over 150 tons of coltan to Rwanda in 2024.^{1,2} M23's territorial expansion toward Katanga, a province rich in copper, coltan, and cobalt, will deepen mineral exploitation by providing access to larger mineral supplies and facilitating trade through cross-border markets in Zambia and Tanzania.³



Figure 1. Key Locations in the DRC, **Created by:** Savannah Dorey

The growing access to mineral resources and proximity to regional markets will enable M23 to enlarge its mineral holdings and profits. While southern expansion provides economic opportunity for more mineral trade, M23 may struggle to have the same level of civilian support and gain legitimacy due to a much lower Tutsi population in the Katanga province, a result of regional violence against Tutsi people during the Second Congo War.⁴ This will potentially limit M23's ability to gain control of additional mines and

establish governance in the Katanga province to the extent that the group did in the North and South Kivu provinces. Regardless of operational location, global demand raises mineral prices and complicates oversight, keeping illicit mining activities profitable for M23.⁵

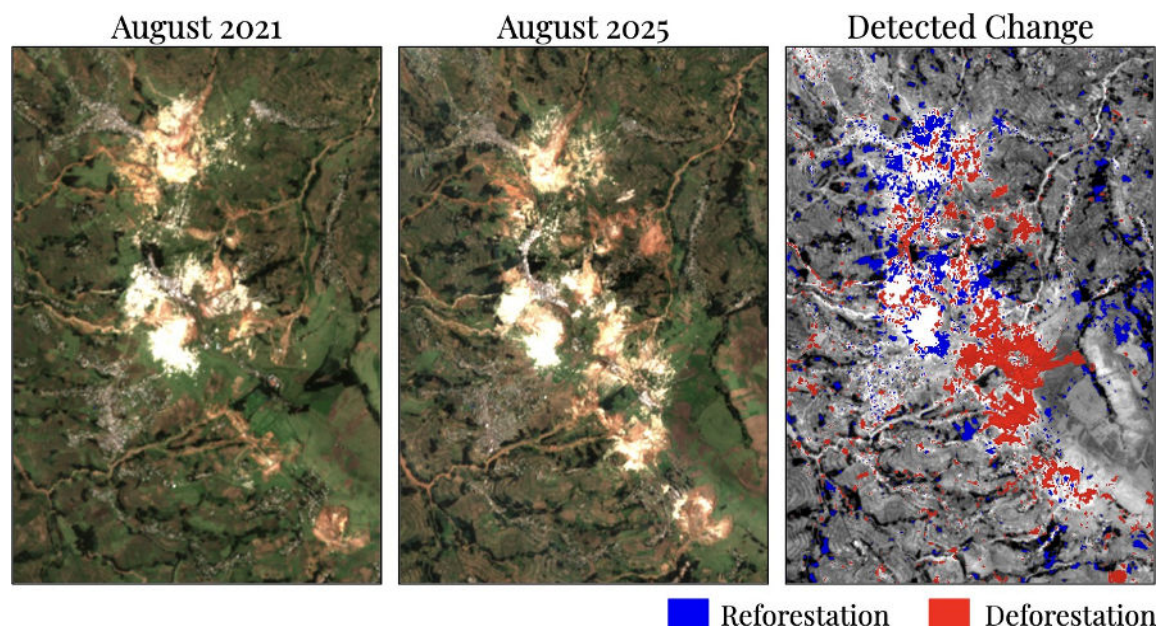


Figure 2. Rubaya Mines Change Detection, **Created by:** Lindsay Toothaker

Drone Use Against Other Critical Infrastructure

M23 is LIKELY to continue integrating drones into operations due to increased access to supplies, support from Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF), and the escalated use in targeting critical infrastructure. Increased affordability and accessibility of commercial off the shelf (COTS) drones make it easier for non-state actors to obtain and modify the technology. The COTS drones and weaponization technology to add explosive payloads provides non-state actors with an inexpensive way to support both surveillance and strike attack operations.⁶ In addition to COTS drones and modification technology, M23's connection with RDF further supports the group's drone integration with advanced military drones.^{7,8} This global exchange of advanced military-grade drones, especially from the U.S., Israel, Turkey, Iran, and China to African countries, is highlighted below in **Figure 3**. Beyond increased



surveillance opportunities, M23 launched drone strikes against the Kisangani Bangoka International Airport in central DRC in early February and March 2026 following the death of M23 senior military officer Willy Ngoma by drone attack demonstrating drone strike capabilities and interest.^{9,10}

Figure 3. Drone Proliferation Flow Map, **Created by:** Savannah Dorey

Willingness to Take Risks Investing in Drones

M23 is **LIKELY** to take risks in the adoption of drones to protect established mining infrastructure, enabled by the group's stable territorial control and profits from current operations. M23 has occupied significant territory in the Kivu provinces, as shown in **Figure 4**, since early 2025 and seeks to establish an autonomous zone in this region through parallel infrastructure, particularly in the mining sector for a continued source of income.¹¹ M23 is inclined to accept financial risks by investing in drones because of their versatility, with uses for surveillance of mining sites or to deter DRC armed forces and competing non-state groups by using armed drones. Financial and material support from Rwanda stabilizes M23's operational environment and incentivizes technology use by providing access to military-grade equipment.¹² Investing in drones allows M23 to better match the DRC's military capabilities and capabilities of regional non-state groups like the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) to maintain their territory and assets. M23 is not adverse to taking investment risks because current extortion, taxation, and mineral trafficking activities are profitable enough to support drone acquisition without sacrificing other operational expenses, with the Rubaya mine alone providing M23 with \$800,000 USD monthly.¹³

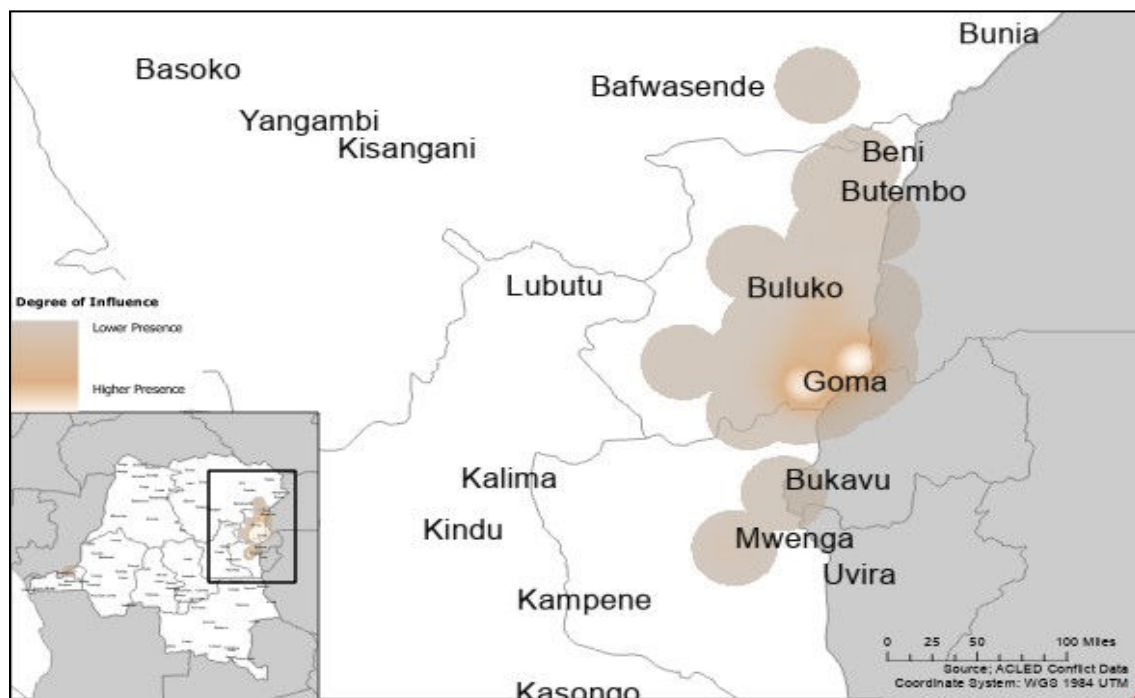


Figure 4. M23's Territorial Occupation, Created by: Abbie Gorman

The DRC's Unstable Government Leadership

Civilian reliance on M23 for security is **LIKELY** to persist due to governmental corruption, political uncertainty, and enduring identity grievances. Ongoing fraud and embezzlement within the DRC government cause civilian distrust and resentment towards policymakers. Recent instances of government corruption involve "legal complaints filed against nine members of" current DRC President Félix Antoine Tshisekedi's family, "concerning tens of millions of euros that vanish monthly."¹⁴ These allegations dampen the nation's hope for a prosperous and well-regulated mineral market. Additionally, concerns about the future safety of the state continue due to the controversial presidential nomination of Joseph Kabila, who is publicly associated with M23 and facing charges for war crimes.¹⁵ This instability is especially threatening to DRC populations who face historical targeting, including Congolese citizens

with Rwandan ancestry, often by government forces. The combination of these destabilizing factors leads civilians to see M23 as an alternative source of protection over the current government.

Implications

Forecasting M23's likely use of drones to protect its mining infrastructure will significantly degrade efforts in countering illegal mining operations in the DRC by improving the group's ability to surveil, defend, and maintain its mining sites. M23's increased surveillance and defense of its current and potential operating sites will threaten U.S. access to mineral supply chains and clean energy goals due to the DRC's lack of sufficient counter drone systems, weakened regulatory and oversight capacity, and increased competition for mineral resources. To prepare and minimize uncertainty about M23 strategies, monitoring air spaces around mines in the DRC could reveal emerging tactics.

Confidence Statement

The confidence level for this assessment is **LOW**.

Limited availability and credibility of unclassified reporting and Publicly Available Information (PAI) on drone procurement by M23 and related groups in Central Africa resulted in explicit assumptions surrounding their acquisition process.

References

1. Livingstone, Emmet. 2026. "M23 Tax Drive in DR Congo Puts Squeeze on Aid Groups." *The New Humanitarian*. May 18, 2026.
<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2026/05/18/m23-tax-drive-dr-congo-squeeze-aid-groups>.
2. De Groof, Melanie, Jacques Ndour, Roberto Sollazzo, Krisztina Varga, and David Zounmenou. 2024. "Letter Dated 27 December 2024 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo Addressed to the President of the Security Council." United Nations Security Council.
3. "Map of the Artisanal Mining Operation in the East of the DR Congo." 2026. International Peace Information Service. 2026.
4. International Crisis Group. *Katanga: The Congo's Forgotten Crisis*. January 9, 2006.
<https://www.justice.gov/file/275566/dl>.
5. Hunter, Marcena. 2026. "Beyond Security: Critical Mineral Supply Chains Will Be the Defining Challenge for Indaba 2026." Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime . February 7, 2026.
<https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/beyond-security-critical-mineral-supply-chains-will-be-the-defining-challenge-for-indaba-2026/>.
6. Dulligan, Jake, Laura Freeman, Austin Phoenix, and Bradley Davis. 2025. "The Rising Threat of Non-State Actor Commercial Drone Use: Emerging Capabilities and Threats." *Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point Sentinel*, March.
7. Okello, Achieng J. 2025. "State Sovereignty vs. International Law: The M23 Resurgence in 2025 and Cross-Border Military Interventions in Africa." *Internationalrelations-Publishing.org*, August.
<https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.18006.1>.
8. Greco, Elisa, and Ben Radley. 2025. "Africa and Permanent (Global) Wars." *Review of African Political Economy* 52 (183): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.2307/48820244>.
9. Reuters Staff. 2026. "Rebels Claim Drone Attack on Congo's Kisangani Airport." *Reuters*, March 2, 2026.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/congos-kisangani-airport-attacked-by-suspected-rebel-drones-authorities-say-2026-03-02/>.
10. Jean-yves Kamale. 2026. "M23 Spokesperson Killed by Drone Strike in Congo." AP News. February 24, 2026.
<https://apnews.com/article/congo-goma-m23-rebels-official-killed-86d81ad26c798c4e7741fb1f8449389e>.
11. Nzobakenga, Jimmy. 2024. "Transnational Ethnic Alliances and Armed Conflicts in the DRC: Focus on the M23 Rebellion (2012-2023)." Utrecht University.
<https://studenttheses.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/20.500.12932/47647/Transnational%20Ethnic%20Alliances%20and%20Armed%20Conflicts%20in%20the%20DRC%20Focus%20on%20the%20M23%20Rebellion%20%282012-2023%29%20Final%20Version.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.
12. Okello, Achieng J. 2025. "State Sovereignty vs. International Law: The M23 Resurgence in 2025 and Cross-Border Military Interventions in Africa." *Internationalrelations-Publishing.org*, August.
<https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.18006.1>.

13. De Groof, Mélanie, Jacques Seckène Ndour, Roberto Sollazzo, Romina Gilda Rivero, Krisztina Varga, and David Zounmenou. 2025. "Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo." United Nations Security Council. <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2025/446>.
14. The African Mirror. 2025. "Tshisekedi Family Faces Brussels Charges over DRC Mineral Looting - the African Mirror." The African Mirror - for Africa - Always. July 16, 2025. <https://theafricanmirror.africa/news/tshisekedi-family-faces-brussels-charges-over-drc-mineral-looting/>.
15. Maclean, Ruth. 2026. "He Led Congo for 18 Years. Now, Joseph Kabila Is a Hunted Man." *The New York Times*, March 30, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/30/world/africa/he-led-congo-for-18-years-now-hes-a-hunted-man.html>.