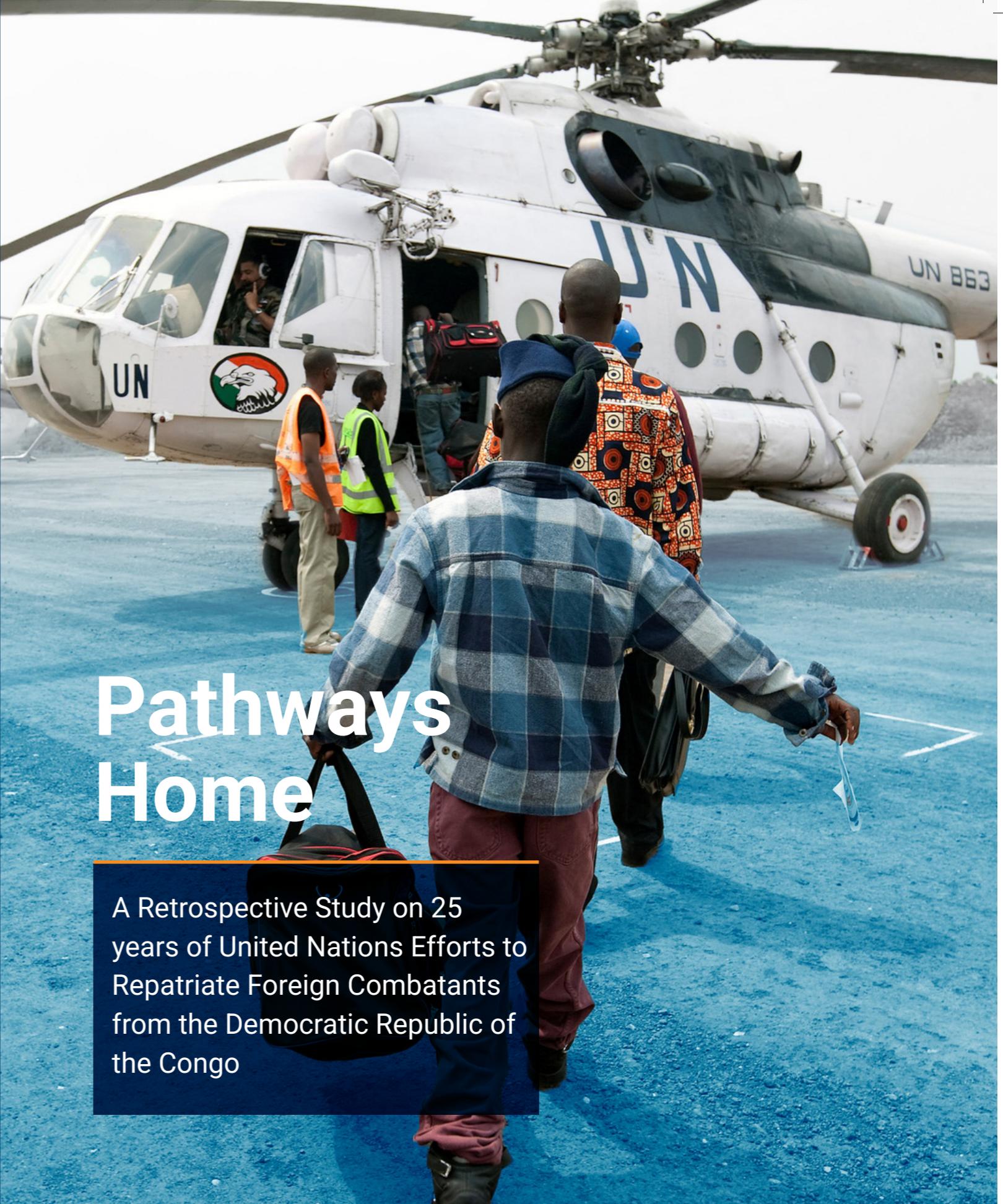


# Pathways Home

A Retrospective Study on 25  
years of United Nations Efforts to  
Repatriate Foreign Combatants  
from the Democratic Republic of  
the Congo



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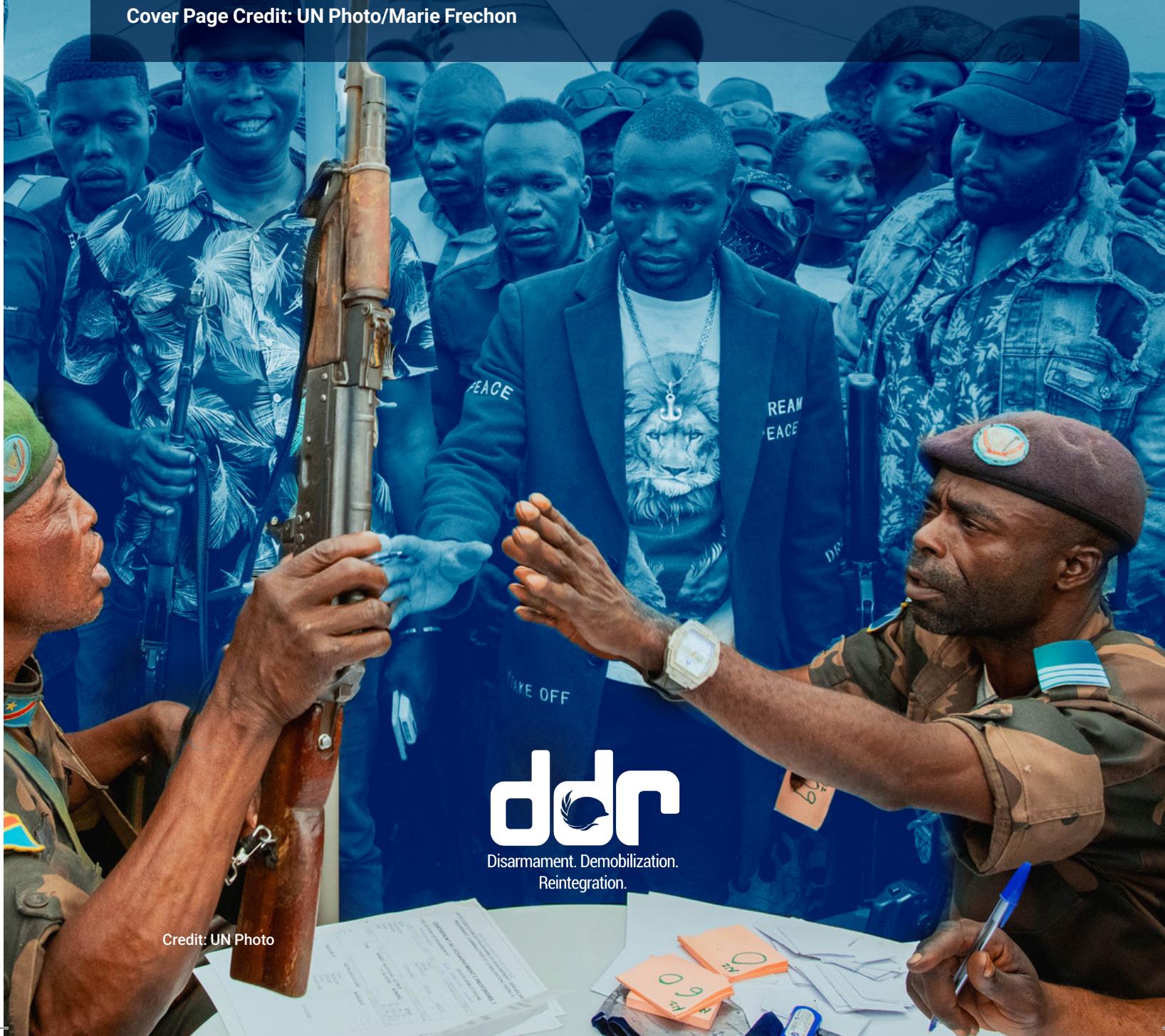
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Disarmament. Demobilization.  
Reintegration.

Credit: UN Photo



# FOREWORD



I am pleased to introduce this retrospective study on Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement (DDRRR) in the Great Lakes region. This comprehensive review is both timely and consequential, reflecting over two decades of steadfast commitment to peace and security in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and beyond.

DDRRR remains a cornerstone of United Nations peacekeeping, aligned with the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative and its call for collective coherence, adaptive strategies and integrated approaches. By reducing cross-border threats and fostering trust among neighboring states, DDRRR has tangibly advanced regional stability and exemplified the primacy of politics in peace operations. The integration of transitional justice and reconciliation into DDRRR has further enabled sustainable peace, in line with A4P's emphasis on inclusive engagement and locally driven solutions.

The significant gains presented in this study must be viewed in light of recent challenges in the DRC, including intensifying conflict dynamics, which have limited further progress in the implementation of MONUSCO's mandate, particularly in the areas of DDR and repatriation. The success of regional and international peace mediation efforts is essential to the implementation of a lasting ceasefire and the facilitation of the withdrawal of all uninvited foreign forces from the DRC.

The lessons and innovations documented in this study transcend the Great Lakes, offering a valuable blueprint for other regions grappling with armed conflict and reintegration challenges. The findings and recommendations herein will inform policy development at Headquarters, reinforcing our shared commitment to evidence-based practice and continuous improvement.

I extend my appreciation to all contributors for capturing these critical insights. Let this study inspire renewed resolve across the Organization to adapt, innovate and collaborate – ensuring that the legacy of DDRRR in the Great Lakes Region informs and strengthens peace operations worldwide. Let us draw encouragement from these accomplishments as we continue to advance the cause of peace, wherever the United Nations are called to serve.

  
**Jean-Pierre Lacroix**

*Under-Secretary-General  
for Peace Operations*

October 2025



*Bintou Keita*

**Bintou Keita**  
*Special Representative  
 of the Secretary-General  
 in the Democratic  
 Republic of the Congo  
 and Head of MONUSCO*

October 2025

This retrospective report offers an insightful and nuanced exploration of 25 years of Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement (DDRRR) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the wider Great Lakes region. It showcases the important contribution that national governments with support from two consecutive United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions in the DRC have made to peace in eastern DRC. I express my deep appreciation to everyone who has worked tirelessly to ensure that those ready to lay down their arms, return to civilian life and contribute to peace have been given the opportunity to do so, through effective services and support offered by the Mission and the government of the DRC.

DDRRR has been a core priority of both MONUC and MONUSCO mandated by the UN Security Council. First implemented in response to the Lusaka ceasefire agreement in 1999, it has remained a key component of the peacekeeping missions' work towards stabilization and peace in eastern DRC.

As the most recent escalation of conflict and extreme violence by local and foreign armed groups continue to harm the Congolese population, we peacekeepers do our utmost to protect civilians and facilitate pathways to peace. This retrospective is a testament to those efforts, which have been made in collaboration with national, regional and international stakeholders committed to non-military approaches to resolving conflicts.

This retrospective study allows us to zoom out of current conflict dynamics and learn from thousands of successful repatriations of foreign combatants from eastern DRC that have contributed to the possibility of peace. Ongoing international and regional peace mediation efforts may draw on the wealth of expertise captured in this study to develop options for durable agreements that address the central question of uninvited foreign armed groups in eastern DRC.

If there is one key lesson to draw from this retrospective study, it is that bilateral and regional cooperation facilitate repatriation. I thus call on all actors involved to work together to facilitate the withdrawal of uninvited foreign armed combatants from eastern DRC. For those who wish to leave the violence behind, for those who wish to return home and, most importantly, for the Congolese population.



Credit: UN Photo/Martine Perret

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**This publication was made possible through the collective efforts of numerous individuals and institutions whose contributions -- over the last four years -- were essential to the completion of this study.**

In particular, the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Section (DDRS), in the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI), in the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) wishes to express their sincere gratitude to the lead authors Simon Yazgi and Matthew Brubacher, whose work was made possible through initial research from Christoph Vogel and Michel Thill.

Special thanks are extended to the current leadership of MONUSCO's DDR and Stabilization Section, led by Khaled Ibrahim and Silke Rusch whose field-level expertise, operational insights, and drafting contribution, informed the finalization of this study.

Likewise, appreciation is extended to all past UN practitioners who served in MONUC and MONUSCO who provided invaluable anecdotes, perspectives, and most importantly the institutional memory that underpins this study's findings, lessons learned and recommendations.

Appreciation is extended to the Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, the national DDR commissions of Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and the DRC, and to regional partners including the African Union, the Contact and Coordination Group ICGLR and SADC, for their collaboration and support.

Lastly, this study wishes to acknowledge the crucial support of the project managers and their support teams within the DDR section who have shepherded this study from inception to finalization, namely Thomas Kontogeorgos, Elizabeth Kissam, Ntagahoraho Burihabwa, Barbra Lukunka, Lea Koudjou, Kwame Poku, Marc Schibli, Markella Mantika, and Josefine Brons, with specific appreciation to Simon Long for the coordination of – as well as his contributions to - this Study's final layout and design.



Credit: UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This retrospective study reflects on the United Nations (UN) efforts to repatriate foreign combatants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to their countries of origin between 1999 and April 2024. Over nearly 25 years, the UN peacekeeping missions' Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration (DDRRR) programme in the DRC collaborated with States across the Great Lakes region to repatriate 32,818 members of foreign armed groups.

In four chapters, this study analyzes the political developments that framed DDRRR efforts, reflects on approaches to different foreign armed groups, outlines the innovative tools and tactics of the DDRRR Section, and provides lessons learned that may inform future initiatives in the region and beyond.

The first chapter, entitled *Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration of foreign armed groups of Rwandan origin* in the DRC from 1999 to 2024, traces the history of the DDRRR programme in the Great Lakes region from its establishment under the 1999 Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement to April 2024. Mandated by the Security Council, DDRRR has been a priority for both UN peacekeeping operations in the DRC: the *Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République démocratique du Congo* (MONUC), from 1999 to 2010, and the *Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo* (MONUSCO), since 2010. The chapter focuses on Rwandan foreign armed groups that formed in eastern DRC after their involvement in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, in particular the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) and its precursors and splinter groups. Outlining the historical context of the launch of DDRRR activities in 2002–2003, the chapter underscores the

importance of regional cooperation, especially between the DRC and Rwanda, and of political framework agreements in legitimizing DDRRR efforts. Following an era of military operations and voluntary disarmament from 2004 to 2009, the chapter describes the innovative use by the DDRRR Section of sensitization messages and the exploitation of FDLR divisions and internal factions. Finally, the chapter traces the emergence of the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (M23) in 2012, outlines the combined military and diplomatic efforts that led to its initial defeat, and highlights the potential reversal of demobilization gains amid renewed conflict between 2021 and April 2024.

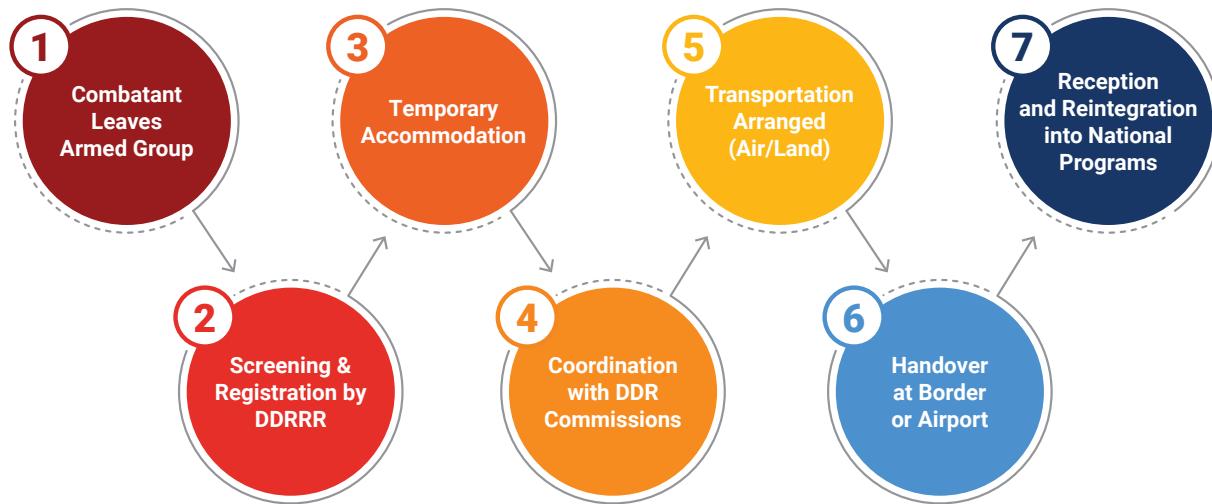
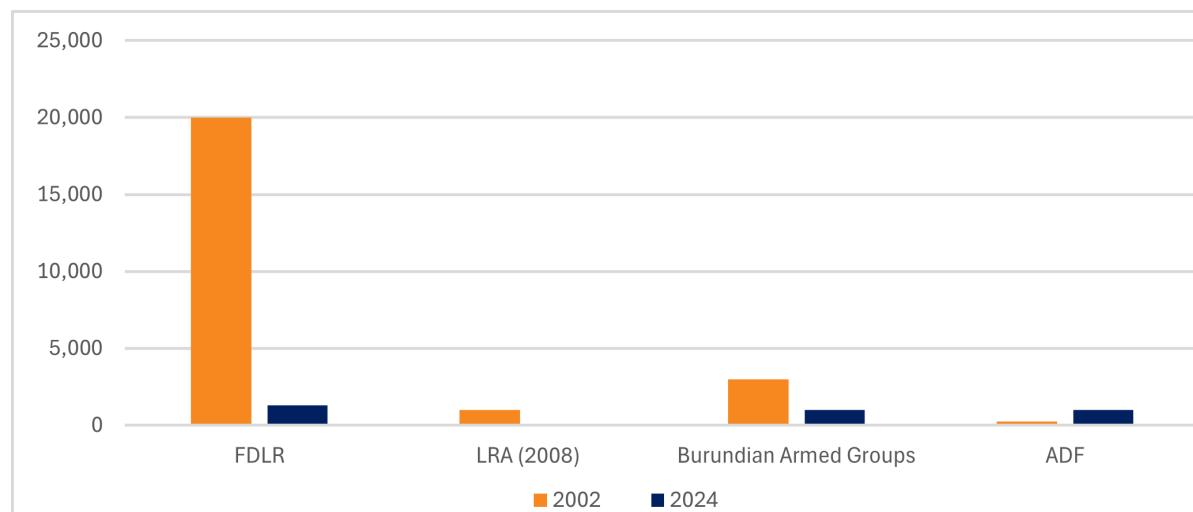
While the DDRRR programme primarily focused on the FDLR, its precursors and splinter groups -- the largest foreign armed group in eastern DRC -- it also undertook significant efforts to encourage other foreign armed groups to demobilize and return home. The second chapter, entitled *DDRRR of Other Foreign Armed Groups and Actors in the DRC*, examines the modus operandi of groups such as Burundian armed groups, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Rwandan fighters in the *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP) and the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (M23), as well as the Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO). It highlights the operational challenges

encountered by the DDRRR Section, including the remote locations of the armed groups, their strict internal command structures and the political discord among neighboring States. Despite these challenges, the DDRRR Section encouraged several defections through creative sensitization and outreach strategies. The chapter concludes with an examination of the Section's engagement with children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG), as well as its support for the dependents of combatants and refugees.

Drawing on nearly 25 years of field experience, chapter three presents a range of innovative DDRRR tools and tactics. It begins by underscoring the importance of sensitization campaigns -- delivered through radio broadcasts and printed leaflets -- to reach remote areas and encourage voluntary defections. The chapter also highlights the strategic value of engaging family members and former combatants as interlocutors, thereby enhancing outreach and credibility. It emphasizes that confidence-building measures, including proactive information-sharing and the physical proximity of DDRRR field teams to targeted foreign armed groups, can significantly improve organizational understanding and responsiveness. Beyond encouraging the defection of rank-and-file members, the Section employed innovative approaches such as establishing a special operations unit to focus on commanders, pursuing legal action against political leaders, and exploiting internal fissures within armed groups -- each serving as a lever to

disrupt command structures and accelerate institutional weakening. The chapter concludes by reaffirming that, despite the Section's expertise, sustainable results depend on a whole-of-mission approach, with integrated political, military and civilian engagement at all levels.

Chapter four, entitled *Lessons Learned*, synthesizes the operational experience of the DDRRR Section into a set of insights that continue to inform current and future efforts in the region and beyond. Recognizing that bilateral diplomacy and political accords at the regional and international levels are prerequisites for the implementation of a DDRRR programme, the chapter emphasizes the importance of contextual awareness and tailored approaches. It also reflects on the complementarity of military operations and voluntary disarmament and reiterates that sensitization remains the most effective DDRRR tool, while not disregarding legal and operational innovations. At the organizational level, the chapter underscores that effective Section leadership and Mission-wide support have been indispensable to the Section's achievements. It concludes with a reminder that planning for a mission's eventual withdrawal must begin early to allow for a sustainable handover of responsibilities to national authorities. Finally, it situates DDRRR within the broader effort to address the root causes of conflict that continue to fuel recruitment by foreign armed groups and thereby perpetuate instability.

**Figure 1:** The seven stages of the DDRRR repatriation process**Figure 2:** Estimate of Foreign Combatants in the DRC in 2002 and 2024



Credit: MONUSCO Photo

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>2</b>
Jean-Pierre Lacroix – Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations	2
Bintou Keita – Special Representative of the Secretary-General in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Head of MONUSCO	3
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Acronyms</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Research Limitations</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Chapter I: Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration of foreign armed groups of Rwandan origin in the DRC from 1999 to 2024</b>	<b>16</b>
The historical context of DDRRR in the Great Lakes region	17
1999-2000: Creating the conditions for DDRRR	19
2002-2003: War ends, DDRRR begins	21
2003-2004: Early successes in DDRRR	26
2004-2009: Between military force and voluntary return	27
2009-2012: Innovative DDRRR tools and the emergence of the Mouvement du 23 mars (M23)	30
2013-2021: The proactive use of force and factions	33
2021-April 2024: Reversing the trend of demobilization	37
Conclusion	43
<b>Chapter II: DDRRR of Other Foreign Armed Groups and Actors in the DRC</b>	<b>44</b>
Burundian armed groups [from 2000]	45
Allied Democratic Forces [from 2002]	47
The Lord's Resistance Army [from 2005]	49
Rwandan and other Foreign Fighters from the Congrès national pour la défense du peuple and the Mouvement du 23 mars [from 2012]	53
Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition [from 2016]	56
Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups, dependents and refugees	57
Conclusion	60
<b>Factsheet: DDR of Congolese Combatants</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Chapter III: Innovative DDRRR Tools and Tactics</b>	<b>63</b>
Sensitization and communication	64
Collaboration with family members and former combatants	66
Confidence-building and the safety of the client	67
Updated organizational analysis	68
Proximity to the target	68
Coordination with military operations	69

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

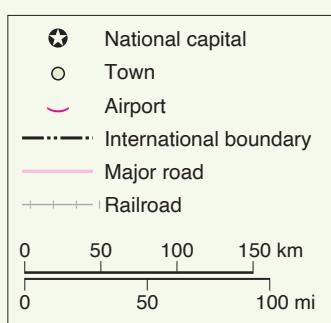
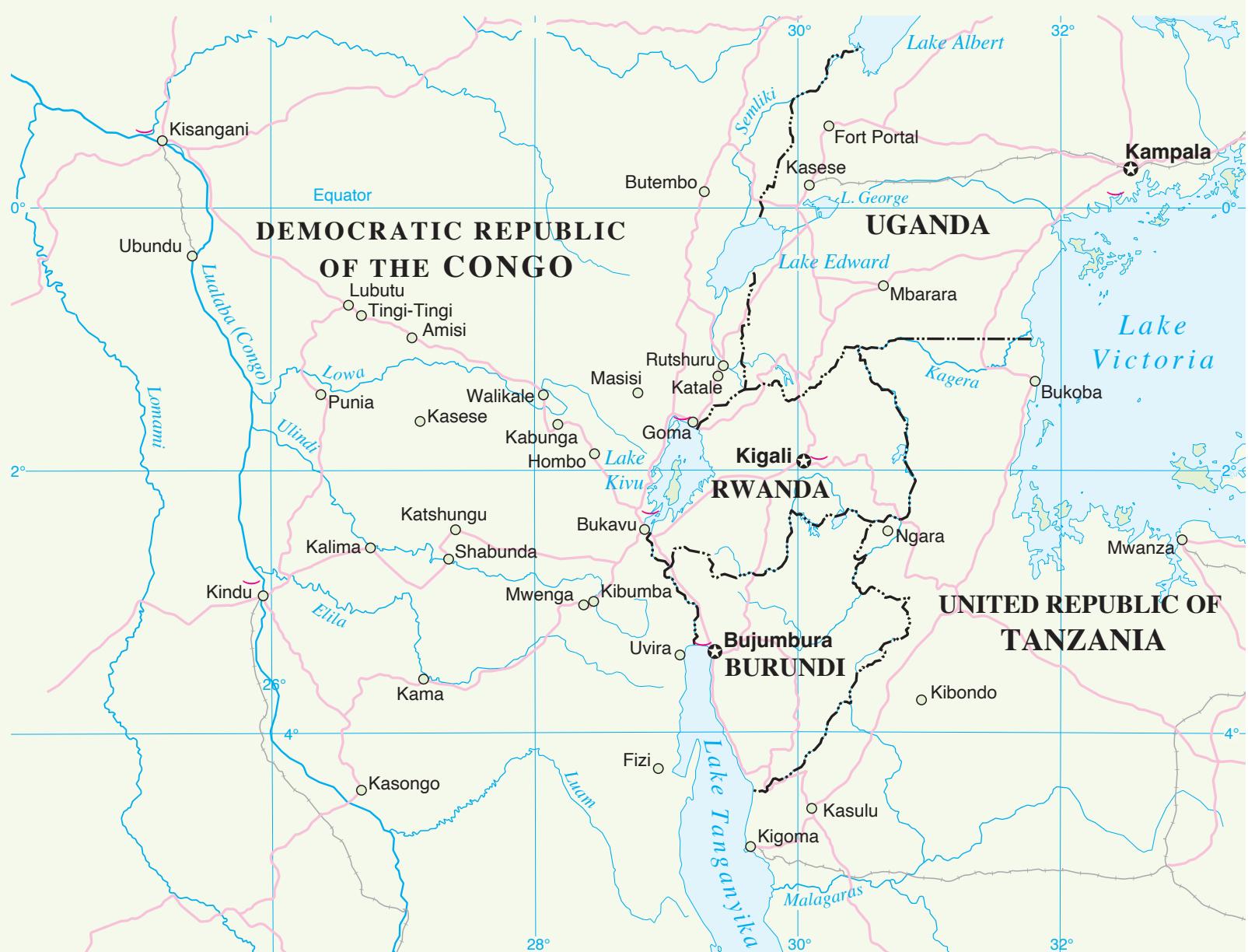
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Establishment of a Special Operations Unit to focus on officers of foreign armed groups	70
Litigation to erode political leadership	70
Exploitation of divisions within the foreign armed group	72
Whole-of-Mission Approach	72
Conclusion	74
<b>Factsheet: Five-Country Repatriation Program (2002–2017)</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Chapter IV: Lessons Learned</b>	<b>79</b>
Bilateral diplomacy creates the conditions for DDRRR	80
Regional agreements can contribute to DDRRR	80
Reliable technical partnerships and expertise on DDR in the region facilitate the return home	81
Context analysis enhances tailored approaches	82
Military operations complement DDRRR efforts	83
Sensitization is the most effective DDRRR tool	84
Innovation leads to success	84
Good Section leadership is key	85
Comprehensive Mission support is decisive for implementation	85
DDRRR must be driven by concrete benchmarking and a clearly articulated end state	86
Conclusion	86
<b>Dedication to Gregory Alex (“Gromo”)</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Annex: Timeline of DDRRR-related events</b>	<b>89</b>

# ACRONYMS

<b>ADF</b>	Allied Democratic Forces	<b>JMC</b>	Joint Military Commission
<b>ADF-NALU</b>	Allied Democratic Forces – National Army for the Liberation of Uganda	<b>LCFA</b>	Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement
<b>AFRC</b>	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (if mentioned in original source)	<b>LRA</b>	Lord's Resistance Army
<b>ALIR</b>	Armée de Libération du Rwanda	<b>MDRP</b>	Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Programme
<b>AU</b>	African Union	<b>MLC</b>	Mouvement de libération du Congo
<b>AU-RTF</b>	African Union Regional Task Force	<b>MONUC</b>	Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République démocratique du Congo
<b>CAAFAG</b>	Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups	<b>MONUSCO</b>	Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo
<b>CCG</b>	Contact and Coordination Group	<b>MSD</b>	Mission Support Division
<b>CNDD</b>	Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie	<b>M23</b>	Mouvement du 23 mars
<b>CNDD-FDD</b>	Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie – Forces pour la défense de la démocratie	<b>NALU</b>	National Army for the Liberation of Uganda
<b>CNDP</b>	Congrès national pour la défense du peuple	<b>PSCF</b>	Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework
<b>CNRD</b>	Conseil national pour le renouveau et la démocratie	<b>RAD</b>	Réserve armée de la défense
<b>CPS</b>	Child Protection Section	<b>RCD-G</b>	Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie – Goma
<b>CRS</b>	Catholic Relief Services	<b>RDRC</b>	Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission
<b>DMS</b>	Director of Mission Support	<b>RDF</b>	Rwanda Defence Force
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of the Congo	<b>ROM</b>	Regional Oversight Mechanism
<b>DDR</b>	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration	<b>RUD-Urunana</b>	Ralliement pour l'unité et la démocratie – Urunana
<b>DDRR</b>	Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Resettlement	<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community
<b>DDRRR</b>	Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration	<b>SPLA</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army
<b>FAR</b>	Forces armées rwandaises	<b>SPLA-IO</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition
<b>FARDC</b>	Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo	<b>SRSG</b>	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
<b>FDD</b>	Forces pour la défense de la démocratie	<b>TDRP</b>	Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Programme
<b>FDLR</b>	Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda	<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme (if in original text)
<b>FIB</b>	Force Intervention Brigade	<b>UNHCR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>FNL</b>	Forces nationales de libération	<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>FUNA</b>	Former Ugandan National Army	<b>UNITA</b>	União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola
<b>HF</b>	High Frequency (radio)	<b>UNRF II</b>	Uganda National Rescue Front II
<b>ICGLR</b>	International Conference on the Great Lakes Region	<b>UPDF</b>	Uganda People's Defence Force
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross	<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria	<b>WNBF</b>	West Nile Bank Front

Figure 3: Map of the Eastern DRC and Great Lakes Region



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Department of Peacekeeping Operations  
Cartographic Section

Map No. 4004.1 UNITED NATIONS  
January 2004

# RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The information used in this report originates from multiple sources, including desk reviews and interviews with former and current UN staff, national partners and experts. The report also draws on internal and publicly available documents from MONUC, MONUSCO and partners such as the Multi-country Demobilization and Reintegration Programme, the Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Programme and national DDR programmes in the Great Lakes region. It seeks to present the history of DDRRR in the DRC over nearly 25 years from the perspective of those who took part in the process. The study nevertheless faced several limitations.

MONUC and MONUSCO repatriation figures were compiled from multiple databases that employed varying methodologies. The figures presented in this report represent the most reliable information available and have been validated by the Mission. From 2002 to 2007, data were disaggregated only into two categories: ex-combatants and dependents. Between 2007 and 2017, further disaggregation was introduced, including by armed group, nationality and category, which also incorporated children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG). From 2017 onwards, a more comprehensive and consistent data recording process was established, with systematic disaggregation by gender, category, armed group, nationality and other variables. No consistent data were gathered on the number of refugees transferred by DDRRR to UNHCR. Official data from national DDR commissions were requested to enable cross-verification and comparison but were not obtained. The figures include only those repatriated under the UN-led DDRRR programme and exclude those repatriated by national authorities.

It is also important to note that the DDRRR Section did not have an effective system to monitor re-recruitment. Although vital information and photographs were attached to the files of ex-combatants, there was limited capacity to register electronically a match with a new ex-combatant entering the DDRRR process. Each ex-combatant was assigned a file number, which was unique

only at the provincial level and not at the national level. In 2023, the registration system was modified to generate a unique identifying number based on the data entered for each beneficiary, which automatically notified registration staff of a possible duplication. The only certain way, however, to ensure that re-recruits are identified is through the collection of biometric data linked to the unique identifier, a measure that currently exceeds available capacities.

Finally, the report uses April 2024 as its cut-off date. Activities undertaken by DDRRR after this date are not included.



Children who fled the fighting in Rwanda rest in Ndasha camp in Goma. Many of the children had witnessed the killings of their parents.

Credit: UN Photo/John Isaac

# Chapter I: DDRRR of foreign armed groups of Rwandan origin in the DRC from 1999 to 2024

The Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration (DDRRR) programme in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was established to implement the 1999 Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, which called for the removal of all foreign armed groups from the DRC. It has been central to the work of the United Nations in the region ever since. Both peacekeeping missions in the DRC -- the Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République démocratique du Congo (MONUC), from 1999 to 2010, and the Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo (MONUSCO), since 2010 -- received strong mandates on DDRRR from the Security Council.

This chapter provides a chronological overview of DDRRR efforts in the Great Lakes region, targeting primarily Rwandan foreign armed groups in eastern DRC that fled to the country after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and later formed the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR). The chapter begins with the historical context of the emergence of the DDRRR programme in the region, before reflecting on the political conditions that enabled demobilization under a UN peacekeeping mission. It then outlines the start of DDRRR operations in 2002–2003 and describes early progress in 2003–2004. While DDRRR efforts alternated between military force and voluntary return from 2004 to 2009, the following three years witnessed the development of innovative DDRRR tools as well as the emergence of the rebel group Mouvement du 23 mars (M23). The chapter explains how the DDRRR programme navigated the proactive use of force by MONUSCO and joint military operations against M23, while continuing to employ sensitization and exploit divisions within the FDLR to advance returns. It concludes with an observation on the apparent reversal of DDRRR trends from 2021 to April 2024.

## The historical context of DDRRR in the Great Lakes region

**“There are three types of DDR, only two of which can really be successful. The successful ones occur after an absolute military victory or a durable Peace Agreement. The third type of DDR, which MONUSCO was working on, is one where there is no war and no peace.”**

### International Partner of DDRRR

One of the primary causes of armed conflict in the Great Lakes region, and of the presence of foreign armed groups in the DRC, is rooted in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. As the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took power, more than 1 million Rwandan Hutus -- including many of the *génocidaires* known as the *Interahamwe*, along with the Forces armées rwandaises (FAR) -- fled to the DRC. The new Rwandan Government viewed the militarized refugee camps in eastern DRC as a security threat. In 1996, therefore, the RPF entered the DRC to disperse the predominantly Hutu

refugee camps and to pursue the ex-FAR and *Interahamwe* who moved across the country.<sup>1</sup> That campaign precipitated the collapse of the regime of President Mobutu Sese Seko of the DRC, allowing the Rwandan-backed Congolese rebel leader, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, to become President.

In 1998, President Laurent-Désiré Kabila sought to assert independence from his Rwandan and Ugandan allies, sparking a second regional conflict. Troops from Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia, acting under the auspices of the Southern African Development Community



Secretary-General Kofi Annan (left) has a tête-à-tête with Joseph Kabila, President of the DRC (right).  
Credit: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

<sup>1</sup> These included Mugunga Camp Lac Vert Camp and Katale Camp, near Goma in North Kivu; Kahindo Camp close to the town of Rutshuru in North Kivu; Panzi Camp, near Bukavu in South Kivu, Panzi was among the larger camps in the southern part of the Kivu region and Lugufu Camp in South Kivu.



Mugunga I and II (in the foreground) and Bulengo (in the background) camps on the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Credit: UN Photo/Marie Frechon

(SADC), aligned themselves with Kabila, while Rwandan, Ugandan and Burundian Government forces supported Congolese rebels. Seeking reinforcements, Kabila turned to some of the rebel groups from opposing countries, including the ex-FAR. At that time, the ex-FAR<sup>2</sup> and Interahamwe renamed themselves the *Armée de libération du Rwanda* (ALIR), later becoming the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR), as they are still known today.

The 1998 war brought together several overlapping regional and national conflicts. A central objective of the 1999 Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement was to address the many foreign and domestic armed groups operating in the DRC. Despite their significant role, none of the rebel movements signed the Agreement<sup>3</sup>.

This absence of endorsement weighed heavily on its implementation, as the armed groups were subjected to terms to which they had not consented.

The parties to the conflict requested that the United Nations deploy a peace operation to “ensure the implementation of the Agreement” and “track down all armed groups in the DRC.” The armed groups listed in the Agreement included the ex-FAR, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), the Uganda National Rescue Front II (UNRF II), the Interahamwe, the Former Ugandan National Army (FUNA), the *Forces pour la défense de la démocratie* (FDD), the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF) and the *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA).

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to the Rwandan and Ugandan-backed Congolese rebels challenging Kabila’s leadership, there was the war between the Angolan government and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA); between the Burundian government and the Forces for the Defence of Democracy (FDD) rebels; between Uganda and its own rebels – the Allied Democratic Front (ADF), West Nile Bank Front (WNBF), Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), Uganda National Rescue Front Part II (UNRFII) and Former Ugandan National Army (FUNA) elements loyal to former Ugandan President Idi Amin; and between Rwanda and the ex-FAR and Interahamwe.

<sup>3</sup> The representatives of the two main Congolese rebel movements, the Rally for a Democratic Congo (RCD) and the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC) attended the negotiations but declined to sign the Agreement.

## 1999-2000: Creating the conditions for DDRRR

On 30 November 1999, the Security Council adopted resolution 1279 (1999), establishing the peacekeeping mission MONUC, which built on an initial cadre of 90 military observers supporting the Joint Military Commission (JMC) established under the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement. From the outset, the deployment observed: “The problem of armed groups is particularly difficult and sensitive. It lies at the core of the conflict in the subregion and undermines the security of all the States concerned. Unless it is resolved, no lasting peace can come. A purely military solution appears to be impossible, if only because the forces most able and willing to impose a military solution have clearly failed to do so.”<sup>4</sup>

The first Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for MONUC, Kamel Morjane, arrived in the DRC on 11 December 1999. He was supported by a small civilian team and carried with him a strong message from the Security Council: the promise of a full peace operation. Even at this early stage, the Council repeatedly cautioned that “any United Nations peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, whatever its mandate, would have to be large and expensive. It would require the deployment of thousands of international troops and civilian personnel. It would face tremendous difficulties and would be beset by risks.”<sup>5</sup> This warning was to prove prescient.

Following the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, a disengagement plan for the foreign armies in the DRC was drafted in April 2000. Implementation, however, was slow, as the deployment of MONUC faced numerous political and logistical hurdles. During this period, clashes intensified between

the Government of President Laurent-Désiré Kabila and Congolese rebel movements seeking to overthrow it, in particular the Rwandan-backed *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie-Goma* (RCD-G) and the Ugandan-supported *Mouvement de libération du Congo* (MLC). At the same time, allegations mounted that President Kabila’s Government supported the Rwandan rebel group ex-FAR/*Interahamwe*.<sup>6</sup>

The alliance of foreign armed groups in eastern DRC, however, began to unravel. Although the Rwandan Government conditioned its withdrawal on the disarmament of the ex-FAR/*Interahamwe*, Uganda withdrew its forces after claiming victory over the ADF. In January 2000, meanwhile, President Laurent-Désiré Kabila brokered talks between the Burundian Government and the main Burundian rebel group, the *Forces pour la défense de la démocratie* (FDD), which led to the withdrawal of Burundian forces from the DRC.

On 16 January 2001, a week after brokering a deal with the Burundians, President Laurent-Désiré Kabila was assassinated, and his son, Joseph Kabila Kabange, was quickly named as his successor. The new leadership was more supportive of MONUC and, initially, of making peace with Rwanda, including the disarmament of the ex-FAR/*Interahamwe*. The withdrawal of national armies and the main rebel groups from the DRC enabled the start of the DDRRR process.

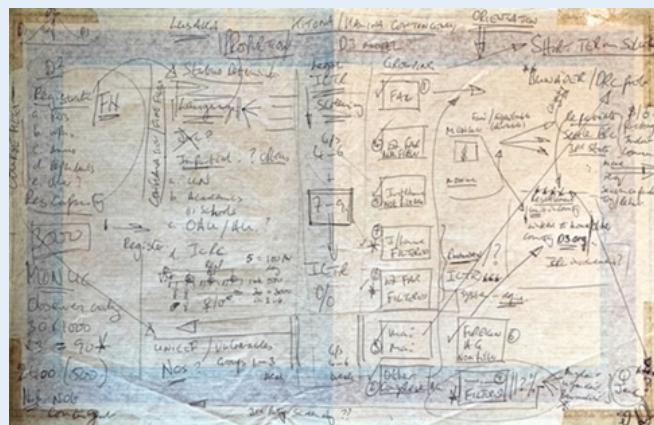
<sup>4</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Preliminary Deployment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, S/1999/790 of 15 July 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Preliminary Deployment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, S/1999/790 of 15 July 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Sixth report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, S/2001/128 of 12 February 2001, page 5.

### Spotlight 1: Planning the DDRRR Process

On 24 February 2000, the Security Council adopted resolution 1291 (2000), which added DDRRR to MONUC's mandate. The resolution requested the Mission to develop an action plan for the implementation of the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, including the DDRRR of all members of the foreign armed groups mentioned in the Agreement. The initial DDRRR plan proposed three options for foreign armed groups after disarmament and demobilization: repatriation to their country of origin, reintegration as civilians in the DRC or resettlement in a third country<sup>7</sup>. When the Mission presented the DDRRR plan to the Council in early May 2001, its stated main objective was that "armed groups having been disarmed are resettled or repatriated in order to allow them to conduct a normal civilian life and cease to pose a threat to the remainder of the population.<sup>8</sup>" The programme was designed to be voluntary, with strong linkages to regional and national peace processes, in particular the inter-Congolese dialogue.



*The first sketch of the DDRRR Plan (2000)*

The Mission recognized that "the credibility of a programme of voluntary demobilization" hinged on its ability to offer "durable solutions in the form of self-reliance support programmes."<sup>9</sup> Since MONUC's role was primarily to transfer ex-combatants to the border, national reintegration programmes in receiving countries were responsible for supporting former fighters in becoming productive members of society.

The Mission soon recognized the need for specialized skills, particularly in dealing with children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG), as well as with the repatriation of civilians accompanying combatants. Accordingly, staff of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and child protection officers were embedded in DDRRR teams. In addition, MONUC and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) signed a memorandum of understanding stipulating that all civilians should be handed over to UNHCR for repatriation.

<sup>7</sup> Since the time of the Kamina operation in 2003, the FDLR had always requested to be repatriated to a state other than Rwanda. DDRRR discussed this option using numerous diplomatic channels but no state was found who would actively accept this option. UNHCR was also unable to support this option due to their policy of not accepting former combatants as civilian refugees. In 2011, DDRRR attempted to obtain asylum status for an FDLR ex-combatant in the DRC. The process took months and was eventually successful. However, Rwanda arrested the individual and this pathway was thus discontinued.

<sup>8</sup> MONUC, Briefing note for Security Council - A Programme for Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, Repatriation or Resettlement of Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DDRRR), 15 May 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## 2002-2003: War ends, DDRRR begins

Political negotiations to end the war in the DRC intensified as the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement was implemented and foreign troops gradually withdrew. These political breakthroughs improved relations between the DRC and its former adversaries -- Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi -- thereby creating a more favorable environment for the DDRRR process.

In July 2002, critically, Rwanda and the DRC signed the Pretoria Accord, which conditioned the withdrawal of Rwandan troops on the disarmament of the ex-FAR/Interahamwe.<sup>10</sup>

Immediately following the signing of the Pretoria Accord, the Government of the DRC assembled a large group of ex-FAR/Interahamwe at a military base in Kamina, Katanga province, where they were to prepare for their return to Rwanda. On 24 September 2002, the Government declared all

political leaders of the FDLR *personae non gratae* and ordered them to leave the country within 72 hours. Eight members of the FDLR, none of whom had been named by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, departed the DRC on 2 October 2002 for Brazzaville. Upon arrival, however, they were arrested and deported back to Kinshasa. These steps taken by the Government of the DRC demonstrated a willingness to address Rwanda's concerns regarding the presence of the FDLR in the DRC.

On 6 September 2002, the signing of the Luanda Agreement by Uganda and the DRC prompted the withdrawal of Ugandan forces from the DRC. Uganda's earlier achievement of its key objective -- the defeat of the ADF -- facilitated the implementation of the Agreement. By early 2003, MONUC reported that it had "no evidence of formed foreign military units remaining



Rwandan Combatants from the Kamina caseload preparing to board a MONUC flight for repatriation to Rwanda.

Credit: MONUC

<sup>10</sup> Pretoria Agreement para. 5.

in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.<sup>11</sup> The withdrawal of regular foreign forces thus completed one of the major goals of the Luanda Agreement.

Following the withdrawal of Ugandan forces, an inter-Congolese dialogue led to the signing of the Sun City Agreement in April 2003, which ended the conflict between the Government of the DRC and the RCD-G and MLC rebel movements. The Agreement enabled the integration of those rebel forces and their political representatives into the Congolese armed forces and the Transitional Government.

Effectively ending what became known as “Africa’s World War,” these developments gave hope for a peaceful DRC. Attention then turned to the residual foreign armed groups with which no political negotiations were possible. As mandated by Security Council resolution 1291 (2000), these groups became the focus of voluntary disarmament through DDRRR operations.

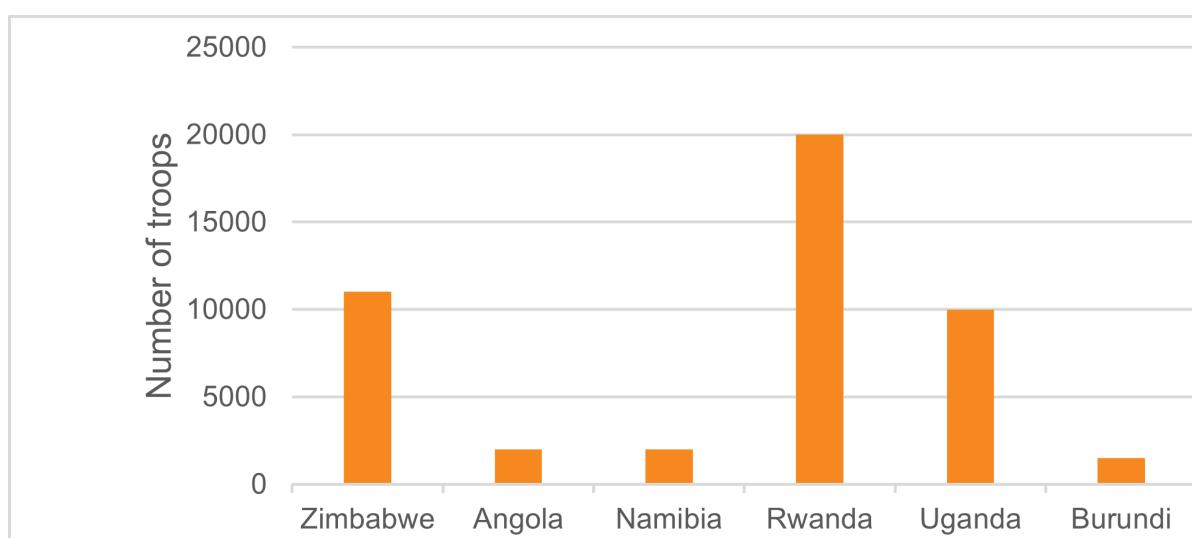
### Starting DDRRR

In late 2001, MONUC established a dedicated DDRRR Section, separating it from the Mission’s Political Affairs Section. To be closer to the

areas where foreign armed groups were located, the Mission opened regional offices and undertook outreach to Rwandan Hutu rebels to inform them of the option of a safe return home. At that time, a failed attempt by ALIR I, a precursor of the FDLR, to attack Rwanda in what the group called *Operation Oracle du Seigneur* resulted in an estimated 2,000 fighters being killed or captured. This proved to be the Rwandan rebel movement’s last major offensive into Rwanda and provided new impetus for DDRRR.

The reduction of the FDLR’s military capacity marked a turning point in Rwanda’s approach to the rebels. Rwanda expressed a new willingness to explore non-military solutions. It accepted that not all militia members were criminals and agreed to reintegrate them into society through two so-called “solidarity camps,” which had already processed approximately 2,000 former ALIR I fighters. Meanwhile, the southern wing, ALIR II, operating out of Katanga province, saw the support of the Congolese army wane after the Government of the DRC signed the Pretoria Accord in July 2002.

**Figure 4:** Estimates of Foreign Troops in the DRC in 2000



<sup>11</sup> S2003 211 (2003), Thirteenth report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Paragraph 15, 21 February 2003.

## Spotlight 2: Baseline 2002

In April 2002, MONUC presented its first assessment of the size of the foreign armed groups listed in the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement to the Security Council (S/2002/341 of 5 April 2002). While this could have provided a baseline against which progress on DDRRR might be measured, it became evident over the years that foreign armed groups were adept at recruiting new combatants and replenishing their ranks, making DDRRR a race between recruitment and demobilization.

The reduction of the FDLR's military capacity marked a turning point in Rwanda's approach to the rebels. Rwanda expressed a new willingness to explore non-military solutions. It acknowledged that not all militia members were criminals and agreed to reintegrate them into society through two so-called "solidarity camps," which had already processed approximately 2,000 former ALIR I fighters. Meanwhile, the southern wing, ALIR II, operating out of Katanga province, saw its support from the Congolese army wane after the Government of the DRC signed the Pretoria Accord in July 2002.

This assessment noted the following:

- MONUC had no recent reliable reports of UNITA activity in the DRC.
- Of the six Ugandan armed groups mentioned in the LCFA only the ADF was still active in the DRC.
- The Burundian FDD and the FNL maintained a presence in the DRC and were also very active in their country of origin.
- The ex-FAR and the *Interahamwe*, that were later to be known as the FDLR, represented the bulk of the foreign fighters to be disarmed in the DRC.

The DDRRR process in the DRC would therefore focus on the estimated 200-300 Ugandan ADF combatants, 2,000-3,000 Burundian FDD and FNL combatants and 4,000-6,000 Rwandan FDLR combatants.<sup>12</sup>



Rwandan Combatants from the Kamina caseload preparing to board a MONUC flight for repatriation to Rwanda.  
Credit: UN Photo/Martine Perret

<sup>12</sup> At the time Rwanda put this figure at 13,000 – 15,000.

Given the relatively favorable conditions for DDRRR, MONUC established a headquarters in Kisangani to coordinate its activities in the east, while DDRRR opened liaison offices in Kigali, Rwanda, and in Kampala, Uganda, to support the return of former combatants. The Mission tasked units of its Force to provide security at disarmament and demobilization sites and to support the destruction of weapons. A reserve battalion, provided by South Africa and based in Kisangani, was deployed to Lubero, Bukavu,

Kindu and Goma to assist civilian and military DDRRR teams in their operations. Military helicopters were also deployed to Goma and Bunia to support the transportation of ex-combatants and to carry out sensitization campaigns. DDRRR's first reception center was opened in Lubero, North Kivu, on 16 December 2002. By this time, Mission force levels had increased from 4,240 troops to 8,700, and the scene was set for DDRRR to start in earnest.

### Spotlight 3: Kamina: An Inauspicious Beginning

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In September 2001, during a visit to Kinshasa by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, President Joseph Kabila announced that he had assembled 3,000 Rwandan combatants at a military base in Kamina for repatriation. The Secretary-General pledged United Nations support for the effort.

On 28 October 2001, the first DDRRR team arrived on site to find approximately 1,500 unarmed men in new uniforms. Their leader, "Lieutenant Colonel" Vincent Ndanda, however, refused to speak with United Nations staff despite having initially agreed to cooperate on the registration and screening of his troops. After protracted discussions, the Government of the DRC brought in members of the FDLR political leadership from Germany to persuade Ndanda to cooperate with the United Nations. He subsequently agreed to the screening exercise.

The DDRRR Section began the screening under the supervision of Congolese representatives and personnel from the Joint Military Commission of the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement. By December 2001, a total of 1,981 combatants had been screened, including 205 who were in hospitals in Kamina, Lubumbashi and Kinshasa, and 348 dependents had been identified. Many combatants refused to provide personal data, as trust was low and they feared reprisals against their families in Rwanda. All were men aged between 22 and 35 who said they had been recruited by the FDLR voluntarily, but knew very little about the armed group, its leadership or its aims. In addition to combatants and dependents, the DDRRR Section registered 1,001 light and 12 heavy weapons.

Completing the screening proved to be only the first challenge. In what became a consistent FDLR position, the movement's leadership insisted that any return was contingent on political discussions with the Government of Rwanda. Since the latter categorically rejected any such discussions, the process stalled. To break the impasse and increase confidence in return, the DDRRR Section organized a "go-and-see" visit to Rwanda for 66 FDLR combatants.

The hard-line FDLR leadership strongly opposed encouraging return to Rwanda. Additional tensions arose when a United Nations Member State attempted to forcibly return several FDLR political leaders to Rwanda by deceiving them into boarding a plane they believed was bound for political negotiations in South Africa. On discovering the attempted deception, FDLR troops in Kamina seized weapons from the armory and fled into the countryside, leading to armed clashes with Congolese Government troops on 1 November 2002. "Lieutenant Colonel" Ndanda was killed during the fighting, depriving DDRRR of an entry point to negotiate with the fleeing troops.

Despite this setback, MONUC succeeded in repatriating 402 combatants and 333 civilians who remained in the camp. In subsequent years, many of those who had fled into the bush contacted DDRRR to return to Rwanda.



Rwandan Combatants from the Kamina caseload preparing to board a MONUC flight for repatriation to Rwanda.

Credit: UN Photo/Yasmine Bouziane

#### Spotlight 4: How DDRRR works

The main objective of DDRRR is to extract individuals or groups from a foreign armed group and repatriate them to their countries of origin where they will be demobilized and reintegrated into their communities. While DDRRR also repatriated combatants captured in military operations, most fighters repatriated voluntarily in response to sensitization messages.

The steps of the DDRRR process are as follows:



Figure 5: DDRRR Process of Repatriation and Reintegration

## 2003-2004: Early successes in DDRRR

Given the favorable environment created by a demotivated and fragmented FDLR, the withdrawal of Congolese support, and improved cooperation with Rwanda, the Mission's DDRRR capacity to repatriate combatants increased steadily. It also benefited from growing technical expertise in safely extracting combatants, which in turn built trust in the process among the FDLR. Over time, DDRRR staff expanded direct contact with the group, establishing relationships and confidence with its members. Initially repatriating some 200 people per month, the number tripled to nearly 700 between September and December 2003, and then tripled again to nearly 2,000 between December 2003 and March 2004.

By April 2004, MONUC's nascent DDRRR programme had repatriated 10,000 combatants and dependents. The Mission reported to the Security Council that it was on track to support "the decision of the Governments of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, taken in November 2003, to resolve the problem of Rwandan armed groups by the end of 2004.<sup>13</sup>" The decision of the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to isolate Rwandan combatants from cooperation with local Congolese Mai-Mai militia groups, particularly in South Kivu, facilitated this success.

The positive momentum, however, was short-lived. In late March 2004, dissident ex-*Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie-Goma* (RCD-G) leaders General Laurent Nkunda and Colonel Jules Mutebutsi took up arms, claiming to prevent a genocide against the

Congolese *Tutsi Banyamulenge* population. Their rebel troops advanced rapidly, seizing Bukavu on 2 June 2004, as MONUC failed to stop them. Instead, the Mission stressed the need for a renewed political solution, including the rebuilding of relations between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and its neighbors. It identified the cessation of explicit and implicit support by the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to individual political or military actors, including the ex-FAR/Interahamwe, and the acceleration of their disarmament<sup>14</sup>, as key prerequisites.

Nkunda's troops withdrew from Bukavu on 7 June 2004, leaving the city -- and relations between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) -- shattered. The Government of the DRC accused Rwanda of supporting Nkunda and Mutebutsi, while Rwanda claimed that the FDLR had launched attacks into its territory from the DRC. As violence escalated and the FARDC renewed its cooperation with the FDLR to repel the new security threat, DDRRR operations slowed, demonstrating once again the impact of political and security developments on DDRRR.

<sup>13</sup> S/2004/251, Fifteenth report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, para 40, 25 March 2004.

<sup>14</sup> S/2004/650, Third special report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, para 55, 16 August 2004. At the same time, In response to the fighting, the Security Council increased MONUC's military component from 10,800 in 2004-05 to 16,474 by 2006.

### Spotlight 5: Defining the End State: What constitutes success in DDRRR?

The end state of the DDRRR programme was never clearly defined by the UN Security Council or the Mission. As a result, there are broadly two different views on the matter.

Threat reduction, not elimination. One prevailing view holds that the primary objective of DDRRR is to reduce the size and operational capacity of foreign armed groups to the point where they no longer constitute a significant cross-border threat. From this perspective, the DDRRR Section's role is to deflate and de-escalate the threat, effectively shifting it from the international to the national domain -- transforming it into a law-and-order issue that can be addressed through bilateral or unilateral action. In doing so, the Section aimed to recalibrate the threat to a level manageable by national military and security institutions. The first DDRRR Director advocated for this position, noting in his end-of-assignment report that there was no need to repatriate every single foreign combatant. He defined success as reducing the foreign armed group sufficiently to prevent it from posing a significant military threat to the DRC and its electoral process, as well as to its country of origin. From this standpoint, the repatriation of 10,000 FDLR combatants -- reducing its capacity by 20 per cent -- was considered a success.

Effective and permanent Neutralization: A second view asserts that DDRRR efforts must persist as long as foreign armed groups retain the capacity for regeneration. This interpretation draws on cases such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which reconstituted itself despite Uganda's 2007 declaration of its defeat, and the FDLR, which -- despite reaching its lowest operational capacity in 2016 -- continued to recruit and regroup. From this perspective, the DDRRR Section should sustain efforts to siphon off new recruits and monitor group dynamics until the armed group is either fully expelled from Congolese territory or irreversibly degraded in its capacity to function as a cohesive armed entity.

These differing viewpoints highlight the complexity of defining success in DDRRR operations and the challenges in determining when such operations should conclude.

## 2004-2009: Between military force and voluntary return

From April 2004 to February 2009, DDRRR figures remained steady, averaging 190 returnees per month: Less than a tenth of returns compared to the period before the Nkunda rebellion. There was a small spike in repatriations from September to December 2005 when the FARDC, supported by MONUC, launched military operations. While DDRRR repatriations

increased, so did reprisals against the civilian population, prompting popular protests against MONUC.<sup>15</sup>

In September 2005, the DRC, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda initiated a diplomatic effort to boost the offensive posture of MONUC. The four countries sent a letter to the President of

<sup>15</sup> S/2005/832, Twentieth report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, para. 27, 28 December 2005.

the UN Security Council, stating that “despite the best efforts of MONUC, it has effectively reached the limits of voluntary disarmament” and that a new mandate was needed to disarm the rebel groups “using all necessary means.<sup>16</sup> Although the UN Security Council did not immediately approve the request, from then on pressure to allow UN military operations against foreign armed groups in the DRC would only build.

In 2006, successful national elections marked the end of the DRC’s transition process but the situation in the East remained unstable. MONUC recognized that “core stabilization tasks remained incomplete, including the DDRRR of foreign armed groups”<sup>17</sup>, which would require “a combination of political engagement, military dissuasion and possible relocation.”<sup>18</sup> Although DDRRR remained voluntary, it would increasingly function alongside military operations targeting the same foreign armed groups.

The use of force by the Mission raised questions around the voluntary nature of the DDRRR process, with some calling it the “DDRRR-or-die” approach. However, together the two methods yielded good results, despite varying degrees of military pressure as other events detracted from offensives against the FDLR. After national elections saw the consolidation of control by President Joseph Kabil, Nkunda formed the *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP) and agreed to the integration of his troops into the FARDC through a process of *Mixage*<sup>19</sup>. Despite formally becoming part of the FARDC, the former CNDP units maintained parallel chains of command and consolidated

control over large areas north and west of Goma. To break the CNDP’s parallel chain of command, the military then required CNDP troops to undergo a process of *Brassage* that would mix the forces by placing them in other units.<sup>20</sup> The CNDP refused these efforts to break up their forces and reignited its conflict with the FARDC creating “security vacuums exploited by the FDLR”<sup>21</sup> to reorganize and recruit new troops.

To generate political consensus on the need to neutralize armed groups in the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda signed the Nairobi Communiqué on 7 November 2008, calling for military and non-military measures to eliminate the threat of illegal armed groups in eastern DRC, particularly the FDLR. The Communiqué demanded their voluntary disarmament and repatriation or temporary relocation away from the Rwandan border. Both Rwanda and Uganda pledged to refrain from arming, financing or otherwise supporting any armed group. This commitment led to a renewed focus on DDRRR. The DDRRR Section relocated to Goma to concentrate its efforts in the east, although it received no additional resources. The Mission’s force size was increased by 2,800 personnel, and temporary operating bases were deployed in areas where the FDLR were present, allowing DDRRR operations to move closer to the foreign armed groups being targeted. In May 2008, a conference with FDLR leaders was held in Kinshasa, and plans were made to relocate them away from the border, as called for in the Nairobi Communiqué. However, renewed fighting involving the CNDP once again interrupted these efforts.

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<sup>16</sup> S/2005/667, Letter dated 21 October 2005 from the Permanent Representative of Uganda to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council, 25 October 2005.

<sup>17</sup> S/2007/156, Twenty-third report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, para 43, 20 March 2007

<sup>18</sup> S/2007/156, Twenty-third report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, para 82, 20 March 2007

<sup>19</sup> Mixage aimed to create a unified national army by blending soldiers from different factions, promoting stability and reducing the likelihood of future conflicts.

<sup>20</sup> Brassage refers to the process of integrating former combatants from various armed groups into a unified national army. The military integration component focuses on training and incorporating these ex-combatants into the national army, ensuring they adhere to a unified command structure and standardized military practices.

<sup>21</sup> S/2007/671, Twenty-fourth report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, para 16, 14 November 2007.

### Spotlight 6: A rare political engagement with the FDLR

In March 2005, at the request of the DRC Government, the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic lay association known for its peace mediation work, sponsored negotiations in Rome between representatives of the FDLR and the Congolese government. These talks resulted in a public declaration by the FDLR on 31 March 2005, in which the group:

- Condemned the 1994 Rwandan genocide,
- Committed to ceasing military action against Rwanda,
- Expressed willingness to transform from an armed group into a political movement,
- Announced intentions to demobilize, repatriate its fighters to Rwanda, and facilitate the return of Rwandan refugees, contingent on certain “measures of accompaniment” for their security and reintegration.

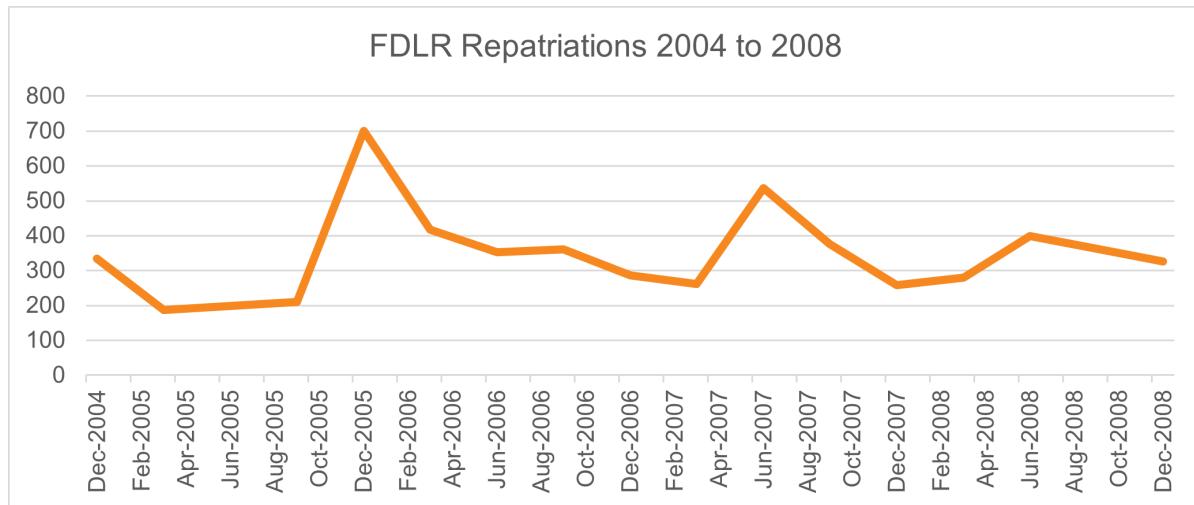
While the Security Council welcomed the FDLR's statement as a significant step towards peace in the region and urged the FDLR to commit to disarming and participating in voluntary repatriation programs, the FDLR never followed through.

This marked a rare political engagement with the FDLR who conditioned their willingness to disarm and return to Rwanda on the organization of an inter-Rwandan dialogue and the restoration of civil and political rights for returnees. These demands were rejected by the Rwandan government, curtailing any attempts at an organized return based on a peace agreement and political process.

The lack of political engagement with the FDLR was a key impediment to their return. It was not only rejected by Rwanda, but also initially by the Mission which was concerned about engaging with a group widely seen as responsible for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The inability to engage with the FDLR on their organized return meant that there was little alternative but to continue with the DDRRR programme that sought to whittle away at the movement and reduce their capacity in the DRC as opposed to finding a negotiated solution for their return.

Although Sant'Egidio's engagement with the FDLR did not bear fruit, it did open the window for subsequent attempts by the international community to engage with the FDLR's leadership, including in 2008 in Kinshasa as well as via the Southern African Community (SADC) and International Conference on the Great Lakes region's (ICGLR) FDLR Voluntary Disarmament Process. The FDLR's continued conditioning of a return on an inter-Rwandan dialogue was systematically rejected by Rwanda and ultimately none of these efforts were successful.

**Figure 6:** Returns of FDLR combatants between December 2004 and December 2008. The spikes in return in December 2005 and June 2007 correspond to military operations Falcon Sweep and Iron Fists (December 2005) and Kimia I.



## 2009-2012: Innovative DDRRR tools and the emergence of the Mouvement du 23 mars (M23)

In January 2009, the Governments of the DRC and Rwanda agreed to re-integrate the CNDP into the FARDC in exchange for joint military operations against the FDLR. Following the arrest of Laurent Nkunda by Rwanda, Bosco Ntaganda assumed leadership of the CNDP, bringing approximately 6,000 combatants into the FARDC through a process known as *intégration rapide* (rapid integration). Immediately thereafter, the FARDC, supported by both MONUC and Rwanda, launched a series of military operations against the FDLR, including *Umoja Wetu* (Our Unity), *Kimia II* (Peace II) and *Amani Leo* (Peace Today).

The first phase of these operations, beginning on 20 January 2009, when an estimated 3,500 to 4,000 Rwandan troops crossed the border north of Goma into the DRC, proved particularly effective. Together with the FARDC, Rwandan troops dislodged the FDLR from their long-held strongholds in North Kivu province. As a result, the DDRRR Section, already deployed

to temporary operating bases in the area and coordinating with the military, repatriated 1,476 FDLR combatants and dependents.

During this period, momentum on DDRRR increased as the United Nations adopted a more multidimensional approach to addressing the FDLR. In addition to authorizing the use of force, non-military measures were also approved, including: (a) encouraging and assisting the Governments of the DRC and Rwanda in defining an end state for the resolution of the FDLR issue; (b) encouraging Member States to take legal action against the group's leadership residing in their countries, including through the effective implementation of the sanctions regime on the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the prosecution of sanctions violations; (c) enhancing DDRRR efforts, including through an information campaign involving the DRC, Rwanda; and MONUC; (d) exploring further measures to promote the voluntary return and durable socio-economic reintegration of non-génocidaire FDLR rank and file; and (e)

supporting the extension of State authority and a sustained security presence in areas from which FDLR elements had been dislodged.<sup>22</sup>

With additional resources, new leadership and improved relations with both the Congolese and Rwandan armed forces, the DDRRR Section expanded the scope of its operations. It extended its field presence, established up to 30 temporary operating bases near the locations of foreign armed groups, created a Special Operations Unit to negotiate the defection of senior rebel commanders and intensified sensitization activities, as well as cooperation with international sanctions and criminal investigations, such as Germany's prosecution of the FDLR political leadership based there.

Progress once again came to a halt when FARDC efforts to break the chain of command of CNDP troops that had joined its ranks encountered resistance. In early April 2012, following an FARDC order for key CNDP commanders to travel to Kinshasa for training, CNDP leader Bosco Ntaganda defected along with hundreds

of his followers. Ntaganda renamed the group the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (M23), claiming that the terms of the 23 March 2009 agreement, which had precipitated the CNDP's integration into the FARDC, had not been respected<sup>23</sup>. The resulting rebellion prompted other Mai-Mai groups that had also been integrated into the FARDC to defect, triggering renewed conflict. On 20 November 2012, M23 entered Goma, creating chaos and allowing the FDLR to take advantage of the fighting to expand its areas of control.<sup>24</sup>

The fall of Goma in 2012 and the unravelling of the 2009 peace arrangements provoked widespread concern in the region. On 24 February 2013, the African Union, with United Nations support, convened a meeting of 11 African Heads of State, who signed the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF). The Framework renewed regional cooperation and established a new diplomatic and security architecture, including the creation of the post of United Nations Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region and a Regional Oversight Mechanism (ROM).<sup>25</sup>



After more than a week in the city of Goma, the rebel militia group known as the M23 have agreed to withdraw to positions 20km north of Goma under a deal struck in Kampala on Monday with an East African regional group. Members of M23 leave the city of Goma on looted trucks.

Credit: UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

<sup>22</sup> S/2009/623 Thirtieth report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, para. 51, 4 December 2009.

<sup>23</sup> The March 23 2009 Agreement between the Congolese government and the CNDP foresaw amongst others the CNDP's transformation from an armed group into a political party; provisions for amnesty for CNDP members for acts committed during the conflict, excluding war crimes, crimes against humanity, and acts of genocide; Integration into CNDP combatants into the national army (FARDC) through a process known as mixage, which aimed to incorporate them into the regular military structure to stabilize the region; political and Administrative Appointments within the provincial government of North Kivu.

<sup>24</sup> MONUSCO, DDR/RR Monthly Field Report, April 2012.

<sup>25</sup> [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/DRC\\_130224\\_FrameworkAgreementDRCRegion.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/DRC_130224_FrameworkAgreementDRCRegion.pdf)

**Figure 7:** FDLR Repatriations 2009-2012. These spiked in January 2009 coinciding with the joint FARDC/FAR Operation Umoja Wetu (20 January – 25 February 2009) and the end of the CNDP rebellion. They rose again later under Operation Kimia II (2 March – 31 December 2009), dropping off when it was concluded. A new spike was registered with the launch of Operation Amani Leo in January 2010, stopping in early 2012 when the CNDP rebellion started.



#### **Spotlight 7: Collaboration between the DRC and Rwanda: A Proven Formula to Neutralize the FDLR**

No relationship is more consequential to the neutralization of the FDLR than that between the DRC and Rwanda. When cooperation is strong, the security situation improves and operations to neutralize the FDLR intensify.

Three periods of strong cooperation advanced DDRRR efforts to weaken the FDLR:

1. Following the 1999 Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, in which Rwanda agreed to withdraw its forces, and the Pretoria Accord of July 2002<sup>26</sup>, which established a common approach to the threat posed by the ex-FAR/Interahamwe, military and non-military intergovernmental cooperation weakened the FDLR. This cooperation included coercive methods such as joint military and intelligence-led operations, as well as non-coercive and trust-building measures such as the repatriation of groups of FDLR combatants, for example from Kamina, and the return of FDLR Deputy Commander General Paul Rwarakabije.
2. In December 2008, the two Governments renewed their commitment and, additionally, agreed to integrate the CNDP into the FARDC. This agreement resulted in similar cooperation, including joint military operations, intelligence-sharing and cooperation on DDRRR through the repatriation of Rwandan nationals in the CNDP. As a result, FDLR numbers dropped rapidly in both 2002 and 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Joint Communique of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Government of the Republic of Rwanda on a common approach to end the threat posed to peace and stability in both countries and the Great Lakes Region, 2007, available at: <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/nairobi-agreement.pdf>

3. Following the election of President Félix Tshisekedi in January 2019, there was a significant increase in collaboration between the DRC and Rwanda. Security cooperation between the two countries led to the killing of FDLR Commander Sylvestre Mudacumura on 18 September 2019; the killing of RUD-Urunana Commander Jean-Michel Africa, a splinter faction of the FDLR, on 9 November 2019; and, in December 2019, a joint operation against the CNRD in Kalehe, South Kivu, which resulted in the killing of its leader, "Colonel" Irategeka Wilson, as well as the forced repatriation of approximately 360 combatants and some 2,000 dependents. The cumulative effect of these operations was to reduce the FDLR and its affiliates, RUD-Urunana and CNRD, to a fragmented force of only a few hundred combatants.

Each time the objective of neutralizing the FDLR has appeared within reach, renewed insecurity has prompted military mobilization that undermined those efforts. Political agreements are therefore essential to ensuring a sustainable solution.

## 2013-2021: The proactive use of force and factions

The signing of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF) led to a more proactive use of force by MONUSCO, notably through its Force Intervention Brigade (FIB). On 28 March 2013, the Security Council mandated the FIB to "carry out targeted offensive operations [...] either unilaterally or jointly with the FARDC [...] to prevent the expansion

of all armed groups, neutralize these groups and disarm them in order to contribute to the objective of reducing the threat posed by armed groups to State authority and civilian security in eastern DRC, and to create space for stabilization activities<sup>27</sup>." The initial force was composed of 3,069 troops from Tanzania, Malawi and South Africa.



Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) troops from MONUSCO on patrol with soldiers from the FARDC during joint operations near Tongo, in eastern DRC.

Credit: UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

<sup>27</sup> UN Security Council resolution 2098 (2013).

While under the command of the MONUSCO Force Commander, the FIB was firmly supported by the troop-contributing countries. This enabled MONUSCO to move beyond static peacekeeping and to use force in pursuit of strategic political objectives<sup>28</sup>. Beginning in October 2013, the FIB, together with the FARDC, launched a well-coordinated and robust offensive against M23, encircling and splitting the armed group<sup>29</sup>. At the same time, international donors threatened to withhold development assistance from Rwanda if Kigali did not cease its support to M23. Rwanda complied, and within a month the movement was defeated. On 7 November 2013, the remnants of M23 crossed into Uganda and surrendered. Later that year, in Nairobi, M23 and the Government of the DRC signed an accord allowing former rebels to return as a step towards reintegration into civilian life.

This marked the first time since 1995 that no Rwandan-backed armed group operated on Congolese territory.

After neutralizing M23, the FIB turned its attention to the FDLR. To avert a military confrontation and gain time to regroup, the FDLR feigned negotiations, signaling to those willing to listen that it was prepared to return to Rwanda voluntarily. In May 2014, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) announced that they had negotiated a ceasefire with the FDLR and would repatriate the first group. Although the DDRR Section was not involved in the negotiations, it questioned the credibility of the FDLR offer: the group successfully stalled the process for four years, while simultaneously delaying the FIB's planned military offensive against it.



MONUSCO Force Commander Lieutenant General Carlos Alberto Dos Santos Cruz (centre), with MONUSCO and FARDC troops prior to the push to capture Medina, as part of "Sokola" operations, against the rebel group Allied Democratic Forces - National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (or ADF-NALU) in Beni territory, North Kivu province, in eastern DRC.

Credit: UN Photo/Clara Padovan

<sup>28</sup> Cammaert, Patrick. "Issue Brief: The UN Intervention Brigade in the Democratic Republic of the Congo" (PDF). IPI. International Peace Institute. Retrieved 5 May 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Instead of turning its force against the FDLR, which was believed to be disarming, the FIB targeted the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). Although the ADF lost several of its bases, its compartmentalized structure, strong ideological indoctrination and brutal tactics frustrated efforts to achieve a decisive military victory. The ADF immediately increased the cost of offensive operations by attacking civilians and humanitarian actors. By 2014, the initial enthusiasm surrounding the FIB had waned and, although its mandate was renewed until 2018, it struggled to mount significant operations against the remaining armed groups.

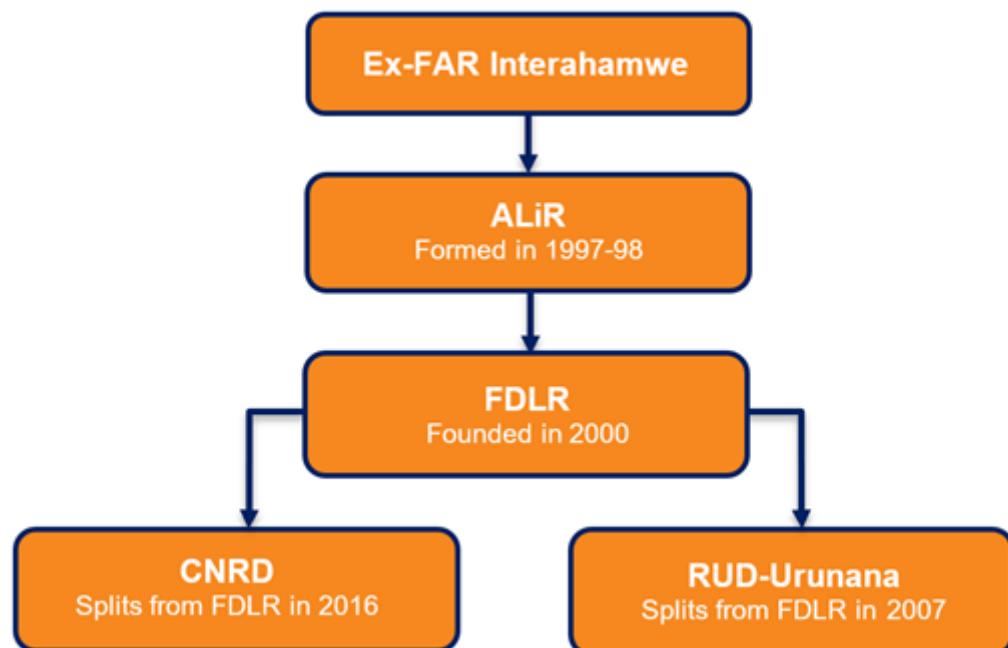
As a result, the initial defeat of M23 did not translate into significant progress against the FDLR. The DDRRR Section continued its sensitization efforts and prevented the FDLR's numbers from increasing, but it did not significantly weaken the group's organizational integrity. In 2017, however, a rift emerged between hardline and moderate FDLR members, creating an opportunity to divide the movement. DDRRR cultivated relations with the leader of a splinter group, "Colonel" Laurent Ndagijimana, alias Wilson Irategeka, which led to internal

fighting and his eventual defection, leaving both groups weaker and more vulnerable. "Colonel" Wilson renamed his group the Conseil national pour le renouveau et la démocratie (CNRD) and relocated to South Kivu. In 2018, the CNRD began infiltrating fighters into Rwanda and assassinated a prominent commander of a local Hutu Mai-Mai armed group, thereby isolating itself from the population it claimed to be protecting and creating a powerful local enemy.

When Félix Tshisekedi was elected President of the DRC in 2019, he authorized the Rwandan government to pursue the CNRD in eastern DRC, as he enjoyed good relations with his counterpart. From late December 2019 to January 2020, the Rwandan army conducted joint operations with the FARDC in Kalehe territory, South Kivu province. As a result of these operations, "Colonel" Wilson was killed and approximately 360 fighters, along with 2,600 dependents and civilians, were forcibly repatriated by the Rwandan army.

Joint military operations between the FARDC and the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) also targeted other FDLR commanders, notably long-time FDLR leader "General" Sylvestre Mudacumura,

**Figure 8:** FDLR structure and splinters from 1994 to 2024.



who was killed in Rutshuru territory, North Kivu province, in September 2019. The commander of another FDLR splinter group, RUD-Urunana, Jean-Michel Musabimana, was killed in November 2019. By the end of 2019, the FDLR was in its weakest state since its creation,

numbering only about 500 fighters. Although it still retained some military capacity, it was no longer the most effective rebel group in the Kivus and had become beholden to the demands of the Congolese armed groups with which it had allied itself.

#### **Spotlight 8: The 2014-2018 Southern African Development Community (SADC) and International Conference on the Great Lakes region (ICGLR) FDLR Voluntary Disarmament Process**

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To avoid military confrontation with the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) on 18 April 2014, the FDLR persuaded SADC and ICGLR representatives of its intention to voluntarily return to Rwanda in exchange for an intra-Rwandan dialogue, a term often used by the FDLR as a precursor to political negotiations. Despite its reservations, the DDRRR Section established three transit camps at Kanyabayonga, Walungu and Kisangani. On 30 May 2014, 102 FDLR combatants arrived in Katiku, North Kivu, and were transported to the DDRRR camp in Kanyabayonga. Ten days later, another 83 FDLR combatants arrived in Kigogo, South Kivu, and were taken to Walungu.

The prospect of a mass FDLR surrender convinced the Government of the DRC to delay authorizing military operations, as the rebels' move was likely in response to the threat of force. On 30 June 2014, MONUSCO reported that "the launch of joint operations against FDLR awaits the green light from the President and the outcome of the voluntary FDLR disarmament process in North and South Kivu<sup>30</sup>." To avoid prolonging the process, ministers from the ICGLR and SADC imposed a six-month deadline, until 2 January 2015, for the FDLR to complete its disarmament.

By October 2014, the number of FDLR members in Kanyabayonga and Walungu had grown to 621, comprising 186 combatants and 435 dependents. As capacity in these sites was being reached, MONUSCO's DDRRR Section sought to transfer FDLR combatants to Kisangani, but the group initially refused because the site was under the control of the Government rather than the United Nations. On 5 October 2014, FDLR Vice-President Victor Byiringiro revealed the real reason for stalling the process, stating that further disarmament required political dialogue with Rwanda. The FDLR eventually agreed to the transfer to Kisangani, leaving space in the UN-run centers to accommodate further surrenders.

On 2 January 2015, the deadline for the FDLR to surrender expired, but only 308 combatants and 1,028 dependents were present in the transit camps. In July 2015, the Government ceased its support for the Kisangani facility due to a lack of funds, forcing MONUSCO to sustain all 1,337 former FDLR elements with no foreseeable exit plan. This situation lasted for nearly four years, as efforts to encourage returns, including

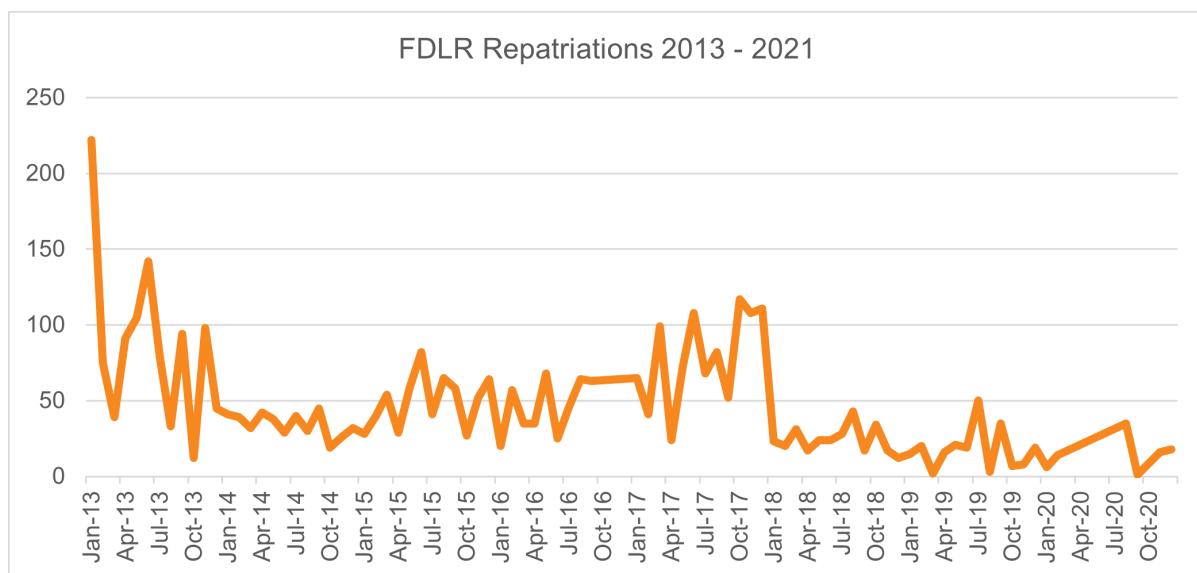
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<sup>30</sup> S2014 450 Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2014, available at: [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2014\\_450.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2014_450.pdf)

video-call sensitization, failed to overcome the FDLR's internal discipline. Finally, in November 2018, the Government of the DRC closed the FDLR disarmament camps and forcibly repatriated all 1,594 FDLR elements to Rwanda.

This incident highlighted the international community's limited options in managing the return of the FDLR. Regional bodies were unable to persuade Rwanda to engage in dialogue with the FDLR or to compel their return, leaving MONUSCO, with limited resources, to manage the process and provide care for the combatants for nearly four years.

**Figure 9:** FDLR Repatriations 2013 - 2021. Over this period FDLR repatriation figures dropped sharply for the period of the SADC/ICGLR FDLR Voluntary Disarmament Process, rising slightly after this ended in January 2015. However, they remained low until the FDLR split in 2017 when they rose slightly.

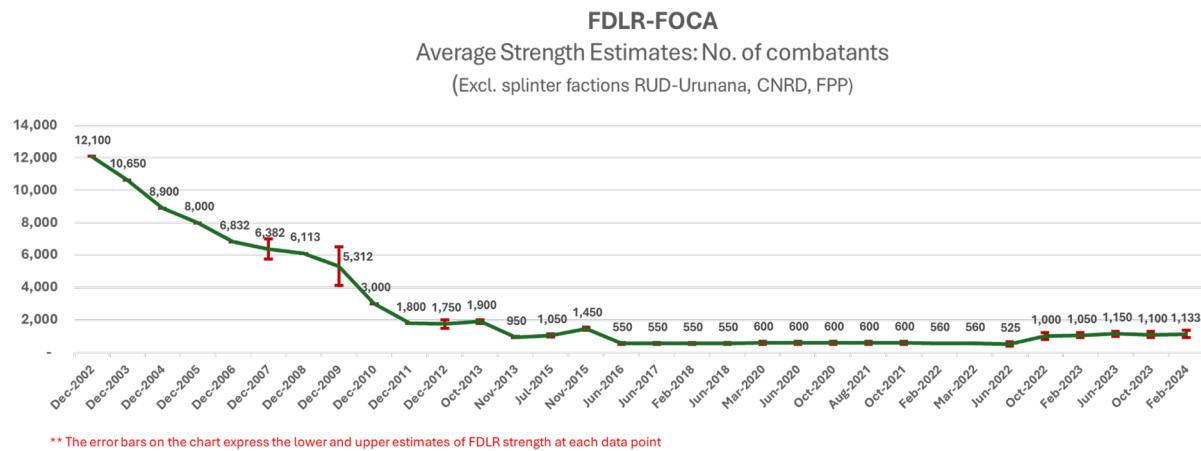


## 2021-April 2024: Reversing the trend of demobilization

The FDLR would likely have continued to weaken or remained in a relatively inconsequential state had it not been for the return of M23 in 2021. After its defeat in 2013, M23 remained in transit camps in Uganda, unarmed but not demobilized. In 2017, reports emerged of M23 re-entering the DRC at Mount Mikeno. Under the leadership of Sultani Makenga, M23 made several failed attempts to capture territory. It was only in 2021, as relations between the DRC and Rwanda deteriorated, that the group began to make progress. In March 2022, a well-supplied and

reinforced M23 launched operations, eventually surrounding Goma and cutting off the regional capital from the rest of the country.

The re-emergence of M23 reversed earlier progress on DDRR. While national efforts to demobilize remaining Congolese armed groups came to a halt, the Government of the DRC encouraged mobilization against M23 in defense of its territorial integrity. In April 2023, the National Assembly passed into law the creation of the Réserve armée de la défense

**Figure 10:** FDLR-FOCA strength estimates 2002 - 2024. Source: MONUSCO JMAC

(RAD), allowing Congolese combatants from self-defense groups to join forces with the FARDC. With this new wave of mobilization against M23, FDLR repatriations stalled in favor of new recruitments, including from Rwandan refugee sites in Uganda and the DRC. Having fallen to about 500 members in 2019, the number of FDLR combatants was estimated at 1,500 in April 2024.<sup>31</sup>

M23's re-emergence also had a significant impact on anti-ADF operations. Its capture of Bunagana in June 2022 triggered two days of demonstrations by the Congolese population

against Uganda and Rwanda over their alleged support to the group. Consequently, the DRC temporarily suspended its military cooperation with Uganda on the anti-ADF Operation Shujaa, about seven months after it had begun in November 2021. Although this cooperation later resumed, the ADF continued its offensives in the DRC and Uganda, carrying out 84 attacks in the DRC and seven in Uganda between 1 October 2023 and 13 February 2024<sup>32</sup>. These developments once again underscored the importance of regional cooperation and political will in facilitating DDRRR.

### Spotlight 9: The Contact and Coordination Group (CCG), trying to build a regional mechanism on DDRRR

The Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF) for the DRC and the Great Lakes region was signed on 24 February 2013 by Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, the DRC, the Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, the Sudan, the United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. It also included four guarantors: the African Union (AU), the ICGLR, SADC and the United Nations. The PSCF aims to promote peace, security and cooperation among the signatory countries by addressing the root causes of conflict and instability in the region, including the presence of foreign armed groups, and promotes a comprehensive approach to DDR that encompasses both military and non-military measures.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with DDRRR staff, August 2024.

<sup>32</sup> S/2024/278, Implementation of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Region, Report of the Secretary-General, 1 April 2024, Para. 6.

The PSCF calls for the DDR of armed groups, including ex-M23 rebels, and urges them to engage in voluntary and unconditional processes. It emphasizes the importance of reintegration and community recovery programmes to support former combatants and conflict-affected communities. It also supports capacity-building and provides technical assistance to national authorities, regional organizations and peace support operations to strengthen their ability to design and implement DDR initiatives. In addition, the PSCF fosters regional cooperation and coordination.

In November 2019, under the overall framework of the PSCF and the auspices of its guarantors (the ICGLR, SADC and the United Nations), the Contact and Coordination Group (CCG) was established to address security challenges through non-military measures.

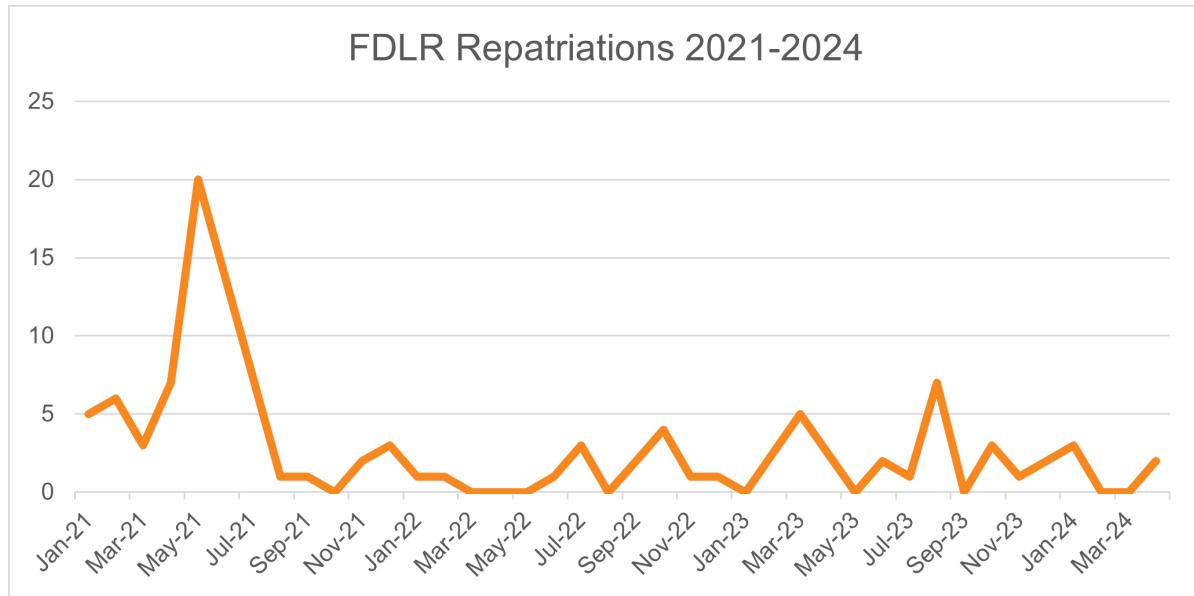
Key responsibilities of the CCG include coordinating non-military measures, developing strategies to promote the demobilization and reintegration of armed groups, and supporting the dismantling of foreign armed group networks. The CCG is also tasked to disrupt supply chains, strengthen DDR programmes and promote cross-border economic cooperation.

It complements military operations against armed groups by focusing on intelligence-sharing, joint planning and coordinated disarmament, repatriation and reinsertion through economic initiatives. Comprising members from Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania, the CCG is a member state-owned mechanism overseen by chiefs of intelligence and security services, with support from the United Nations (mainly MONUSCO, O-SESG-GL, DPO and UNOAU).

From 2019 to 2022, its Operational Cell of security experts conducted several contact and reconnaissance missions aimed at engaging with five target armed groups, namely the FDLR, the CNRD, the ADF, the FNL and RED-Tabara. In early 2024, the CCG worked with the Congolese Programme de désarmement, démobilisation, relèvement communautaire et stabilisation (P-DDRCS) to host a limited number of FNL and RED-Tabara ex-combatants wishing to be repatriated from the DRC.



The Technical Support Committee (TSC) of the PSCF meets in Goma for its seventh session since the Framework was drafted and signed on 24 February 2013. TSC Members meet with North Kivu Governor Julien Paluku Kahongya (centre right, wearing blue tie). Credit: UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

**Figure 11:** FDLR Repatriations from 2021-April 2024

#### Key dates in the DRC peace process

Date	Event
<b>Jul. 1999</b>	Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement is signed
<b>Dec. 1999</b>	Security Council Resolution 1279 establishes MONUC
<b>Jan. 2001</b>	President Laurent Kabila is killed, Joseph Kabila succeeds him
<b>May 2001</b>	JMC and MONUC agree on DDRRR plan
<b>Oct. 2001</b>	DDRRR operations start at Kamina military base
<b>Feb. 2002</b>	MONUC's DDR Section is established
<b>Mar. 2002</b>	MDRP is established
<b>Jul. 2002</b>	Rwanda & DRC sign Pretoria Accord
<b>Sept. 2002</b>	Uganda & DRC sign Luanda Agreement
<b>Nov. 2002</b>	Kamina DDRRR process ends with the repatriation of 735 Rwandans
<b>Oct. 2003</b>	Burundi Government and CNDD-FDD sign the Pretoria Protocol
<b>Dec. 2003</b>	CONADER is established

<b>Apr. 2004</b>	MONUC reaches 10,000 repatriations
<b>May 2004</b>	Congolese PNDDR I starts
<b>Jul. 2005</b>	FARDC and MONUC launch operations Falcon Sweep and Iron Fist against the FDLR
<b>Jul. 2006</b>	First free election, Joseph Kabil is elected
<b>Sept. 2006</b>	Burundian PALIPEHUTU-FNL rebels sign Pretoria Protocol
<b>Dec. 2006</b>	PNDDR I closes
<b>Dec. 2006</b>	CNDP is formed by Laurent Nkunda
<b>Sept. 2008</b>	PNDDR II is launched
<b>Sept. 2008</b>	Operation Rudia I is launched by FARDC against LRA
<b>Jan. 2009</b>	FARDC launches Umoja Wetu against FDLR
<b>Mar. 2009</b>	Operation Rudia II is launched against LRA
<b>Jun. 2009</b>	MDRP closes
<b>Jul. 2010</b>	MONUC is renamed MONUSCO
<b>Nov. 2011</b>	PNDDR II closes
<b>Nov. 2012</b>	M23 seizes Goma
<b>Feb. 2013</b>	Peace, Security & Cooperation Framework (PSCF) is signed
<b>Mar. 2013</b>	Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) is established by Security Council
<b>Aug. 2013</b>	FARDC and FIB begin operations against M23
<b>Nov. 2013</b>	M23 is defeated; leaders flee to Uganda
<b>Dec. 2013</b>	DRC and M23 sign peace agreement
<b>Apr. 2014</b>	FDLR FoCA announces surrender to SADC
<b>Jul. 2014</b>	SADC/ICGLR Voluntary Disarmament Process is launched
<b>Jan. 2015</b>	SADC/ICGLR FDLR Voluntary Disarmament Process deadline expires

<b>Feb. 2015</b>	FARDC launches operation Sukola II against FDLR
<b>Jul. 2015</b>	PNDDR III is launched
<b>May 2016</b>	FDLR splits and CNRD is formed
<b>Dec. 2017</b>	TDRP closes
<b>Nov. 2018</b>	DRC forcibly closes FDLR disarmament camps established further to the failed Voluntary Disarmament Process
<b>Dec. 2018</b>	PNDDR III closes
<b>Dec. 2020</b>	UNSC orders MONUSCO gradual drawdown
<b>Jul. 2021</b>	PSCF Contact and Coordination Group is established
<b>Sept. 2021</b>	The Joint Transition Plan between the DRC government and MONUSCO sets out 18 benchmarks to guide a successful transition of responsibilities from the Mission to the national authorities.
<b>Nov. 2021</b>	UPDF and FARDC launch Operation Shujaa against ADF
<b>Oct. 2021</b>	M23 resumes military operations
<b>Mar. 2022</b>	P-DDRCS programme is validated
<b>Sept. 2022</b>	Congolese government requests UN to begin MONUSCO withdrawal
<b>Nov. 2022</b>	EAC Regional Force is deployed
<b>Dec. 2023</b>	EACRF mandate expires; DRC decides not to extend
<b>Dec. 2023</b>	SADC Mission in DRC (SAMIDRC) is deployed
<b>Nov. 2023</b>	The DRC government and MONUSCO sign the Disengagement Plan that defines phases for the Mission's accelerated, gradual, orderly and responsible withdrawal
<b>Apr. 2024</b>	MONUSCO officially ceases all operations in South Kivu on 30 April 2024 and completes its disengagement from the province on 30 June 2025.

## Conclusion

Established under the 1999 Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, the DDRRR programme in the Great Lakes region aimed to remove all foreign armed groups from the DRC and to facilitate their safe and voluntary return to their countries of origin. Consecutive mandates of the United Nations Security Council enshrined the importance of DDRRR in MONUC and later MONUSCO. Political consensus -- both regional and international -- was critical to the success of DDRRR efforts from 1999 to 2024. Primarily targeting the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR), whose members fled Rwanda after their participation in the 1994 genocide, the DDRRR programme complemented military operations against foreign armed groups -- either supported by United Nations peacekeeping missions

or launched bilaterally -- with sensitization messages on the option of a safe return home, the exploitation of divisions within splinter groups, and operational mobility in the field. The emergence of M23 in 2012 prompted an effective combined political and military effort that led to the group's initial defeat, although its resurgence in 2021 risked reversing demobilization trends. While instability persists in eastern DRC, the overall results of the United Nations DDRRR programme remain notable. Between 2002 and 2024, the DDRRR Section repatriated 32,818 members of foreign armed groups, of whom 18,307 were combatants and 14,511 dependents. The majority of those repatriated belonged to the FDLR, reducing its numbers to 500–600 combatants by 2021.



A delegation of the government of the DRC negotiate with Ituri militia groups on the disarmament of combatants and their integration in the government armed forces (FARDC).

Credit: UN Photo/Martine Perret

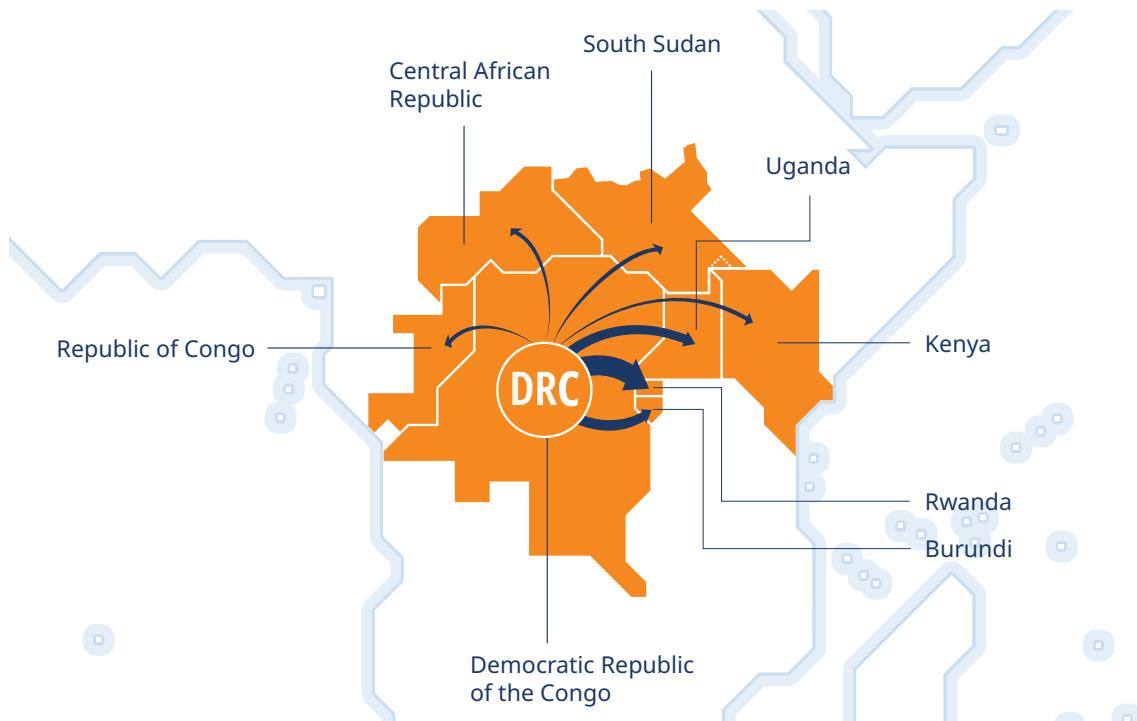
# Chapter II: DDRRR of Other Foreign Armed Groups and Actors in the DRC



The vast majority of the 32,818 members of foreign armed groups repatriated by the DDRRR Section between 1999 and April 2024 were of Rwandan and Burundian origin. Only 120 belonged to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and 69 to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), while none were from M23, despite significant caseloads. What explains this disparity?

This chapter examines the modus operandi of foreign armed groups in the DRC beyond those of Rwandan origin discussed in the previous chapter, including the LRA, the ADF, Burundian armed groups, the Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO) and Rwandan fighters in the Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP) and the Mouvement du 23 mars (M23).

It outlines the challenges the DDRRR Section faced in reaching and processing combatants from these groups, owing to their remoteness, strong ideological discipline or political obstacles. Despite these difficulties, the DDRRR Section was able to solicit several defections through innovative sensitization and communication methods that had a lasting impact on communities, as well as through close collaboration with the FIB, blending military and non-military measures to advance its objectives. While they were not the primary targets of DDRRR efforts, the chapter also reflects on the Section's support to Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG), as well as to dependents of combatants and refugees.

**Figure 12:** Flows of Repatriations from DRC to Neighboring Countries

## Burundian armed groups [from 2000]

In contrast to other residual foreign armed groups, the repatriation of Burundian combatants resulted from political processes rather than counter-insurgency operations. When MONUC was established in 2000, Burundian armed groups, estimated at 2,000 to 3,000 fighters, were at their strongest. Most of these combatants belonged to the *Forces pour la défense de la démocratie* (FDD), the armed wing of the *Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie* (CNDD). The FDD operated alongside a smaller group, the *Forces nationales de libération* (FNL). Both Hutu rebel groups, the CNDD and the FDD, were established after the 1993 assassination of the first democratically elected Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, to fight what they perceived as Tutsi-dominated institutions.

In August 2000, the civil war in Burundi formally ended as FDD rebels signed the Arusha Accords. However, no ceasefire was agreed owing to internal rifts within the fractious rebel groups, and low-level fighting continued. As Burundian armed groups were present along the shores of

Lake Tanganyika, the DDRRR Section established offices in Bukavu, Uvira and Kalemie to begin sensitization. Initially, however, repatriating these groups was impossible because Burundi lacked a DDR programme and was unwilling to receive them. As a result, the DDRRR Section held approximately 100 Burundian rebels in Adikivu, near the Burundian border, for several months without the prospect of return. This changed in November 2003, when the CNDD-FDD agreed to the Pretoria Protocol on Political, Defence and Security Power with the new Transitional Government led by President Domitien Ndayizeye. The power-sharing arrangement provided immunity to the FDD and gave its key members positions in government and security institutions. In December 2003, the Mission's DDRRR programme began sensitization of FDD combatants and assisted in their repatriation. Outreach operations were conducted on the remote Fizi peninsula, resulting in the repatriation of more than 500 FDD combatants by MONUC in the first two months of 2004. Shortly thereafter, in January and February 2004,

the Mission registered the self-organized return of approximately 3,250 FDD combatants who voluntarily repatriated to Burundi.

As the FDD returned to Burundi, the Government launched a DDR programme that lasted 14 months. Although it faced many logistical challenges, the programme received support from the World Bank's Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Programme (MDRP) and was largely successful<sup>33</sup>. Its success was linked to the FDD political leadership's desire to participate in the upcoming general elections, which it went on to win in both 2005 and 2010. The more radical FNL was not as successful politically, but its main faction eventually entered the peace process.

Burundian armed rebellion did not end with political participation. After the CNDD-FDD won general elections for a second time in 2010, elements of the FNL returned to the bush. The FNL, together with a new rebel group known as RED-Tabara, opposed the leadership of Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza, the former leader of the FDD. Rebel activity increased considerably in 2015 after Nkurunziza ran for a third term. Armed opposition continued

after power was transferred from Nkurunziza to his successor, Évariste Ndayishimiye, and became increasingly violent as rebels launched several cross-border attacks.

The principal obstacle to the DDRRR of Burundian armed groups in the DRC -- particularly since 2015 -- has been the Burundian Government's longstanding refusal to receive them. As a result, even when combatants expressed willingness to surrender and return, no formal repatriation or reintegration mechanisms were available. This impasse left many Burundian ex-combatants stranded in DDRRR transit camps in South Kivu. Recent political and strategic engagement within the framework of the Contact and Coordination Group (CCG), however, has contributed to a significant policy shift. In March 2023, the Burundian authorities established a *Cellule de réinsertion et de ré intégration des ex-membres des groupes armés burundais* under the authority of the *Chef de cabinet chargé des questions militaires*. This coordination unit is mandated to supervise and coordinate reintegration operations for ex-combatants returning from eastern DRC.



Weapons being burnt during the official launch of the Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) process in Muramvya, Burundi.

Credit: UN Photo/Martine Perret

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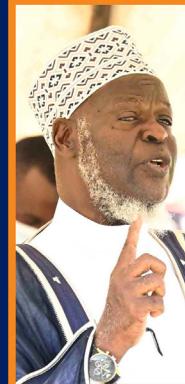
<sup>33</sup> MONUC DDRRR personnel participated in the first mission to Burundi by the World Bank to support the Government in setting up a DDR programme within Burundi.

## Allied Democratic Forces [from 2002]

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) proved to be one of the most difficult groups to address, both through DDRRR programming and military pressure. Despite repeated military operations and efforts to elicit voluntary defections, the group maintained its strength, becoming one of the deadliest foreign armed groups in eastern DRC and going through several iterations, evolving its objectives, methods and composition.

Initially formed in 1995, it became known as ADF-NALU after the ADF, an Islamist youth group from the Tabliq sect in Uganda, merged with the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU), a more traditional rebel movement. Over time, NALU elements either accepted amnesty or informally reintegrated into local communities. In its early years, the group targeted civilians, conducting its first bombings in Uganda in 1996. The Ugandan government fought the ADF during the DRC wars between 1996 and 2003. By 2001, the ADF was significantly weakened, and Uganda declared victory.

The remnants of the group reorganized under the leadership of Jamil Mukulu, who imposed a stricter regime of indoctrination and training. All members of the ADF, including children and women, were treated as combatants and subjected to military training. Mukulu also transformed the ADF into an entity engaged in both legal and illicit cross-border economic activities, including the extortion of funds from gold, coffee and charcoal traders operating in areas under its control, and the corruption of elements within national security forces. These strategies strengthened the ADF's financial base, boosted morale among its combatants, and provided the group with a renewed sense of purpose. They also reinforced the ADF's compartmentalized structure. While the senior leadership centralized control over the group's strategy and finances, combat units were



### Message from the Grand Mufti of Uganda to ADF Combatants in the DR Congo:

"I am the Grand Mufti of Uganda, Sheikh Shaban Mubajje speaking to you from Kampala. I understand you are fighting a Jihad war in the DR Congo. I do not think the current situation in Uganda constitutes a Jihad because there is no one including the government that is prosecuting Muslims in this country. We worship and speak out freely in Uganda. I would therefore want to ask you to abandon the path of war and return to Uganda and live in peace and harmony. War is not good; war can destroy life and property. Please stop fighting in DR Congo. Come home and we will all help you to reintegrate into the society. May God bless all of you".

increasingly decentralized into autonomous cells to reduce exposure to military pressure. Since individual members were less able to disclose meaningful information, this complicated efforts to understand the group through interviews with ex-combatants.

The ADF changed its mode of operations in the DRC in the early 2010s and, from 2014, was implicated in large-scale massacres of civilians. The group's use of extreme violence not only radicalized its members but also terrorized the local population. Following the annihilation of the last ADF stronghold in Beni territory, Medina Camp, in 2014 and the arrest of Jamil Mukulu in 2015, his successor, Seka Musa Baluku, reoriented the ADF towards the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). These ties provided the ADF with enhanced military knowledge,

tactical capabilities, resources and external support, while bolstering the confidence of its combatants<sup>34</sup>. At the same time, the ADF adopted a new recruitment strategy. Whereas the group had previously focused on recruiting Ugandan nationals for ideological and religious reasons, it gradually redirected its efforts towards Congolese individuals and communities seeking economic opportunities and protection for their lives and livelihoods.

The Mission's DDRRR Section began activities related to the ADF in 2002, when MONUC deployed to Beni together with the Uganda Amnesty Commission. At that time, the ADF was estimated to comprise 200 to 300 fighters, mainly based in the Ruwenzori Mountains near the border with Uganda. Through the Kampala Liaison Office, DDRRR deepened its understanding of the group by interviewing defectors. At the time, the ADF was considered a manageable residual armed group, but this changed quickly.

As the ADF's operations grew more violent, the Mission's DDRRR Section intensified its engagement strategies to build trust and gather actionable intelligence. It undertook extended missions within Beni and Lubero territories of the DRC and to Uganda to engage a wide spectrum of Islamic and local community leaders, including the Mufti and moderate Islamic groups, who supported sensitization efforts through governmental and local DDRRR radio broadcasts as well as the distribution of leaflets and other sensitization material. At the same time, the DDRRR Section maintained close coordination with Ugandan security services to facilitate information-sharing and negotiate

the surrender of individual ADF members. These efforts enabled the Section to gain an understanding of the ADF's internal structure, recruitment methods and financial support networks. In line with a coordinated response, the Section shared its findings with the UN Group of Experts and relevant authorities to help disrupt financial flows from ADF supporters.

Though infrequent, the defection of senior ADF officers created strategic opportunities for the DDRRR Section to deepen its understanding of the group and encourage further defections. One notable case was that of "Colonel" Bwonadeke Winny, also known as Jaguar, the ADF's Director of Military Intelligence, who defected in July 2010 after protracted negotiations with the DDRRR Section. In close coordination with Congolese intelligence services, the Section secured his protection in a safe house for several weeks. The debriefings yielded high-value intelligence, including insights into ADF operational plans, leadership dynamics and aspects of its financial network.

Although the DDRRR Section invested significantly in intelligence-gathering and acquired extensive knowledge of the ADF's structure, tactics, locations and ideology, the programme's impact on the group remained limited. The complex conflict ecosystem, including the ADF's deep connections with local communities and allegedly also with parts of the defense and security forces<sup>35</sup>, combined with its specific tactics, made it extremely difficult for the Section to reach or influence the group. The ADF countered sensitization efforts through economic incentives offered to supporters, counter-propaganda campaigns, and strict

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<sup>34</sup> ADF was publicly recognized by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) leaders in Syria as an ISIS branch (ISIS–Democratic Republic of Congo (ISIS-DRC) in 2019. The US State Department designated ADF as a foreign terrorist organization in March 2021 and designated the branch's leader, Seka Musa Baluku, a specially designated global terrorist at the same time. In 2014, the ADF was sanctioned by the US Treasury Department and the UN under the UN Security Council's DRC sanctions regime for violence and atrocities

<sup>35</sup> On 2 January 2014, FARDC General Mamadou Mustafa Ndala and three of his soldiers were killed in an ambush while travelling from Beni to Kamango in North Kivu. The FARDC's North Kivu Military Tribunal found that the attack was carried out by ADF elements with support from several Congolese soldiers. As a result, on 17 November 2014, the Military Tribunal sentenced Lieutenant Colonel Biroto Nzanzu and four Ugandan ADF combatants, including Jamil Mukulu, to death, while Lieutenant Colonel Joker Kamuleta and a dozen other FARDC soldiers were sentenced to between one and 20 years in prison. The ADF considered General Ndala a significant threat due to his previous successes against the M23. His death weakened the FARDC's ability to organize a coherent military operation against the ADF.

internal controls, including the use of extreme violence to punish attempted defections. Its brutality against the local population further impeded cooperation, making defection from the group both difficult and dangerous. Most ADF members -- including those recruited by force or deception through false job offers -- ultimately had little choice but to seek protection from the very organization that victimized them.

As a result, over the course of its engagement, the DDRRR program repatriated only 69 foreign ADF combatants, including 11 children, and 20 dependents, along with dozens of locally recruited Congolese. Uganda, however, achieved greater success in soliciting defections. Since it began operations in 2000, the Uganda Amnesty Commission has reported receiving more than 2,800 ADF combatants and dependents, with support from the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) and partners, including the Bridgeway Foundation, a US based NGO. To institutionalize its approach, the Commission established a transit center in Kasese, with technical

support from the Contact and Coordination Group, and more recently created a specialized rehabilitation center in Nakasongola.

Despite these efforts, the ADF has demonstrated remarkable resilience. Its cell-based structure, strict internal control mechanisms and tactics of intimidation that restrict information-sharing have made it largely resistant to traditional DDRRR approaches. At the same time, the complex conflict environment, the weakness of state institutions, and the illicit economy on which many communities depend for survival have facilitated the ADF's continued territorial expansion to Beni and Lubero territories in North Kivu and Irumu and Mombasa territories in Ituri. Military operations have so far pushed the ADF into previously unaffected areas of operations and failed to halt the group's attacks in both the DRC and Uganda, reflecting fluctuations in bilateral relations. As a result, the ADF has consolidated its strength and remains highly active in eastern DRC.

## The Lord's Resistance Army [from 2005]

When the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) entered Congolese territory in September 2005, few anticipated the scale of its atrocities or the complexity of operations to neutralize it. At that time, the group was estimated to have 500 to 700 fighters spread across the DRC, South Sudan, and Uganda. Following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which led to the gradual withdrawal of Sudanese government forces from the south, the LRA became increasingly vulnerable to joint military operations by Ugandan forces and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). This pressure

significantly reduced the group's strength, forcing it to regroup and seek refuge in the remote Garamba National Park in northern DRC.

After increasing its numbers through small-scale abductions, the LRA launched an ambitious military campaign into the Central African Republic in 2007. In December 2008, it extended operations into the DRC, committing the infamous Christmas massacres, which killed nearly 1,000 civilians and resulted in hundreds of abductions.<sup>36</sup> As the UPDF, SPLA and FARDC organized joint military operations to pursue

<sup>36</sup> The LRA Christmas Massacre refers to a series of brutal attacks carried out by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) from December 24 to December 27, 2008. These occurred in several villages in the Haut-Uele District and were characterized by extreme violence and coordinated assaults on civilian populations. They were timed to coincide with Christmas festivities, a period when villagers were gathered together, making them more vulnerable. Over the course of these attacks, at least 620 civilians were killed, with some estimates placing the death toll as high as 860 and at least 160 children and numerous adults were abducted.



Abducted Uganda LRA with child while being repatriated by DRRR Section.

Credit: Matthew Brubacher

the group, the LRA splintered into small units scattered across a vast territory, complicating efforts to neutralize it.

The DRRR Section tracked the LRA's expansion across Africa, establishing an antenna operation in Dungu, Haut-Uélé, soon after the group entered the DRC in 2005. When its presence grew after December 2008, the Section faced numerous challenges in establishing a presence and maintaining communications due to the remoteness and size of the territory. To create the infrastructure needed for sensitization, extraction, repatriation and rehabilitation, a complex network of partnerships was required among military, civic, governmental and religious actors across four countries. The full range of UN infrastructure was also mobilized, including collaboration with UN agencies such

as UNHCR, UN peace operations in South Sudan, and UN special political missions such as BINUCA, UNOCA, and UNOAU.

As the LRA was highly mobile, the priority was to establish communication among affected communities. This was achieved through a partnership with the Catholic Church, which already maintained high-frequency (HF) radio communications in several communities. MONUSCO expanded this system, including into South Sudan and the Central African Republic, using solar and battery packs to power the radios. These community-run HF radios became the primary method of communication, functioning both as early warning systems and as a means for communities to report on LRA escapees. The system also helped locate the families of abductees and organize their return. By 2012, 68 communities across northern DRC, eastern Central African Republic and South

## WARAGA PA ACELLAM CEASER BOT DUL MONY PA LRA.

### ACHOLI

Man an Major General Acellam ma dong akato woko ki i lum ki bot dul mony pa LRA, dong acwalo dwona botwu wun omegi na ma pud odong i lum. Keto wunu muduku wu piny, wuwek Iweny. Kony obedo ka bwolo wan ki lok ma tere peke. Pe wubed ki lworo mo i cwinyywu. Dul mony pa UPDF pa gutimo gin mo ikoma ikare ma arwate kwedgi. Pe wulwor omegi wa me dul mony pa UPDF, gin gimito ni wan omymero wadwog pacu. Ka wudwogo pacu ki bitimo botwu kica. Waweko dong Iweny man ogik woko.

### PAZANDE

Mi nga Major General Caesar Achellam, kuru be a LRA mina keda pangbanga sa fu awiri nami du nvua yo. Om zego gaoni amara vura na omi mbu so vura, Kony anangirani dinduko. Ho ho rengbe ani kagundé be he te. UPDF aamanga nga re gbagbere te ligu regbo ani agbia tirani nayo. Ke oni gunde nga ya, agumerani nga a UPDF na ida ani karaga brani ku kpurani yo. Ke oni kuru i ahijesi hi foroni. Ani mangi rogo gu gene nga gi vura re nyasi.

### SANGO

Mbi wakamba ti tourougou ti LRA, Général Major Caesar Acellam, Mbi singi naya ti tourougou ti LRA milasi mbi tokwa na ala mbéti sô na ala ti mbi kwe sô agbia naya ti gonda, ala za gombé ti ala, na ala za legé ti tiri ne popo ti ala. Kony a andá ékwé na véné, ikpembéto pépé, mbi duti legé oko na nzoni tére pé na séni na a tourougou ti UPDF tongana ala singi naya ti gonda, fadé ala duti nzoni tongana mbi.

Ikpé mbéti ti a tourougou ti UPDF pépé aké ala ti ila ala ye ti tene ikiri na kodro ti éna nzoni tére tongana isingi iga gi ala oko. Ibaogbi ti téné birasó a unzi biani.



Okema Vincent Okumu, Obali Samuel, Opio Makas, Lt. Col Abdul Rugumayo, Caesar Acellam, and Col Joseph Balikuddembe.

DDRRR RADIO - DUNGU: 100.4 FM  
 RADIO OKAPI - DUNGU: 103.4 FM  
 RADIO YAMBIO - YAMBIO: 90.0 FM  
 RADIO ZEREDA - OBO: 100.6 FM  
 RADIO RHINO - FARADJE: 94.0 FM  
 UBC RADIO: 719.5 kHz (41 METERS)  
 UBC RADIO: 497.6 kHz (60 METERS)  
 RADIO DJEMA - NYUMUSE: 91.9 FM



GUPANGBANGALE NEYE DUGANDA, SUDANI, REPUBLIQUE CENTRE AFRICANE, CONGO NA OBOO UN

DDRRR LRA leaflet advertising the radio stations that broadcast sensitization messages

Sudan operated these systems with the support of Caritas, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and Invisible Children.

Direct contact with active LRA members was nearly impossible due to the group's internal controls, which imposed severe punishments. MONUSCO's DDRRR Section therefore diversified its sensitization methods, using FM radio, leaflets and local communities. As there were few FM radio stations, the Section constructed new ones or enhanced existing facilities. Within three years, stations in Dungu, Duru, Bangalu, Yambio, Obo and Zémio were broadcasting "Come Home" messages from ex-combatants, dependents and family members, transmitted either digitally or physically via memory sticks.

To move around the remote area, including into the Central African Republic, the Mission's DDRRR programme relied in part on flights from the American missionary society Africa Inland

Mission, which owned and operated most of the landing strips in the affected region. These were later supplemented by MONUSCO and joint military flights, as well as support from UN operations in South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

The remoteness of the area, combined with the fact that the group was composed of combatants of four different nationalities, made repatriation especially challenging. While Uganda maintained an operational DDR programme and MONUSCO facilitated repatriation flights from Dungu to Entebbe, the situation was more complex in South Sudan and the Central African Republic, where national DDR structures were either underdeveloped, non-existent, or unwilling to provide services to nationals affiliated with foreign armed groups. Moreover, organizing flights to these northern neighboring countries proved logistically challenging.



To address this gap, DDRRR programming focused on supporting locally formed “LRA Victims’ Associations.” These began as self-help groups created by abductees to counsel one another and receive assistance from local churches and civil society. Over time, more formal programmes were established with support from UNICEF, Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI), Caritas, Invisible Children, and others. Physically repatriating combatants and their families remained a challenge despite support from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and local authorities. The UN missions in the Central African Republic and South Sudan also assisted in the repatriation process, particularly in securing cooperation from national authorities, who were often inclined to imprison rather than reintegrate former abductees. Given the diversity of actors involved, DDRRR convened “LRA Focal Point” meetings to coordinate efforts, resolve challenges, and develop standard operating procedures.

The DDRRR of LRA combatants was further complicated by the movement’s strict internal control systems. Defection from the LRA was extremely dangerous: those who even considered escaping were executed or severely punished. Even when able to flee, defectors were often killed by local communities and

self-defense groups, known as the Arrow Boys, out of fear. DDRRR therefore worked with community leaders to establish safe reception points and procedures to alert authorities to potential defectors. These reception points were publicized through leaflets posted on trees along known LRA routes and through FM radio broadcasts, enabling both local communities and abductees attempting to return home to identify secure entry locations.

By 2017, LRA activity had declined significantly. The group’s capacity to recruit and sustain its forces had diminished, and units operated with increasingly less direction from the central command. Joint military operations, supported by the African Union and the United States military, ended in 2017, and MONUSCO’s DDRRR Section ceased its operations in Dungu in 2019.<sup>37</sup> Between 2005 and 2019, the DDRRR programme repatriated 120 foreign combatants, including 22 children, and 45 dependents, and assisted dozens of Congolese abductees. The programme’s impact, however, extended beyond repatriation: the DDRRR Section established numerous FM radio stations that remain operational today and expanded the HF radio system, which continues to protect and connect communities.

## Rwandan and other Foreign Fighters from the Congrès national pour la défense du peuple and the Mouvement du 23 mars [from 2012]

By early 2012, the Mission was deeply engaged in the DDRRR processes of foreign armed groups like the *FDLR*, *ADF*, and *LRA*, as described in preceding sections of this report. By that time, the DDRRR Section was one of the Mission’s largest civilian components, with more than 160 staff,

comprised of Congolese, international staff and military officers. Its breadth of responsibilities -- from managing Congolese combatants to overseeing the repatriation of foreign fighters -- were guided by well-defined protocols. However, the sudden emergence of the *Mouvement du 23*

<sup>37</sup> The USAFRICOM-led counter-LRA mission known as Operation Observant Compass supported the African Union - Regional Task Force against the LRA from 2013 to 2017. In a [statement](#), the U.S Africa Command said the task force has “dramatically weakened the LRA in numbers and overall effectiveness.” It said the LRA had shrunk from 2,000 to under 100 fighters, and noted that four of the five key LRA leaders had been captured.

mars (M23) in 2012 severely tested the Mission's approaches, protocols and relationship with countries in the region.

The M23 rebellion, emerging in May 2012, stemmed from the defection of former *Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple* (CNDP) officers from the Congolese army (FARDC), led by figures like Bosco Ntaganda and Sultani Makenga. Rooted in grievances over unfulfilled promises from the peace agreement between the Government of DRC and CNDP, signed in Goma, on March 23, 2009 to integrate CNDP into the FARDC and into the Congolese National Police, and to transform the CNDP into a political party among other elements, the M23, named after the 23 March 2009 accord, quickly escalated tensions in eastern DRC, capturing Goma in November 2012.

### **The emergence of the first wave of Rwandan M23 Defectors:**

Around the time Goma fell to M23 in November 2012, a small group of 20–30 Rwandan defectors approached MONUSCO, seeking repatriation to Rwanda. This first group of foreign individuals associated with the M23 claimed that they were recruited at the Rwanda-DRC border, trained in camps, and deployed to fight for the M23, but had grown weary of the conflict and wanted to return home. Their stories painted a vivid picture of cross-border recruitment, with young men lured from villages, sent to training camps, and unexpectedly thrust into combat on the Congolese side. Tired of fighting and disillusioned with M23's cause, they sought MONUSCO's assistance to escape the violence. Although most of the first wave of defectors identified as Rwandan, MONUSCO also received individuals who claimed to have been recruited in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya.

### **Operational and tactical challenges and solutions in managing the first wave of Rwandan M23 elements**

Managing this first wave of Rwandan and foreign M23 elements posed unprecedented difficulties for MONUSCO. First, this caseload, though

small, represented a significant challenge, as the defectors claims directly implicated Rwanda in supporting M23, a charge Rwanda vehemently denied. Second, the absence of a functioning national DDR programme in the DRC meant that MONUSCO relied primarily on its own resources and infrastructure. Third, their presence also exposed a fundamental operational and policy gap: unlike FDLR repatriations, which benefited from tripartite agreements between the DRC, Rwanda and MONUSCO, no comparable framework existed for M23, leaving MONUSCO without an agreed upon pathway to resolve contested nationalities. And lastly, The M23 rebellion was not part of MONUSCO's original DDRRR mandate, which focused on groups like the FDLR and therefore did not have well-established SOPs for their management.

To address these constraints and challenges, first, MONUSCO quickly developed clear and tailor-made SOPs by adapting its pre-existing stringent FDLR screening and vetting mechanisms, which involved detailed identity verification (language, village of origin, family tracing, etc) and security assessments, to process M23 defectors. By applying these protocols, the Mission confirmed the Rwandan nationality of 152 defectors over the course of 2012, a critical step in preparing for their repatriation. Second, to address any potential nationality disputes, MONUSCO established a verification commission in Goma in June 2012, comprising DRC's *Direction Générale de Migration* (DGM) and *Agence Nationale de Renseignements* (ANR), to screen M23 defectors and verify their origins. The commission confirmed the Rwandan identity of many defectors, but Rwanda's delegation rejected these findings, and thus resulted in the defectors' stateless status.

In the interim, while awaiting clarity, the Mission housed these defectors in DDRRR camps, providing them with protection and basic assistance until verification was completed and viable repatriation arrangements could be made. The defectors, aware of their state of flux,

grew increasingly disgruntled. As processing continued, several individuals questioned the conditions of their stay. The Mission reiterated that participation in DDRRR was voluntary and that accommodation did not constitute detention. A number subsequently chose self-repatriation to Rwanda, leaving MONUSCO premises and returning by their own clandestine means. MONUSCO provided contact numbers for minimal post-repatriation monitoring, but received no follow-up calls, reflecting the Mission's limited authority and resources to track returnees across borders.

### Second wave of foreign nationals associated with the M23

By 2014, following its authorization, the FIB was mandated to neutralize and disarm armed groups in eastern DRC, with priority given to defeating the M23 rebellion. Unlike traditional peacekeeping contingents, the FIB was specifically equipped and mandated to conduct offensive operations, undertaking joint missions with the FARDC against M23

strongholds in North Kivu. Between August and November 2013, the FIB engaged in sustained clashes, particularly around Kibati and Kiwanja, ultimately forcing M23's withdrawal from Goma and dismantling several of its key bases.

It is important to note that to achieve its objective, in parallel, the FIB partnered with the DDRRR Section to promote voluntary defections, conducting sensitization campaigns prior to military operations. This collaboration proved mutually beneficial, as it encouraged combatants to leave M23 before hostilities escalated and reduced the number of fighters engaged in direct combat. The partnership also helped to avoid treating those who surrendered as prisoners of war, maintaining the voluntary character of DDRRR despite the intensity of FIB's military campaign.

By November 2013, these operations culminated in M23's military defeat, forcing its leaders and fighters to flee to Uganda and Rwanda and resulting in MONUSCO's DDRRR Section to manage an influx of a second wave of M23



Troops of the FARDC cheer after taking control, with assistance from MONUSCO's FIB, of a highly strategic position of the M23, an area known as Three Towers on the hills of Kibati, five kilometres north of Goma.

Credit: UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

defectors, which also included Rwandan and other foreign elements seeking repatriation. To support this process, MONUSCO established 13 designated surrender points across North Kivu, supported by FARDC units, from which defectors could be extricated and consolidated into one Transition Camp in Goma by road or helicopter. The camp itself, originally designed for 200 individuals, was later relocated to Munigi on the outskirts of Goma and expanded to host more than 400, in order to accommodate the growing number of clients.

To facilitate repatriation and ease tensions, MONUSCO once again supported the creation of a governor-chaired case review committee in North Kivu, bringing together ANR, police, military intelligence and civil authorities, to process individuals and determine their

nationalities. Although the mechanism introduced some transparency, its outcome mirrored that of the earlier commission: all Rwandan members of M23 were denied reentry into Rwanda. As a result, they endured prolonged stays in MONUSCO facilities, in some cases exceeding a year, rather than the originally envisaged few days. Conditions in the transit camps reflected this reality. Reports of illicit trafficking, alcohol abuse and even suicide attempts underscored the psychological strain. In response, MONUSCO staff relied on “golden rules” briefings emphasizing discipline, prohibition of alcohol and drugs, and common purpose to maintain order, but the prolonged stays ultimately eroded morale and again led to self-repatriations rather than structured support from the Mission.

## Sudan People’s Liberation Army-in-Opposition [from 2016]

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In 2016, following the outbreak of civil war in South Sudan, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO), loyal to Vice-President Riek Machar, moved into Garamba National Park in north-eastern DRC. As many in the group were malnourished and injured, the Government of the DRC requested MONUSCO’s assistance. The DDRRR team in Dungu subsequently provided accommodation for 630 SPLA-IO members at its transit camp.

There was no easy long-term solution, as it was neither safe nor feasible to return the group to South Sudan. As a result, the combatants remained in the Dungu transit facility for several months, during which their frustration grew. At one point, they took DDRRR staff hostage to demand that their situation be addressed. Owing to the staff’s good relations with the SPLA-IO, the situation was defused, but a more durable arrangement was required. The group was eventually transferred to another DDRRR facility in Munigi, North Kivu, which was larger and provided better support. Its location, further from the South Sudan border, also reduced the risk of combatants crossing back into their country.

After three years in the transit camp, DDRRR repatriated 100 combatants to Sudan for return to areas in South Sudan under SPLA-IO control. However, more than 400 SPLA-IO combatants remained in the Munigi DDRRR facility. Various attempts were made to find a solution for these fighters, including a letter from United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to the Security Council in October 2016 requesting a decision on the way forward, as MONUSCO lacked the legal authority to expel them. The absence of a formal response highlighted the complex diplomatic and humanitarian challenges posed by the presence of foreign armed groups in the DRC and underscored the need for international cooperation. In the end, with no prospect of organized repatriation, DDRRR encouraged members to leave the camp using their own travel documents and means. Most of the SPLA-IO combatants -- 611 in total -- sought to join their families in refugee camps in Uganda and Kenya, while 16 accepted voluntary repatriation to South Sudan.

## Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups, dependents and refugees

Although DDRRR programming primarily focuses on foreign combatants, it must also take into account vulnerable groups accompanying them. Special attention has therefore been given to children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG), dependents of combatants and refugees.

The term *children associated with armed forces and armed groups* (CAAFAG) refers to people under the age of 18 who are used by an armed group in any capacity, such as fighters, cooks, spies or for sexual exploitation<sup>38</sup>. The concept is therefore broader than that of a “child soldier,” which implies that the underage person was a combatant. In the DRC, child recruitment has

been widespread and has tended to increase in times of conflict. Nearly every armed group in the DRC has forcibly recruited children. The FARDC also relied on children as combatants, particularly during the 2009 process of *intégration rapide* (rapid integration), but later limited this practice after it was prohibited under Congolese law the same year<sup>39</sup>. At the same time, the FDLR intensified the recruitment of children.

Between 2009 and 2024, the DDRRR programme processed 568 foreign and 6,378 Congolese children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG). As a vulnerable group, children are generally treated differently from



ADF Child Soldiers.

Credit: Picture confiscated from ADF computer.

<sup>38</sup> UNICEF, “Joint Statement on Advancing Child-Sensitive Social Protection”, 2009, available at: [http://www.unicef.org/aids/files/CSSP\\_joint\\_statement\\_10.16.09.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/aids/files/CSSP_joint_statement_10.16.09.pdf). Accessed 4 March 2020.

<sup>39</sup> MONUSCO (2019) “Our Strength Is In Our Youth”: Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2014 – 2017).



Child carrying a rifle.

Credit: Sébastien Lapierre

adult fighters. In the DRC, once a child was identified through the initial screening process, the DDRRR programme continued to house, feed and care for the child in the transit center. In-depth interviews were then conducted by the Mission's Child Protection Section (CPS), whose personnel had received specialized training. Following the interviews, CPS referred the child to UNICEF, which determined whether and how to reintegrate the child into the local community and family.

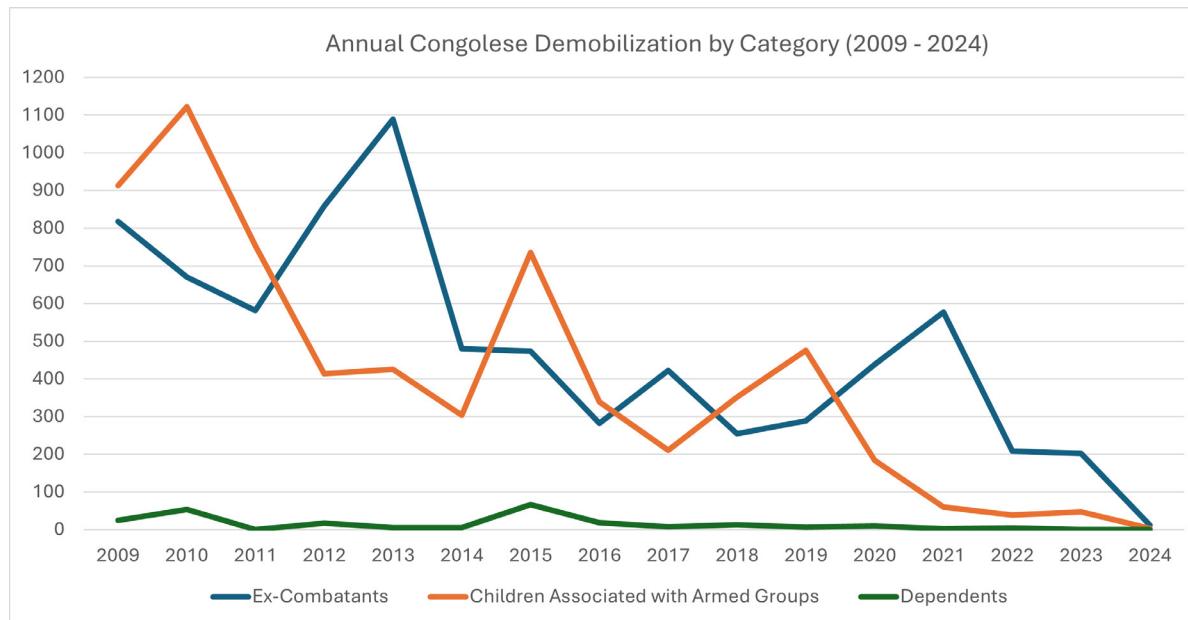
Despite the lack of official data, anecdotal evidence indicates a high rate of recidivism among Congolese children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG). Common reasons include persistent insecurity that compelled children to rejoin an armed group to protect themselves and their families, or being identified by a former commander who forcibly

re-recruited them. In contrast, recidivism and re-recruitment were less common among foreign armed groups. Once demobilized, foreign CAAFAG generally returned to relatively safe environments with existing support structures. Moreover, foreign armed groups tended to be suspicious of returnees, fearing infiltration by government agents, and therefore often refused to accept them back.

Beyond CAAFAG, DDRRR also identified dependents of combatants -- usually family members who were non-combatants and accompanied them through DDRRR processes<sup>40</sup>. Dependents were transferred to DDRRR transit centers along with combatants for processing. Women and children were then housed separately from men and provided with their own sanitation facilities. In general, Congolese combatants belonging to foreign armed groups

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<sup>40</sup> IDDRS <https://www.unddr.org/the-iddrs/level-4>

**Figure 13:** Annual Congolese Demobilization by Category (2009 - 2024)

left their families behind when defecting to join DDRRR, whereas foreign combatants either sent their dependents ahead to ensure their safety or defected together with their families.

Once repatriated, dependents of foreign combatants -- particularly women, who bore the greatest responsibility for children -- were given special care. The Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RDRC) and the Ugandan Amnesty Commission, for example, worked with receiving communities to sensitize them to the specific needs of returning female dependents<sup>41</sup>. This preparation helped reduce stigmatization of those associated with foreign armed groups such as the FDLR and the LRA. Both Commissions also provided psychological support and facilitated reintegration by offering resources and, in some cases, vocational training.<sup>42</sup>

Although the DDRRR Section did not directly target refugees, it often extracted them in the course of its operations. Following screening,

refugees were identified as foreign nationals who were neither combatants nor dependents. In certain cases, the Section assumed responsibility for them out of concern for their protection, as authorized under the Mission's protection of civilians mandate. In relation to the FDLR, another rationale was to reduce the Rwandan refugee population in the DRC, which constituted the group's primary recruitment base.

Once extracted, the DDRRR Section transferred refugees to UNHCR for repatriation. Although official figures are unavailable, a review of the Section's weekly and monthly reports indicates that it handed over tens of thousands of refugees to UNHCR. In return, UNHCR referred individuals it had identified as combatants to the DDRRR Section for processing.

<sup>41</sup> New Beginnings for Ex Combatants (2019) World Bank. See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/01/28/new-beginnings-for-ex-combatants-in-rwanda>; Moving to Catch Up, TDRP, [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/39115-doc-81..moving\\_to\\_catch\\_up\\_migration\\_of\\_excombatants\\_in\\_uganda\\_ex\\_combatants\\_migration\\_factors\\_and\\_links\\_between\\_migration\\_and\\_programming.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/39115-doc-81..moving_to_catch_up_migration_of_excombatants_in_uganda_ex_combatants_migration_factors_and_links_between_migration_and_programming.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> RDRC trained over 120 Cooperatives of ex-combatants across the country, See <https://www.demobrwanda.gov.rw/news-detail/rdrc-trains-over-120-cooperatives-of-ex-combatants-across-the-country>

## Conclusion

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The experience of engaging with foreign armed groups revealed the necessity for the DDRRR Section to remain agile and adaptable. Groups such as the LRA and ADF operated in vast, remote areas and relied on coercive ideologies and strict internal discipline, severely limiting the effectiveness of conventional DDRRR approaches. Nevertheless, the Section expanded radio connectivity in isolated regions, disseminated visual defection messaging, and partnered with religious leaders in Uganda to encourage surrenders.

Where political frameworks existed -- as with Burundian armed groups under the 2003 Pretoria Protocol -- the Section was able to scale up sensitization efforts, repatriating over 500 FDD combatants from the Fizi peninsula and registering 3,250 voluntary returns in early 2004. In contrast, the absence of a political accord for SPLA-IO members precluded safe return and stymied progress. Temporary political openings, such as those with Rwanda between 2013 and 2014, enabled limited engagement with CNDP and M23 combatants despite their ambiguous status.

For both waves of Rwandan M23 -- first in 2012 around the fall of Goma, and again in 2013 -- the lack of clarity on nationalities proved to be an insurmountable constraint. Despite MONUSCO's adherence to established SOPs and repeated confirmations by the Goma Commission, no formal repatriations of M23-declared combatants to Rwanda were effected.

These varied operational environments also required the Section to support the return of CAAFAG, dependents and refugees, often in coordination with UNICEF and UNHCR.

Together, these experiences underscored the limitations of a uniform approach and highlighted the importance of political alignment, inter-agency cooperation and operational flexibility -- prompting the development of innovative tools and tactics explored in the next chapter.

# Factsheet: DDR of Congolese combatants

**~220,000**

Congolese fighters processed  
(2003–2024)

**Over US\$ 300 million**

total disbursed across 4 DDR  
programme iterations

**50,000** Congolese fighters

targeted under P-DDRCS (ongoing)

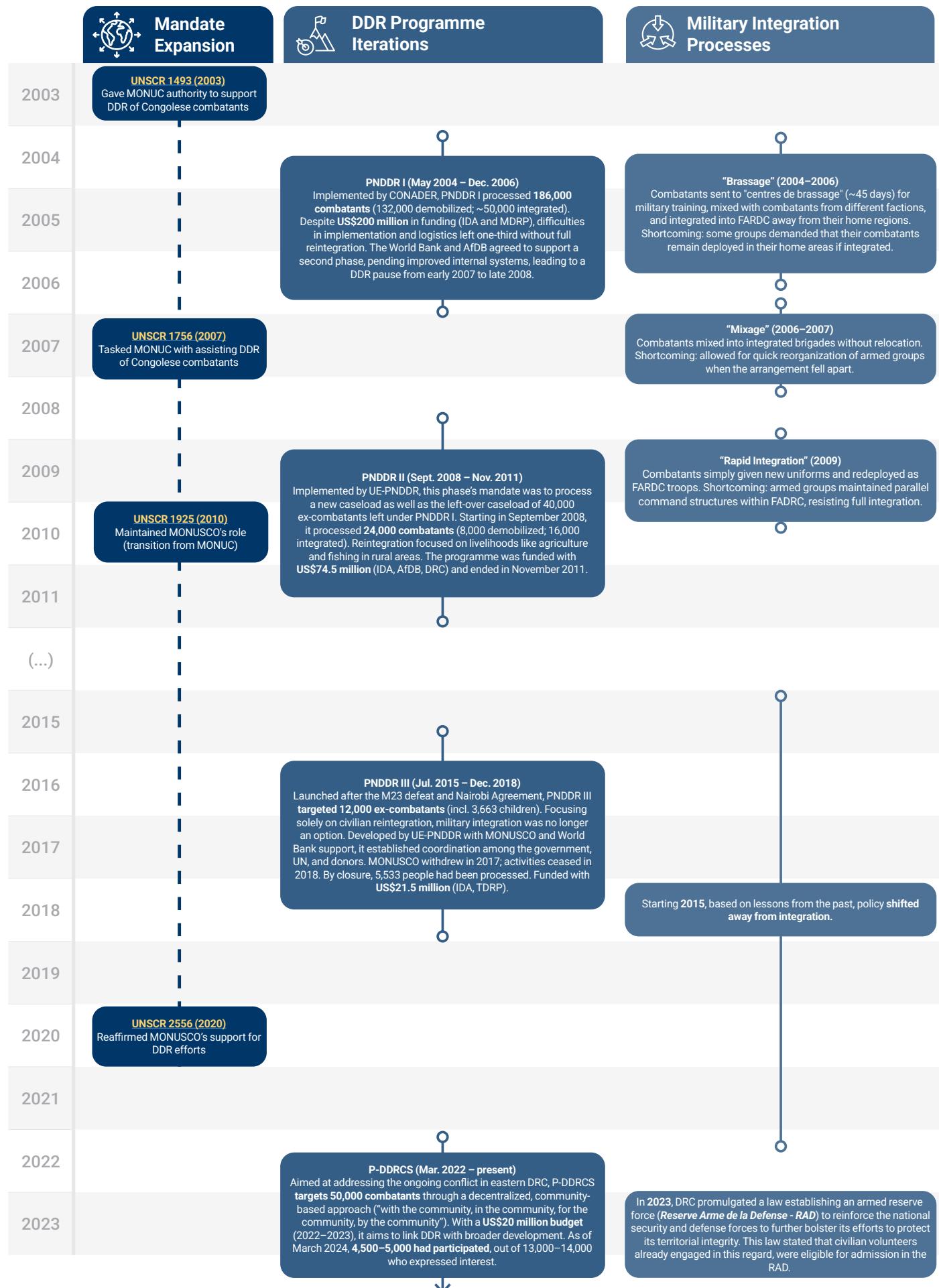


In May 2006, the DRRR Division was given additional tasks of supporting the National DDR Programme (PNDDR) for Congolese combatants, as well as the national efforts at security sector reform (SSR). The Mission was tasked to: monitor the disarmament and demobilization process; provide assistance in the destruction of arms and ammunition; and monitor and provide advice on human rights and child protection.

The role of the Mission, however, would grow over time as successive national DDR programmes were implemented and the security situation became more complex with the rise of new and diverse armed groups. Whereas this process was entirely separate from the DRRR of foreign armed groups, this section provides some information on the work to demobilize the Congolese armed movements that often collaborated with and/or operated in the same areas as the foreign armed movements.

In parallel to formal DDR programmes, the Mission also engaged in what became known as "DDR firefighting" (i.e., ad hoc, rapidly deployed disarmament and reintegration efforts launched in response to sudden conflict outbreaks). These operations, such as those carried out in Ituri and the Hauts Plateaux in 2003, aimed to leverage the Mission's technical expertise and operational presence to defuse localized crises, reduce violence at community level, and contribute to Protection of Civilian (POC) efforts. It did so by developing several targeted interventions aimed at demobilizing militia members outside national DDR frameworks, often under intense time pressure and fluid security conditions.

## FACTSHEET: DDR OF CONGOLESE COMBATANTS



# Chapter III: Innovative DDRRR Tools and Tactics

Over the course of nearly 25 years of operations against foreign armed groups in eastern DRC -- particularly the FDLR -- the DDRRR Section developed a range of innovative tools and tactics. These interventions were designed to reduce the operational capacity of such groups by adapting to shifting circumstances and the specific profiles of their members.

This chapter presents the most salient of these innovations, illustrating how the Section encouraged defections and facilitated repatriation through context-specific approaches. It details creative sensitization efforts targeting both combatants and their dependents, the use of diverse communication channels, and the cultivation of personal relationships and confidence-building measures.

The chapter also explores how DDRRR efforts were coordinated with military operations, and how legal and relational strategies were employed to weaken the leadership structures of targeted groups. It concludes by underscoring the importance of a whole-of-Mission approach, highlighting that the effectiveness of DDRRR rests on sustained collaboration across civilian, military, and political components.



Credit: Tim Freccia

**Figure 14:** Innovation Toolbox

## Sensitization and communication

The primary driver behind combatants' decisions to return to their country of origin was sensitization. Soon after its establishment in 2002, the DDRRR Section began direct communication with armed groups, informing them of the option of safe return under UN auspices. Given the size and dispersed nature of these groups, the Section relied heavily on frequency modulation (FM) radio programmes to maximize reach. These broadcasts frequently featured testimonies from returnees, encouraging those still in the bush to lay down their arms and return home.

In 2004, the DDRRR Section launched the *Gutahuka* ("return" in Kinyarwanda) programme on the UN's Radio Okapi. The programme became the backbone of the Section's sensitization strategy. It was regularly updated with testimonies from returnees and reports from transit facilities, while also enabling families to broadcast messages to their relatives still in the bush, encouraging them to come home.

This form of sensitization proved particularly effective against the FDLR, as it directly countered one of their main propaganda messages -- that returnees to Rwanda would be jailed or killed. Hearing reassuring testimonies from trusted voices convinced many to abandon the fight. To reach combatants beyond FM coverage, the DDRRR Section deployed mobile radio stations that broadcast *Gutahuka* more

widely, enabling direct outreach to the FDLR and allowing community leaders to transmit messages encouraging return.

In addition to radio programming, the DDRRR Section produced sensitization documentaries and organized field cinemas with projectors that showed the stories of those who had returned.

In addition to encouraging returns with positive messages, DDRRR sensitization also aimed to reduce the morale of foreign armed groups and sow dissent between combatants and their commanders. To counter the belief that their struggle was justified or winnable, DDRRR messaging emphasized that UN Member States had deemed the continued presence of the FDLR in the DRC intolerable and that international forces would support government efforts to neutralize them. To further undermine cohesion, the DDRRR Section disseminated messages stressing that FDLR leaders were living comfortably outside the DRC while rank-and-file combatants remained in the bush with their families.

To amplify sensitization efforts and reach individuals without access to radio programmes, DDRRR distributed leaflets carrying similar content and the contact details of its officers. These leaflets were dropped by helicopter and disseminated in markets frequented by the FDLR. Recognizing that not all members were literate, some leaflets relied exclusively on visual messaging.

**“ We were able to weaken the hold of the FDLR leadership by showing that what they said about FDLR being killed when they return to Rwanda was a lie. In this way we persuaded a significant number of their followers to enter the DDRRR programme. ”**

#### MONUSCO DDRRR staff

While sensitization was used with all foreign armed groups, it proved less effective with the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Both groups maintained strict internal surveillance, limiting access to radios and movements, and imposed severe punishments, including death, on those attempting to defect. The ADF framed its struggle in religious terms and increasingly associated itself with global jihadist movements, while the LRA emphasized loyalty to its leader Joseph Kony and his claimed prophetic authority. Both groups systematically recruited and indoctrinated children, who were particularly vulnerable to coercion and manipulation.

Attempts to sensitize the ADF demonstrated the limits of remote sensitization and the importance of direct contact. Due to a high level of distrust of any Ugandan government or religious authority, ADF combatants did not believe the positive stories of former ADF members who had returned to Uganda. Deserters indicated that they were even suspicious of messages from the Ugandan Grand Mufti. As a result, ADF usually defected after direct contact with DDRRR personnel or trusted interlocutors.



Members of the military component of MONUC distribute information leaflets on the DDRRR programme throughout the stronghold areas of the FDLR.

Credit: UN Photo/Marie Frechon

Figure 15: Outreach Process



## Collaboration with family members and former combatants

Family ties of mutual trust provided an important entry point for DDRRR efforts. Many FDLR combatants, for instance, sent their families out first to ensure their safety and to facilitate their own subsequent defection. When family members departed before the combatant, the DDRRR Section systematically encouraged wives to call their husbands to reassure them of their safety and urge them to defect as well. Combatants who defected

were similarly asked to contact former comrades, as many maintained relationships with active fighters. The DDRRR Section promoted such collaboration with dependents and former combatants, particularly while they were in transit camps where coordination of extractions was easier, though in some cases this cooperation continued after families had returned to Rwanda.

**“We created Women’s Voices where wives, sisters and daughters of FDLR combatants were interviewed. We got letters and messages to the FDLR in the DRC. When the helicopter would land, hundreds of people would come out of the forest and the letters would be handed over to those who came out. They would then be passed on through the ranks to the individuals. This strengthened the link between families and showed those still in the DRC what they were missing.”**

**MONUC DDRRR staff**



A combatant returning from Kamina is reunited with his family in Rwanda and welcomed back by his relatives.  
Credit: MONUC/Yasmine Bouziane

## Confidence-building and the safety of the client

Maintaining the confidence and trust of combatants was vital to the success of DDRRR. Personnel developed unique relationships with combatants, who -- despite knowing that the Section's ultimate objective was to weaken and neutralize foreign armed groups -- remained in contact because the Mission provided a channel to the international community. In the case of the FDLR, trust was fostered by providing accurate

information on the international community's stance toward the group. For example, the DDRRR Section informed FDLR members in advance that MONUSCO would support the FARDC's Operation *Umoja Wetu* in January 2009, thereby encouraging safe defections. Ensuring the safety of defectors remained central to this trust: safe extraction was prioritized as the most effective incentive for further defections.

### Spotlight 10: Extraction of "Colonel" Elie Mutarambirwa (aka Colonel Safari), FDLR Battalion Commander of Someka

"Safari called us early in the morning. Word had got out that he was negotiating a return to Rwanda and his safety was in question. Not having time to arrange a military escort, [my DDRRR colleague] and I set off for the rendez-vous point north of Kanyabayonga. After waiting the entire day we finally saw Colonel Safari snaking his way towards the camp with 6 soldiers. Colonel Safari greeted [my colleague] with a warm smile and we began to make our way to the vehicles. I asked [my colleague] if the others knew he was defecting as I could see they were maintaining formation. [My colleague] said he thought that would happen very shortly. At that point an argument started and soldiers

accompanying Colonel Safari raised and cocked their weapons. After a brief standoff, the soldiers lowered their weapons and started returning back up the hill, disappointed. Colonel Safari turned around and, as he moved toward the UN cars, laughingly said: 'You see, in the FDLR we practice democracy.'"

## Updated organizational analysis

Once combatants were extracted, the DDRRR Section debriefed them during processing to update its analysis of the FDLR's organization and tactical deployments. These debriefings provided real-time information on command structures, alliances, propaganda, and methods

of recruitment and training. The Section also collected feedback on the effectiveness of its approaches, particularly in assessing progress in reducing the FDLR's strength.

## Proximity to the target

Because defection is a life-changing decision, encouraging a combatant to leave a foreign armed group often required time and patience. Establishing physical proximity to the FDLR enhanced DDRRR personnel's ability to conduct sensitization, build trust, and create opportunities for defections to UN temporary operating bases. Initially, DDRRR staff were based in Bukavu and Goma, deploying mobile teams to engage with and extract combatants. While cost-effective and flexible, this approach lacked the advantages of a semi-permanent presence.

In 2005, the South Kivu office began deploying national staff to remote MONUC field bases. This approach proved effective and was subsequently expanded. By 2009, DDRRR had moved beyond the provincial capitals and maintained permanent field teams in more

than 25 locations, including near FDLR camps. This expanded presence enabled deeper relationships with local leaders and combatants, thereby strengthening sensitization efforts and increasing opportunities for defection -- despite the FDLR establishing cordons around UN bases to hinder DDRRR's success.

Expanding the DDRRR Section's presence required additional human resources, leading the Mission to hire new international and national staff. The Section also drew on UN Military Observers, deploying them as team leaders in field outposts and leveraging their rank, seniority, and military training to cooperate effectively with both the Mission's Force and the FARDC. By 2009–2010, the DDRRR Section had become the largest substantive component within MONUSCO.

***“In 2004, as team leader in South Kivu, I took the decision to deploy permanent DDRRR teams to the field. This created good results and so was expanded. In 2008, when I went to Goma, we created an Operational Cell that supported the deployment of more staff to the field.”***

**MONUSCO DDRRR staff**

**“We tried to co-locate with military presence, but sometimes national staff were on their own. This allowed us to get close to the FDLR. This greatly increased the amount of direct contact and increased their opportunities to defect.”**

**MONUSCO DDRRR staff**

## Coordination with military operations

Given the Mission’s robust mandate to disarm foreign combatants by force, it was essential for the DDRRR Section to coordinate its voluntary approach with military operations. During Operation *Kimia II* in March 2009, when UN forces supported FARDC operations against the FDLR, DDRRR personnel created safe corridors (*couloirs sécurisés*) through the Coordination Team to enable FDLR members to surrender

and enter the DDRRR process. Information on these safe corridors was communicated to the FDLR by radio and other channels before and during operations. Similarly, close collaboration between the FIB and the DDRRR Section during the offensive against M23 in 2014, following the creation of the FIB, proved to be a successful blend of military and non-military measures.

**“The setting up of safe corridors to allow FDLR to surrender did not work as well as expected because at that time they thought they would be turned over to the FARDC. However, overall the military operations had a very positive impact.”**

**MONUSCO DDRRR staff**

## Establishment of a Special Operations Unit to focus on officers of foreign armed groups

In parallel with efforts to solicit defections from rank-and-file combatants, the DDRRR Section also focused on high-ranking members to gather intelligence. FDLR officers were particularly valuable given their positions in the chain of command, organizational knowledge and ability to defect jointly with subordinates. With financial support from the United Kingdom, the DDRRR Section recruited

two Special Operations Officers who had extensive personal ties to the FDLR as part of a newly established Special Operations Unit. Based within the Section, the unit targeted FDLR officers through tailored approaches designed to secure their defection. These included leveraging personal relationships, such as dependents or comrades, and were occasionally coordinated with Rwandan

and Congolese intelligence services, which provided additional incentives, including employment upon return. These operations

significantly increased the number of FDLR officers defecting, disrupted the chain of command, and yielded valuable intelligence.

***“The greatest and most effective innovation of DDRRR to solicit the defections of FDLR beyond sensitization was to hire [two Special Operations Officers]. This seriously disrupted the FDLR chain of command and increased not only the number but the quality of defections.”***

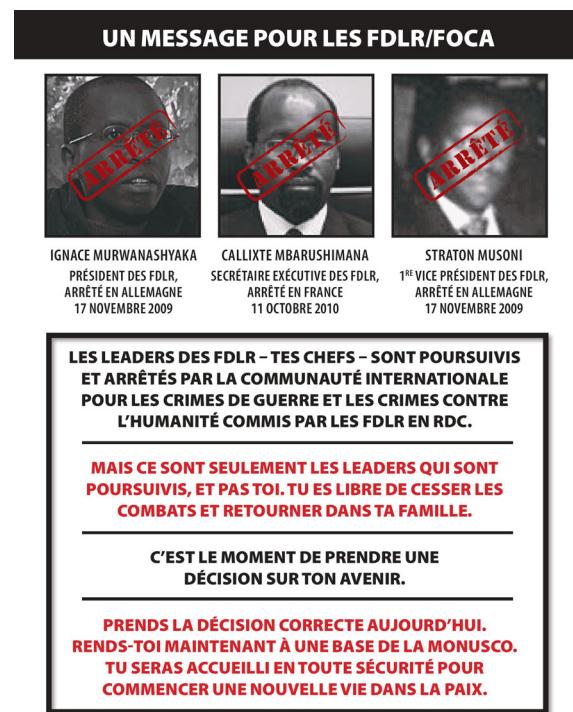
#### MONUSCO Arms Embargo Cell staff

### Litigation to erode political leadership

In addition to strategies targeting combatants and officers, the DDRRR Section also promoted legal action against the political leadership of foreign armed groups. The FDLR's political leaders, in particular, played a central role in shaping the group's strategy and political objectives, providing guidance and fostering the perception among members that the FDLR was part of a broader movement with international support.

Although the DDRRR Section engaged with FDLR leaders abroad, including during their transfer to Kamina in 2003<sup>43</sup>, the leadership opposed the return of combatants to Rwanda and actively sought to prevent it. The group's political leaders thereby supported -- or at minimum condoned -- the crimes perpetrated by the FDLR in the DRC.

In 2008, the DDRRR Section's management began exerting pressure on FDLR leaders based in Europe to disrupt their support for the group in the DRC. As many resided in Germany, the Section held meetings with German diplomats to explore options that would trigger violations of the leaders' residency status. These discussions led the German authorities to prohibit political activity linked to the FDLR as a condition of asylum. However, these legal measures had little impact.



In 2009, German prosecutors investigating international war crimes opened a case against FDLR President Ignace Murwanashyaka and Vice President Straton Musoni. Mission personnel supported the prosecution by collecting evidence and providing logistical assistance. Once the indictment was executed,

<sup>43</sup> The FDLR leaders brought were Christophe Hakizabera and FDLR President Ignace Murwanashyaka.

Figure 16: MONUSCO sensitization leaflet – “Only the Leaders are Arrested”



DDRRR officers testified as witnesses in the trial. Both leaders were convicted in 2015 and sentenced to 21 years' imprisonment for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Similarly, in 2010, the International Criminal Court (ICC) arrested FDLR Executive Secretary Callixte Mbarushimana, although he was later released

without conviction, leading to his removal from the position. The DDRRR Section communicated these developments through radio broadcasts and leaflets to FDLR members in the field, aiming to erode morale and deter further crimes against civilians.

## Exploitation of divisions within the foreign armed group

Since internal divisions can weaken armed groups, the DDRRR Section capitalized on existing tensions to prompt defections. In April 2017, for example, a rift emerged between hardline and moderate FDLR members. With the support of MONUSCO's leadership and the Rwandan government, DDRRR staff encouraged the leader of the moderate wing, Executive Secretary “Colonel” Laurent Ndagijimana, alias Wilson Iragegeka, to break away from the FDLR

and form his own group, with the expectation that his movement would subsequently engage in negotiations to return to Rwanda.

“Colonel” Wilson defected with nearly 1,000 fighters and moved his newly formed armed group, the *Conseil national pour le renouveau et la démocratie* (CNRD), to Kalehe in South Kivu. However, instead of pursuing negotiations to return to Rwanda, CNRD members requested

asylum in third countries. In December 2019, joint military operations by the DRC and Rwanda killed "Colonel" Wilson and forcibly repatriated about 500 CNRD members. At the same time,

the DDRRR Section facilitated the voluntary return of several CNRD elements to Rwanda, reducing the group's strength to an estimated 250 members.

## Whole-of-Mission Approach

For DDRRR to be effective, support from other Mission components was essential. The DDRRR Section therefore worked closely with the Mission's leadership on political efforts, with the Force on military operations, and with the Mission Support Division (MSD) on logistics. Beyond the Mission, the Section also maintained a close relationship with the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo through regular information-sharing.

Political backing was essential to ensure the legitimacy of DDRRR and to create conditions for cooperation with the military. In addition to advocating for DDRRR as a mandated Mission priority in Security Council resolutions, political support helped secure adequate staffing and resources for the Section. The Chief of DDRRR therefore maintained close relations with Mission leadership, highlighting the Section's

needs and reporting on its achievements. In turn, DDRRR supported the Mission in resolving difficult situations during political stalemates. In 2009, for example, the Section informed the FDLR that the Mission would proactively use force against foreign armed groups. Other interventions included efforts to address the stalled peace process with the FDLR in 2014 and to manage the presence of SPLA-IO fighters crossing into the DRC in 2016.

At the operational level, collaboration with the Mission's Force was key to ensuring the security of DDRRR activities. It also enhanced sensitization and information-gathering, as the Force was often present in remote areas where foreign armed groups were based. In addition, the Force played an important role in coordinating DDRRR and military operations.

**Figure 17:** MONUC and MONUSCO DDRRR Staffing (posts) and budget (assessed contributions)



Logistical support underpinned all DDRRR activities, including the procurement of sensitization equipment, the establishment and management of reception and transit centers, and the transport of DDRRR personnel and combatants. In 2009, the DDRRR Section secured “Special Measures” from the Director of Mission Support (DMS). These exempted the Section from certain procedures, gave priority to DDRRR in air operations, and provided personnel with additional petty cash to cover unforeseen expenses ranging from the purchase of phone credit for potential defectors to limited financial support for escaped dependents.

Reflecting the collaborative whole-of-Mission approach of the DDRRR Section, it was initially set up as an integrated section that included Liaison Officers from the Force and staff from the MSD. This integration greatly facilitated relations with other important Mission components and led to excellent support from both sides. A mission

reconfiguration and a shift of operations to the East led to the disbandment of this structure in 2003. While some observed a decrease in attention to DDRRR efforts and support to the Section following this restructuring, others welcomed it as an innovative opportunity that allowed the DDRRR Section to operate more independently.

Beyond the Mission, the DDRRR Section maintained a particularly close relationship with the UN Group of Experts on the DRC, mandated by the Security Council to investigate natural resource exploitation, child recruitment, weapons trafficking and other issues. The Section cultivated this strategic relationship by sharing information on the activities and structure of armed groups. In addition, the two entities collaborated in tracking the supply chains and support networks of foreign armed groups.

***“In July 2017, after receiving a call from [a senior commander] that he was ready to surrender, I organized six helicopters and an Indian escort and went to Mutongo. We stayed there overnight to convince him to return with us. In the morning, after he and his family got on the helicopter and we were returning to Goma, he stated that he wanted us to land to pick up his son. We stated this was not possible but we would get him later. He took out a grenade from his pocket and threatened to blow up the helicopter. It took all my effort to calm him down and allow us to continue to Goma.”***

**MONUSCO DDRRR staff**

## Conclusion

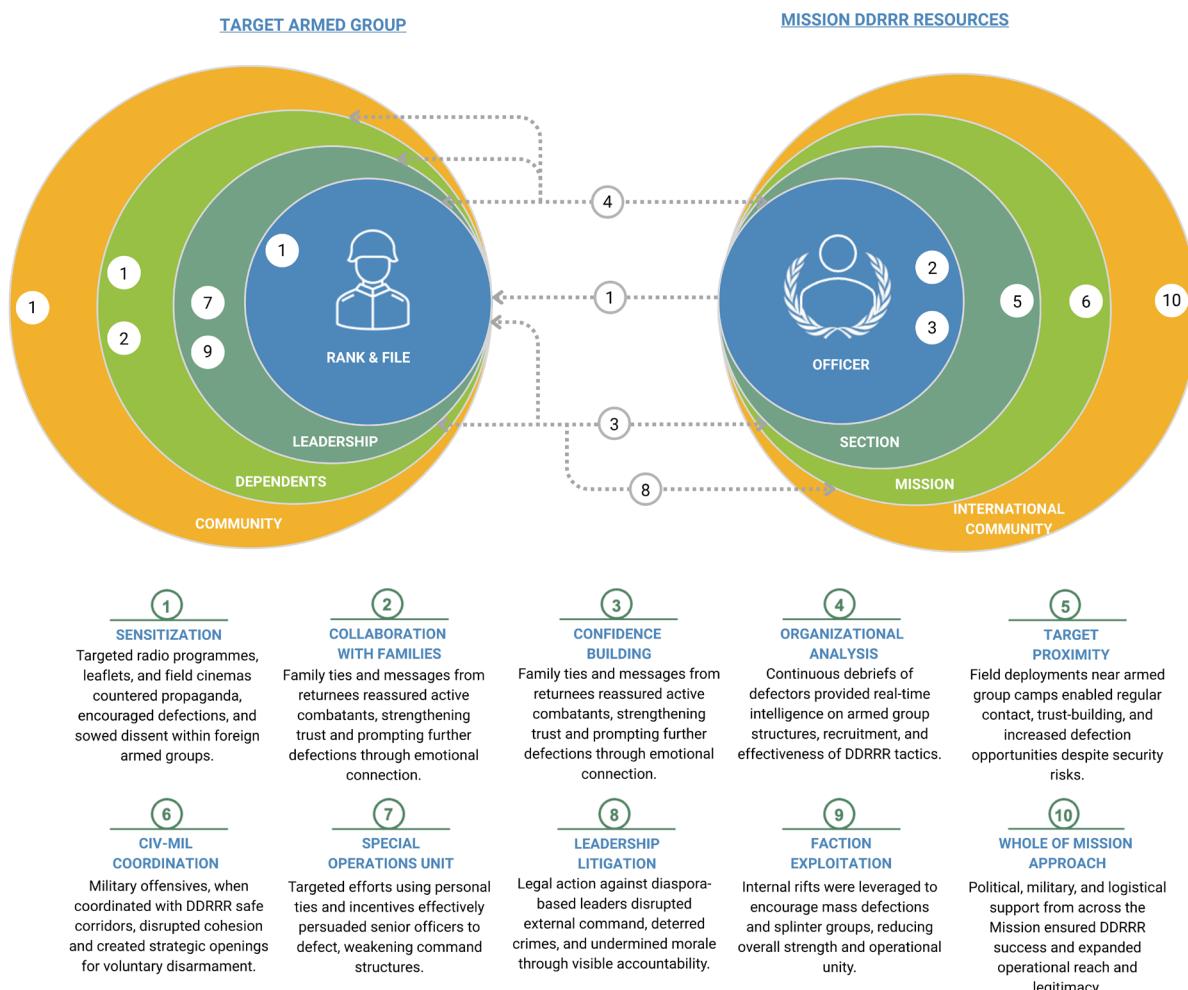
To encourage the defection of foreign combatants, the DDRRR Section employed several innovative tools and tactics over nearly 25 years of operation in the DRC. Sensitization through radio programmes and leaflets, including visuals for illiterate fighters, informed combatants of the option to defect

and countered armed groups’ propaganda. Dependents and ex-combatants who had already left were also engaged in encouraging active fighters to join the DDRRR process. Building trust through honest dialogue further enhanced the Section’s effectiveness and allowed it to update its organizational analysis

continuously. DDRRR personnel also deployed closer to targeted groups and coordinated with military operations to reach remote areas. The establishment of a Special Operations Unit enabled a focus on officers with valuable intelligence, while legal action undermined

political leaders and the exploitation of internal divisions weakened armed groups. Importantly, DDRRR relied on Mission leadership and on other Mission components, including the Force and the Mission Support Division (MSD), to implement its operations successfully.

**Figure 18:** Innovative Tools of DDRRR



# Factsheet: Five-Country Repatriation Programme (2002–2017)



Credit: UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

## Overview

From 2002 to 2017, the World Bank undertook significant efforts to address the issue of foreign combatants in the Great Lakes region through the [\*\*Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Programme\*\*](#) and the [\*\*Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Programme\*\*](#).

These initiatives supported the disarmament, voluntary return and reintegration of former combatants across national borders, thereby contributing to regional peacebuilding and security. National DDR commissions and coordinated international funding and technical support frameworks were at the core of this process.

## Regional approach: What was done

- A regional DDR framework to support governments and irregular forces. The MDRP provided strategic guidance and harmonised standards across borders, to ensure that DDR policies were consistent across the region and responsive to the complex dynamics of cross-border armed groups.
- A unified mechanism for donor coordination and financing: Through a multi-donor trust fund managed by the World Bank, the programme pooled contributions from thirteen donors, improving efficiency, reducing duplication, and ensuring the targeted allocation of resources.
- National DDR programme formulation and technical assistance: The programme served as a platform supporting the development of country-specific DDR strategies, by offering technical support, capacity building and operational guidance tailored to the needs of each national DDR commission.

### **Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Programme (MDRP)**

Launched in 2002, the MDRP was the first coordinated regional framework to address the demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants across the Great Lakes and was managed by the World Bank. It pooled donor funding, aligned national efforts, and provided technical assistance to help stabilize post-conflict environments. The programme concluded in 2009.

### **Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Programme (TDRP)**

The TDRP succeeded the MDRP in 2009. While continuing to manage residual caseloads in the Great Lakes region, the TDRP, broadened its geographical scope to include fragile contexts such as Somalia, South Sudan, and Mali. The TDRP emphasised capacity-building, regional knowledge-sharing, and integration of DDR into broader stabilisation and resilience agendas. The TDRP concluded in 2017.

The MDRP and TDRP were governed through an Advisory Committee and Technical Coordination Group, ensuring that strategic oversight and technical assistance were consistently aligned with evolving security contexts. The programmes also invested in monitoring and evaluation to guide implementation and share lessons across the region.

## In Numbers

**279,263** combatants demobilized across **7 countries**

**us\$ 355 million** (MDRP) to fund five national programmes

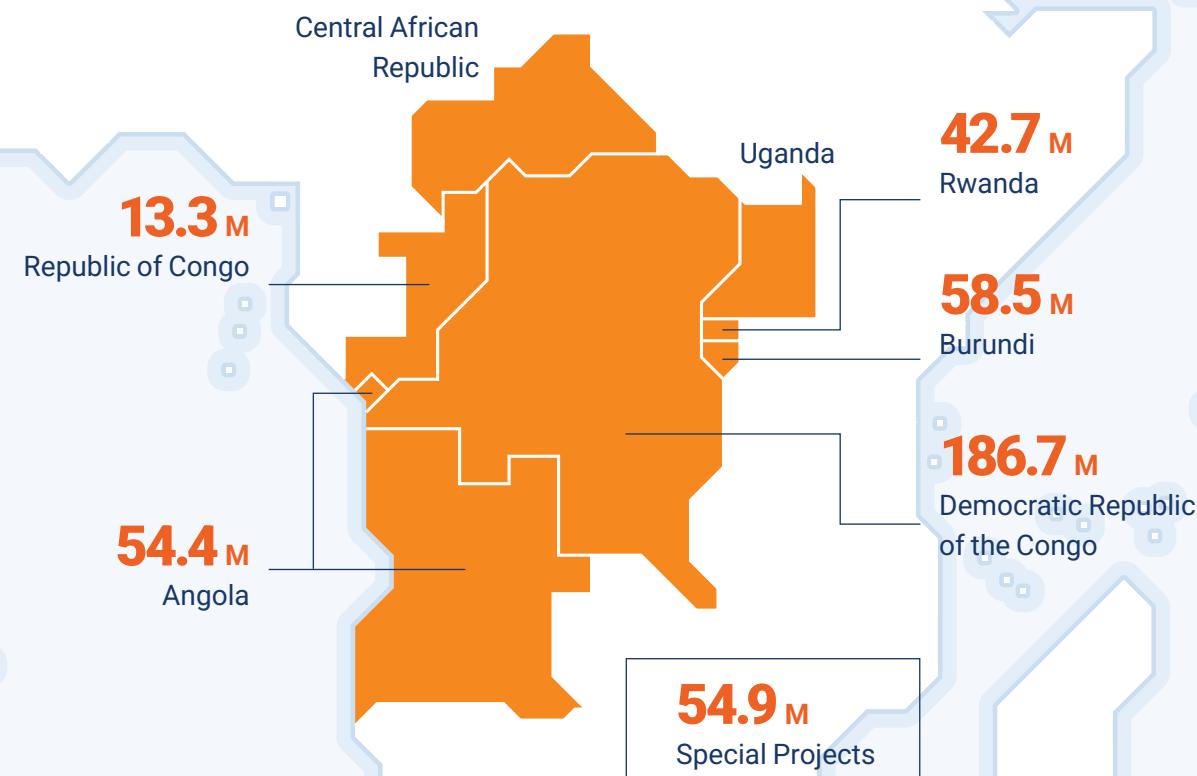
**us\$ 55 million** (MDRP) to fund special projects to support targeted reintegration for vulnerable groups, including child soldiers in DRC and Burundi, and female dependents in Uganda

**5 major** national DDR programmes implemented

**Over 40 partners**, including governments, the World Bank and various donor agencies

## Funding by Country (2002–2009)

(approximate allocations in US\$ millions)



## Country Spotlights

DDRRR would not have worked without effective national reintegration programmes in the countries of return. Cross-border and in-mission coordination also played a crucial role. In the absence of a regional DDRRR architecture, collaboration between MONUC/MONUSCO and national DDR commissions relied on practical arrangements (i.e., joint planning meetings, liaison offices and shared sensitization materials).

**Rwanda:** The Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RDRC) oversaw the structured reintegration of thousands of former combatants. Returnees received vocational training, psychosocial support and civic education at facilities such as Mutobo and Nyarushishi, before returning to their communities. The RDRC's good working relationships (bolstered by the presence of former FDLR members within the Commission) enabled informal outreach to active combatants. Although embedding RDRC staff in the DRC was unsuccessful, regular cross-border meetings were held to coordinate figures and align strategies.

**Uganda:** The Amnesty Commission issued amnesty certificates and ran rehabilitation programmes for former LRA/ADF members. MONUSCO facilitated the repatriation from the DRC to Uganda, where former combatants received skills training and reinsertion packages. Staff based in Beni and Bunia supported the screening processes and UN flights transferred returnees from Goma to Entebbe. Handover protocols at Entebbe airport ensured coordination, and follow-up visits helped monitor well-being and gather material for sensitisation campaigns.

**Burundi:** The *Commission nationale de démobilisation, réintégration et réinsertion* demobilized over 30,000 combatants and militia members in two phases (2004–2005 and 2009). However, delays in setting up a DDR Commission and the failure to recognize Burundian combatants abroad initially hindered coordination. Since the DDR Commission closed in 2009, there have been no formal repatriation pathways. Returns have often been handled on an individual basis, with combatants handed over to their families at the border. This has left significant gaps in institutional support and follow-up care.

## Core Challenges

- **Combatants on Foreign Soil (COFS):** Although COFS were the catalyst for the launch of the MDRP, they were ultimately excluded from its financing framework as they were not nationals of the countries involved in its implementation. Their repatriation was handled by MONUC/MONUSCO through DDRRR, but this was done without dedicated funding, clear mandates or reliable cross-border coordination. MONUC handled COFS through DDRRR but lacked dedicated funding, cross-border political trust and operational clarity.

- **Data reconciliation:** Discrepancies between MONUSCO and national figures due to the existence of parallel return channels. For instance, between 2009 and 2020, the Rwandan RDRC reported the repatriation of 8,357 ex-combatants and 9,921 dependants, whereas MONUSCO only recorded 6,656 ex-combatants and 6,229 dependants.
- **Burundi post-2009:** The dissolution of its DDR Commission meant that there were no longer any institutional channels for returning fighters, which severely complicated DDRRR operations.

# Chapter IV: Lessons Learned

Studying 25 years of DDRRR operations in the DRC reveals a wealth of lessons that may inform future efforts to reduce the capacity and presence of foreign armed groups in the region and beyond.

This chapter draws on the DDRRR Section's experience, as outlined in earlier sections of the study, to present a set of lessons learned. It begins with the importance of bilateral and regional solutions, as well as reliable partnerships to facilitate repatriation, before emphasizing the need for thorough context analysis to tailor approaches. While military operations can complement DDRRR, sensitization remains its most effective tool. The chapter also highlights how innovative methods can reinforce traditional approaches. Strong leadership within the Section and sustained support across the Mission amplified DDRRR's achievements. Finally, the chapter concludes that advance planning for Mission withdrawal is essential, while underscoring that DDRRR programmes cannot substitute for a holistic response to the root causes of conflict that drive recruitment.

Credit: MONUSCO Photo



## Bilateral diplomacy creates the conditions for DDRRR

**Bilateral relations between states have been central to the success of DDRRR operations in the Great Lakes region.** No relationship has been more consequential to the repatriation of foreign fighters than that between the DRC and Rwanda. Over the course of 25 years, key moments in their shared history demonstrate that **periods of cooperation facilitated the repatriation of FDLR combatants, while times of political tension blocked progress.** This study highlights several milestones that strengthened bilateral relations and, in turn, significantly advanced DDRRR efforts.

**Political commitments and shuttle diplomacy made in good faith proved instrumental in facilitating DDRRR.** At the outset of DDRRR operations, a failed military offensive by FDLR precursor ALiR I against Rwanda weakened the group. Combined with waning FARDC support for ALiR II in the south, these developments improved bilateral relations and prompted Rwanda to consider non-coercive measures. The opening was met by President Kabila's commitment to repatriate approximately 3,000 Rwandan combatants from Kamina military base. Reciprocating, Rwanda allowed a "go-and-see" visit by 66 FDLR combatants who subsequently reported the safety of return to their peers. A later milestone came in December 2008, when the integration of the CNDP into the FARDC prompted further joint military, intelligence, and operational cooperation, including the repatriation of Rwandan elements within the CNDP.

**Joint military and non-military operations conducted under a negotiated framework also acted as push factors to elicit voluntary defections.** From 2003 to 2004, and again between 2009 and 2012, joint political and military pressure, combined with DDRRR efforts, significantly degraded FDLR cohesion and regeneration. The DDRRR Section responded by scaling up operations near FDLR encampments and tailoring sensitization campaigns to commanders. The election of President Félix Tshisekedi in January 2019 marked another wave of bilateral progress when he authorized the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) to conduct joint operations against the CNRD in Kalehe territory, South Kivu, and in Rutshuru territory, North Kivu. These operations captured leading FDLR figures and forcibly repatriated some 360 fighters and 2,600 dependents and civilians, reducing the FDLR to about 500 fighters – the weakest it had ever been.

**Conversely, poor bilateral relations have impeded DDRRR.** When RCD-G briefly occupied Bukavu in South Kivu in June 2004, mutual distrust dominated the discourse. While the Congolese government accused Rwanda of supporting rebel leaders, Rwandan authorities claimed that the FDLR had launched attacks from Congolese soil. Beyond the FDLR, the failure to repatriate Rwandan members of the initial M23 rebellion in 2012–2013 illustrates how the **absence of bilateral agreement on fundamental issues such as citizenship and belonging blocked operational DDRRR efforts.**

## Regional agreements can contribute to DDRRR

The transnational nature of foreign armed groups, including their recruitment networks, financial support structures and safe havens, indicate that during periods of regional collaboration, a regional approach to DDRRR operations could complement bilateral strategies.

**In the early years of DDRRR, regional political agreements played an important role in facilitating operations.** Signed by Angola, DRC, Namibia, Uganda, Rwanda and Zimbabwe, the 1999 Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, for instance, aimed to end the hostilities of the Second Congo War and included provisions for

the withdrawal of foreign groups from the DRC as well as the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of combatants. A decade later, the 2008 Nairobi Communiqué united the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda in calling for military and non-military measures to eliminate the threat of illegal armed groups in eastern DRC, notably via their voluntary disarmament and repatriation or temporary relocation away from the Rwandan border and an end to illicit foreign financing pledged by both Rwanda and Uganda. In response, the DDRRR Section relocated to Goma, benefiting from additional human resources, and MONUSCO deployed temporary operating bases in areas with FDLR presence to move closer to foreign armed groups. The Mission also held a high-level conference with FDLR leaders in Kinshasa to implement the Nairobi Communiqué but renewed fighting with the CNDP interrupted joint efforts. More recently, from 2019 onwards, the establishment of the Contact and Coordination Group (CCG) under the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF) institutionalized regional efforts, launching a regional DDR working group that brings together DDR commissions from the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and Tanzania. Recent regional tensions, however, have limited the effectiveness of this mechanism.

While certainly not easy to manage and highly sensitive on shifting political dynamics, **regional and international collaboration has been important to coordinate cross-border movements of foreign armed groups** in certain

cases, as illustrated by the Lord's Resistance Army's ability to exploit porous borders to evade capture. The African Union Regional Task Force (AU-RTF), supported by the United States, exemplified how multilateral coordination beyond national jurisdictions can respond to such transnational threats.

In addition to national political will and a strong field presence, **regional mandates and mechanisms can provide strategic support to DDRRR operations**, provided they are well coordinated. Since MONUC and MONUSCO's mandates focused on the territory of the DRC, the DDRRR Section built trust-based relationships with neighboring States, especially Rwanda and Uganda, to facilitate repatriation and coordination. In support of these endeavors, broader mechanisms such as the Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Programme (MDRP) and the Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Programme (TDRP) are examples of regional mechanisms that enabled collective planning and synchronized programming across borders. Equally, the appointment of a United Nations Special Envoy for the Great Lakes and the creation of the Regional Oversight Mechanism provided another entry point for DDRRR-related issues to be addressed at the highest political levels in the region. **Coordination of bilateral and regional efforts and collaboration among actors**, especially in times of regional tension as witnessed more recently, were crucial to ensure effective progress on DDRRR operations.

## Reliable technical partnerships and expertise on DDR in the region facilitate the return home

**The success of DDRRR operations in the DRC depends on having a reliable partner in the country of return.** Effective reintegration is not only a humanitarian imperative, but also a political and operational enabler of regional cooperation, trust-building and long-term stability. **A strong DDRRR programme in the receiving countries**

enhances sustainability and regional stability by providing ex-combatants with viable alternatives to violence, thereby reducing the risk of recruitment and contributing to the dismantling of transnational armed networks. This was evident in the role played by the Rwandan Demobilization

and Reintegration Commission (RDRC) and the Ugandan Amnesty Commission, which reintegrated thousands of former FDLR and LRA members, offering structured support and restoring a sense of civic belonging.

**The success of DDRRR operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo depends on having a reliable partner in the country of return.** Effective reintegration is not only a humanitarian imperative but also a political and operational enabler of regional cooperation, trust-building and long-term stability. **A strong DDR programme in receiving countries enhances sustainability by providing ex-combatants with viable alternatives to violence**, thereby reducing the risk of re-recruitment and contributing to the dismantling of transnational armed networks. This was evident in the role played by the Rwandan Demobilization and Reintegration Commission and the Ugandan Amnesty Commission, which reintegrated thousands of former FDLR and LRA members, offering structured support and restoring a sense of civic belonging.

In contrast, **the absence of a DDR programme, and in particular viable reintegration solutions, in the receiving country impedes DDRRR.** The

prolonged accommodation of Burundian ex-combatants in MONUC transit centres, due to Burundi's lack of a DDR framework, exemplified how such institutional gaps stalled progress. Conversely, Uganda and Rwanda emerged as strong technical and operational counterparts, with the capacity to absorb returnees and sustain reintegration processes that complemented DDRRR efforts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. **Viable reintegration solutions in receiving countries also encourage others to defect**, particularly when former combatants communicate their positive experiences to those still in the bush. The successful case of FDLR returnees at Mutobo, or family reunification initiatives supported by the Ugandan Amnesty Commission, served as compelling incentives. However, outcomes for ADF returnees remained more limited owing to their incarceration or surveillance by intelligence services. **Effective national DDR programmes that can provide such services to beneficiaries**, in turn, build trust among combatants, reassuring them that repatriation will not result in punishment or neglect.

## Context analysis enhances tailored approaches

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**Effective DDRRR operations require a thorough understanding of the armed groups involved**, including their internal structures, motivations and operational dynamics. Tailored interventions, grounded in robust and context-specific analysis, are critical to success. **Understanding a foreign armed group and its context is a precondition for DDRRR**, requiring continuous monitoring of recruitment patterns, leadership structures, ideological narratives and support networks, together with a nuanced appreciation of shifting political dynamics across the region. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the DDRRR Section invested considerable time and resources in building

such situational awareness, recognizing that the effectiveness of its interventions depended on their alignment with the national and regional context.

**This analysis was strengthened through systematic and predictable information-sharing, particularly with actors beyond the host State.** In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, strategic engagement with neighboring countries -- notably Rwanda and Uganda -- enabled the triangulation of intelligence essential to dismantling foreign armed groups such as the FDLR and ADF. Rwanda's cooperation was pivotal in facilitating the

defection of senior FDLR commanders, while Uganda provided crucial insight into the ADF's ideological cohesion, recruitment strategies and internal structure. The DDRRR Section also engaged with religious leaders critical of the ADF's ideology, leveraging their influence to counter extremist narratives and to support targeted sensitization efforts both in Uganda and within the DRC.

**Above all, contextual awareness enables tailored approaches.** No single template can address the vastly different profiles of armed groups operating in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Recruitment by the FDLR from among Rwandan refugees, for example,

required distinct messaging from that used with the ADF, whose tightly controlled, ideologically driven structure necessitated a more discreet and relational approach. The Section adapted its tools and field presence accordingly, disrupting armed group propaganda, building trust and promoting defections. Through this approach, the DDRRR programme in the Democratic Republic of the Congo matured into a flexible, intelligence-led operation -- one capable of responding to the evolving vulnerabilities of each group and the shifting realities of the broader security landscape.

## Military operations complement DDRRR efforts

**Military operations should align with political efforts to unlock their potential as enablers of DDRRR. When anchored in a coherent political framework,** military pressure can complement voluntary disarmament by weakening armed group cohesion, disrupting territorial control and creating the conditions for a safe and dignified exit. The 2002 Pretoria Agreement between Rwanda and the DRC exemplified this synergy, combining high-level political commitment with coordinated military operations that facilitated the repatriation of FDLR combatants while exerting pressure on those who refused to disarm. Military and DDRRR activities are complementary when designed in tandem: while security forces may constrain armed groups through targeted offensives, DDRRR teams can seize such moments to establish safe corridors and offer credible alternatives to continued violence. This coordination proved effective during Operation Kimia II in 2009, when FARDC and MONUC offensives against the FDLR were accompanied by DDRRR-led defection pathways, resulting in a marked increase in voluntary surrenders.

Beyond immediate tactical gains, **the long-term impact on the morale of foreign armed groups is equally significant.** Sustained military pressure signals that the use of Congolese territory as a sanctuary is no longer viable, thereby undermining recruitment, fracturing internal cohesion, and increasing the operational cost of persistence. In 2009, for example, the FDLR was forced to rely more heavily on Congolese recruits, a development that weakened the group's overall effectiveness.

However, **such complementarity is not without risk.** Managing safety is essential to maintaining trust, particularly when DDRRR teams operate in volatile frontlines. Personnel have faced ambushes, shelling and complex extraction scenarios, underscoring the need for rigorous security protocols, real-time coordination with military actors and a strong emphasis on safeguarding the trust of those willing to defect. When carefully sequenced and politically guided, the integration of military operations and DDRRR processes can serve as a powerful dual-track strategy for dismantling foreign armed groups and fostering long-term stability.

## Sensitization is the most effective DDRRR tool

**Sensitization has been the most effective tool to encourage participation in the DDRRR programme, proving more persuasive than military pressure.** Interviews with repatriated FDLR members between January and October 2015 revealed that only one quarter cited military operations as their reason for return. The majority referred instead to radio programmes such as UN Radio Okapi's *Gutahuka* and direct appeals from family members. To maximize impact, communication channels and messages need to be context-specific. The DDRRR Section employed a range of methods, from FM and mobile radio broadcasts to the distribution of illustrated leaflets in markets and areas frequented by combatants. Messages were adapted to each group: FDLR combatants were reassured that return to Rwanda was safe, while ADF and LRA fighters were approached more discreetly due to strict internal controls.

**Information-sharing effectively counters internal propaganda** when messages are grounded in credible, up-to-date examples -- particularly those demonstrating the safe reception and reintegration of former combatants. This approach proved especially effective with the

FDLR, enabling the DDRRR Section to refine its messages using direct feedback from recent returnees. Personal and family relationships were also instrumental in convincing combatants to leave, especially when relatives had already returned and could attest to the safety of the process. DDRRR officers actively encouraged such communication to build trust. Likewise, community leaders can help legitimize the DDRRR process by reinforcing its credibility and countering armed group narratives.

Lastly, **building trust and ensuring safety are key to successful sensitization.** DDRRR staff maintained transparency about risks, prioritized safe extractions, and upheld the integrity of the process. Sensitization also requires physical proximity to foreign armed groups in field locations. After 2006, the Section shifted from mobile outreach to establishing a sustained field presence, which proved more effective in building rapport and monitoring group dynamics. Finally, up-to-date information from returnees should inform sensitization efforts, ensuring that messages remain responsive to evolving conditions and resonate with those still in the bush.

## Innovation leads to success

**Innovation proved essential to overcoming persistent blockages** in DDRRR implementation, particularly in the complex and often inaccessible terrain of eastern DRC. Faced with armed groups that were deeply embedded, ideologically motivated or geographically isolated, the DDRRR Section adopted a suite of unconventional tools to disrupt organizational cohesion and encourage defections. One of the most impactful innovations was the creation of a Special Operations Unit, which developed tailored approaches to engage FDLR commanders. By combining operational ingenuity with legal pressure, the Section also supported litigation efforts in Germany and Canada against FDLR political leaders

-- a strategy aimed at dismantling command-and-control structures, lowering morale and exposing internal divisions. These measures led to tangible results, including the defection of senior officers and the eventual fragmentation of the CNRD from the FDLR in 2017. In parallel, the Section harnessed technology to extend its reach, deploying mobile radio stations and FM broadcasts to spread sensitization messaging in remote areas, while piloting digital tools to enhance monitoring, outreach and real-time data analysis. Taken together, these innovations allowed the DDRRR Section to adapt its tactics, amplify its impact and sustain pressure on foreign armed groups in an evolving operational landscape.

## Good Section leadership is key

**The DDRRR Section benefited from a clear mandate, purpose and a tangible way of assessing success**, which helped foster a strong sense of team cohesion despite many operational challenges. Interviewees frequently cited the Section's team spirit as a source of resilience. However, the effectiveness of the Section was also shaped by the leadership style and priorities of its Chiefs, with notable variation in the degree of support for innovation, risk-taking and external engagement. The Mission's and the Section's leadership were also crucial in shaping and maintaining relationships across the region, particularly with neighboring states such as Rwanda, whose cooperation was instrumental to repatriation efforts. Much of this collaboration relied not on formal agreements but on trust and mutual interest. Between 2008 and 2009, relations with Rwandan authorities improved markedly, in part because Section leaders at the time had previously worked in Rwanda and could draw on longstanding personal ties -- facilitating access to officials, supporting sensitization efforts at reintegration sites and smoothing the repatriation process.

At the same time, this study suggests that **effective leaders encourage flexibility and innovation**, finding creative ways to navigate bureaucratic constraints without compromising operational integrity. The most successful DDRRR Chiefs demonstrated both fluency in UN rules and pragmatism -- securing special administrative arrangements and adapting interventions to evolving conditions on the ground. Equally important, good leaders are good communicators. Those who clearly articulated the Section's objectives and achievements, both within the Mission and to external partners, were better able to mobilize support, secure resources and expand field deployments. During joint operations in 2008, proactive communication by Section leaders helped generate institutional momentum, leading to increased staffing and improved operational reach. Together, these experiences underscore the vital role of leadership in enabling DDRRR success through diplomacy, innovation and strategic advocacy.

## Comprehensive Mission support is decisive for implementation

**Mission support, including logistics and financial administration, plays a crucial role in the success of DDRRR operations**, yet often lies outside the direct control of the DDRRR Section, as it depends on broader Mission priorities. This underscores the need to advocate for DDRRR internally, secure the backing of Mission leadership and identify extra-budgetary funding to complement limited core resources. Logistical planning must be comprehensive, covering not only the transport of personnel and equipment but also the establishment of disarmament and demobilization sites, the provision of food, shelter and medical care, and

the delivery of sensitization materials. Large-scale operations require advance planning, detailed coordination and access to substantial logistical assets. At the same time, logistical support must flexibly adapt to a dynamic context. DDRRR opportunities often emerge unexpectedly -- through political breakthroughs, shifting deployments or openings in the field -- and require rapid mobilization of Mission Support Division (MSD) resources.

## DDRRR must be driven by concrete benchmarking and a clearly articulated end state

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**For a DDRRR programme to be effective, there must be political alignment on the conditions required for its conclusion.** Without agreement on a shared vision of success and an agreed end state, programming risks becoming open-ended and unsustainable. In the DRC, diverging perspectives among regional actors have long complicated this effort. The desired DDRRR end state must be defined in political terms -- whether as the point at which a foreign armed group no longer poses a regional security threat, allowing residual elements to be addressed by military or judicial means, or as the point at which the group's capacity to regenerate has been fully dismantled. The failure of the DRC and Rwanda to converge on such a definition in the case of the FDLR hindered the ability to frame and measure progress and to coordinate exit strategies. Such clarity on the end state

can, in turn, support planning for successor arrangements in the context of Mission disengagement and eventual withdrawal.

Still, it must be recognized that DDRRR cannot substitute for a comprehensive response to root causes. Disarmament and demobilization alone are insufficient to ensure sustainable peace if underlying drivers -- including political exclusion, economic marginalization and regional mistrust -- remain unaddressed. While not within the mandate of DDRRR, these issues must nonetheless be acknowledged as central to any durable solution. DDRRR should therefore be regarded as one component of a broader peace architecture -- essential but not sufficient -- whose success ultimately depends on the extent to which it is complemented by sustained political and development efforts to remove the incentives and conditions for armed mobilization.

## Conclusion

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The retrospective study of DDRRR operations in the DRC provides clarity on important preconditions and approaches for success. At the political level, bilateral and regional agreements are required to enable the return of foreign fighters, while reliable partnerships across borders facilitate the sustainable reintegration of ex-combatants. Understanding the political and operational context, as well as the target group, is key to developing tailored and effective approaches. Military operations

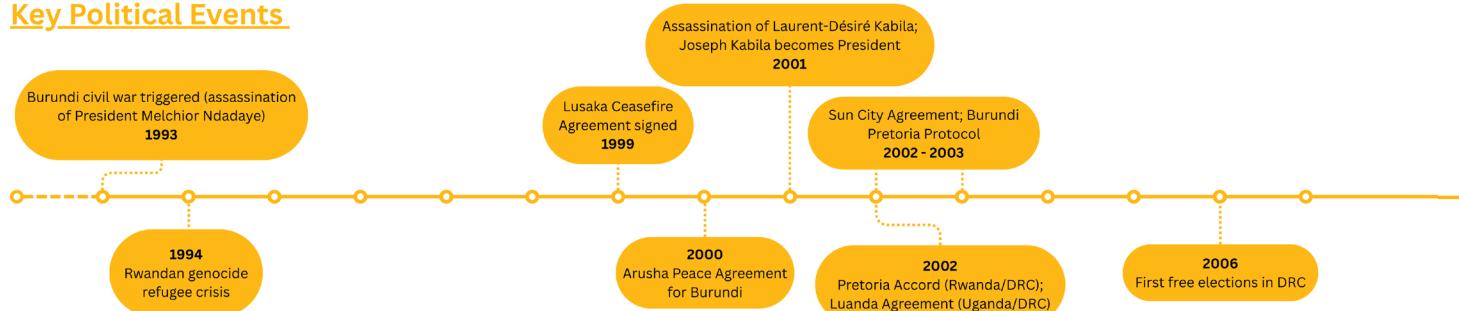
may complement voluntary disarmament, while sensitization remains the most effective DDRRR tool and innovation can enhance traditional methods. Organizationally, strong Section leadership and the support of the Mission Support Division are essential. Planning for Mission withdrawal in advance empowers national structures, although addressing root causes of conflict -- critical to successful DDRRR -- lies beyond the Section's mandate and must be a collective endeavor.

**Figure 19:** Summary of Lessons Learned

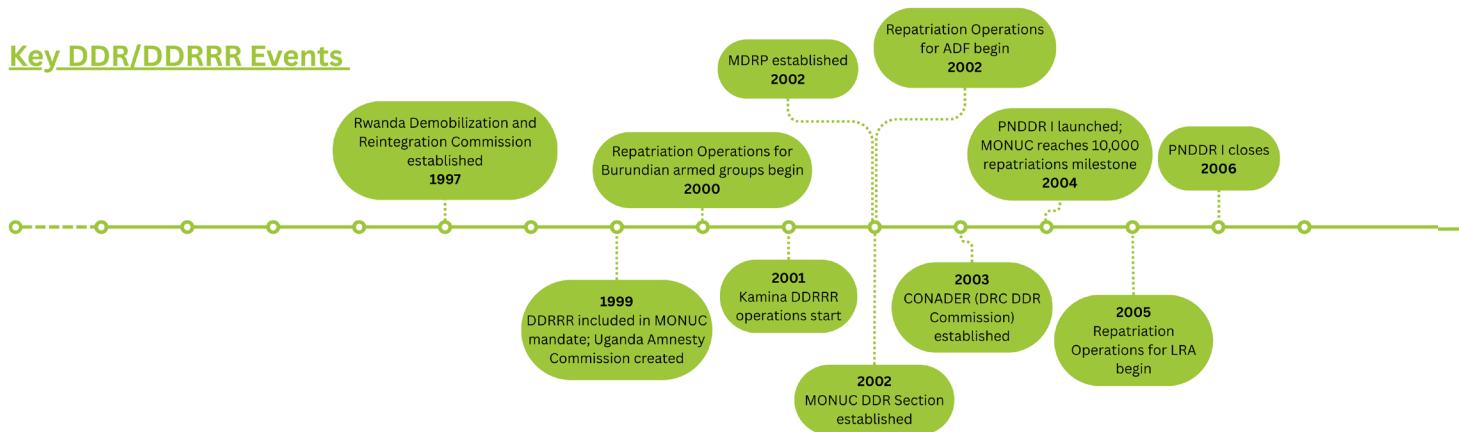
	<b>BILATERAL DIPLOMACY ENABLES DDRRR</b> Strong DRC-Rwanda cooperation, anchored in good-faith commitments and joint operations, drove repatriations; strained relations stalled progress, proving bilateral diplomacy is decisive for DDRRR.
	<b>REGIONAL MECHANISM ARE ESSENTIAL</b> Foreign armed groups are transnational. Regional agreements, mechanisms, and joint pressure enabled DDRRR coordination.
	<b>REINTEGRATION CAPACITIES DETERMINES SUSTAINABILITY</b> Successful returns depend on reliable DDR frameworks in receiving states. Rwanda and Uganda's commissions incentivized defections, while Burundi's absence of structures stalled progress.
	<b>TAILORED APPROACHES THROUGH CONTEXT ANALYSIS</b> Deep knowledge of group structures and motivations allowed targeted messaging. Distinct strategies for FDLR, ADF, and others ensured effective, context-specific interventions.
	<b>COORDINATED MILITARY PRESSURE IS A PUSH FACTOR FOR DDRRR</b> When politically anchored, military offensives weaken groups and open pathways for voluntary defections. Coordinated DDRRR actions during offensives boosted surrenders.
	<b>SENSITIZATION AS A PRIMARY TOOL</b> Targeted messaging and family/community networks convinced more combatants to defect than military pressure. Trust, transparency, and updated information from returnees strengthened credibility.
	<b>ALLOWING ROOM FOR INNOVATION DRIVES RESULTS</b> Creative methods, from Special Operations Units to legal action abroad and mobile radio campaigns, helped dismantle groups and encouraged defections in challenging contexts.
	<b>LEADERSHIP SHAPES DDRRR EFFECTIVENESS</b> Strong Section leadership fostered innovation, and trust-based regional ties. Chiefs who communicated clearly and navigated internal bureaucracy pragmatically mobilized support and expanded operations.
	<b>MISSION SUPPORT AS A DECISIVE FACTOR</b> DDRRR depended on logistics, funding, and rapid mobilization of resources. Securing Mission leadership backing and extra-budgetary funds was essential to seize political or operational openings.
	<b>BENCHMARKS AND END STATES ARE NEEDED</b> Clear political agreement on what constitutes DDRRR "success" is vital. Without this, programmes risk being open-ended. DDRRR must also be seen as one piece of a broader peace architecture, insufficient alone to resolve root causes.

# ANNEX: TIMELINE OF DRRR-RELATED EVENTS

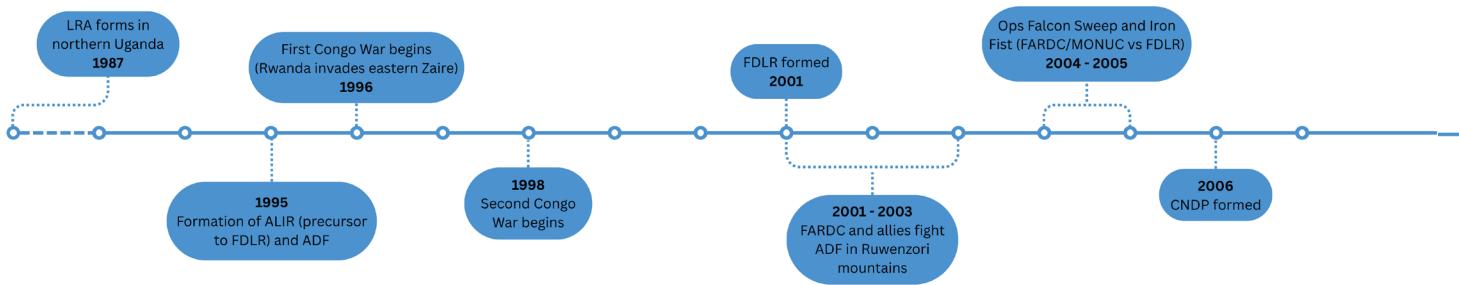
## Key Political Events



## Key DDR/DDRRR Events



## Key Military Events





## Dedication to Gregory Alex aka "Gromo"



Gregory Alex (Gromo) standing outside his office in Goma, DRC.

Credit: Sam Howard

**R.I.P.  
1954 – 2013**

**This report is dedicated to the memory of Gregory Alex, affectionately known as "Gromo", a pioneer and one of the foundational architects behind the DDR/RR approach in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.**

For Gromo, disarmament and repatriation were never just technical mandates. They were deeply human missions rooted in empathy, persistence and courage. Whether strumming a bluesy tune to welcome home returning combatants or navigating the complex terrain of armed group negotiations, he brought heart, grit and unwavering dedication to every step of the process. His work was not only about numbers or indicators of success, but about restoring dignity, healing communities and building a more peaceful future.

A veteran of the United Nations system and former World Bank staff member, Gromo devoted over three decades of his life to peacebuilding across Africa. His final years were spent leading the DDR/RR Section of MONUC/MONUSCO, where his compassion, leadership and humor left a lasting impact on colleagues, former combatants, partners and the many lives he helped change.

As former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said upon his passing: "He leaves an inspiring legacy of compassion and commitment (...) the best tribute we can pay to him is to finish the job he started."