

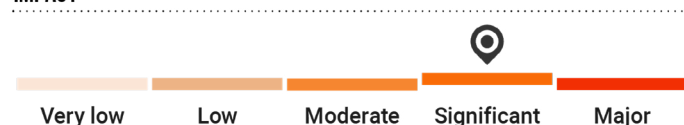
Risk of violence in the upcoming general elections

DRC general elections trigger heightened levels of violence, leading to increasing protection threats, population displacement, and food insecurity.

PROBABILITY



IMPACT



About this report

Aim: this report presents a risk analysis of violence related to the general elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), set to take place on 20 December 2023. The report provides a brief of the current context and humanitarian situation in the country, maps out factors that could lead to violence during or after the electoral period (triggers), and identifies the potential humanitarian impacts of such violence (hazard).

ACAPS' risk analysis aims to enable humanitarian decision makers to anticipate potential changes with humanitarian consequences. Explaining how situations might develop and helping to understand their impact can support decision makers and responders in planning and preparedness, improving the overall response.

Scope: this report focuses on possible increased violence levels during the DRC electoral process. The context and dynamics of conflict and violence in the DRC are complex and extend beyond the upcoming elections. The electoral process may act as a catalyst for conflict escalation or spread, but particularly in eastern DRC, the process interacts with other factors, whose detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this report.

Method: ACAPS based this analysis on its [risk methodology](#) and a secondary data review of publicly available sources.

The ACAPS risk methodology defines risk as the probability of a hazard or multiple hazards materialising, combined with the estimated impact of such hazards. The associated risk level (low, medium, or high) rises with the hazard's probability of occurring and the severity of its expected impact.

The impact is the predicted overall humanitarian consequence of a hazard materialising. It can comprise an increase in the number of people needing assistance, the severity of their needs, or both. The impact is based on hazard exposure and intensity, as well as the population's vulnerability and coping capacity. ACAPS classifies impact on a five-point scale: very low, low, moderate, significant, or major.

Probability is the chance of a hazard materialising. ACAPS assesses probability on a five-point scale: very low, low, medium, high, or very high. Probability and impact levels are not mathematically calculated but assigned through expert judgement based on contextual knowledge.

Limitations: risk analysis focuses on negative outcomes and may not adequately consider the potential benefits or opportunities of different events. Information and data gaps limit the analysis. The emergence of new information and the influence of factors not accounted for may change the analysis offered. While we seek to ensure that all information is current at the time of publication, the fluidity of the situation means significant changes can occur quickly.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Context	2
Humanitarian situation	3
Rationale	3
Triggers	4
Anticipated impacts	5

CONTEXT

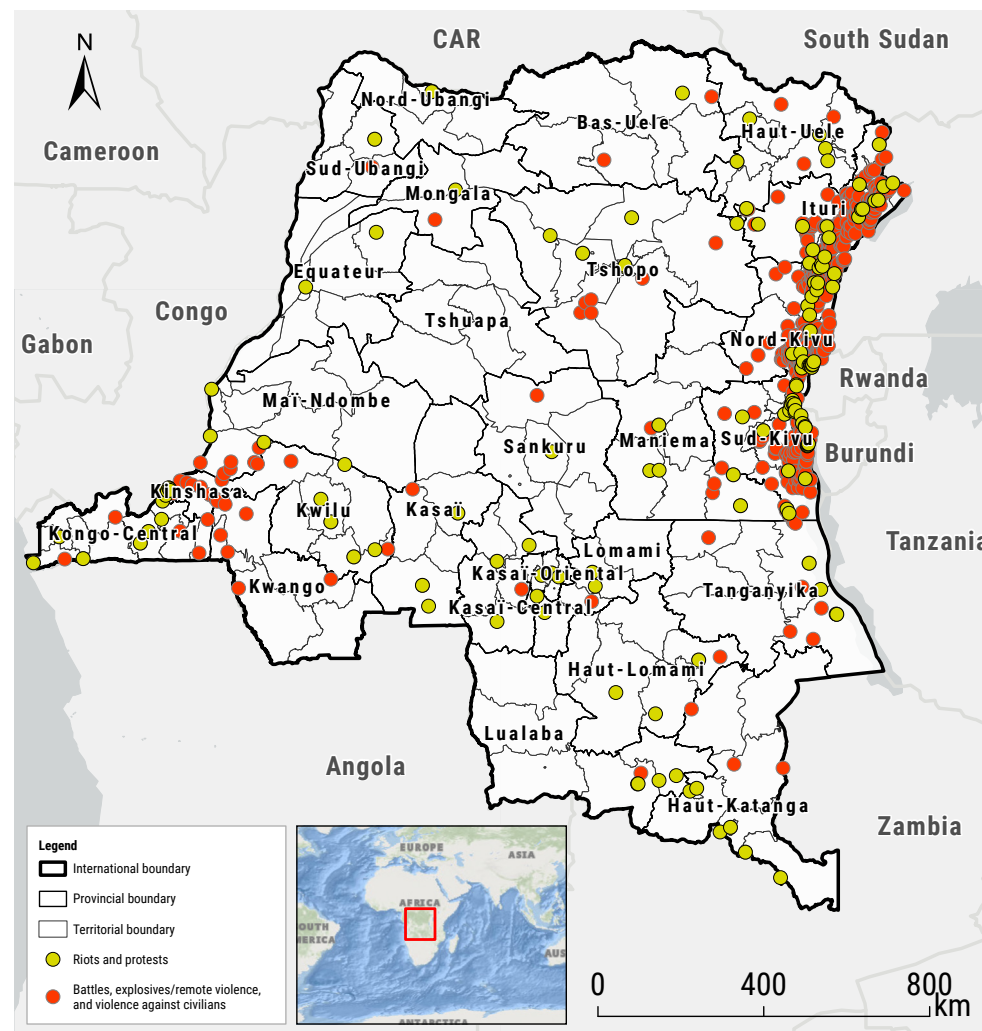
The DRC faces a complex crisis that involves conflict among armed groups, intercommunal violence, natural hazards, and poor infrastructure and governance structures. These factors contribute to widespread displacement, severe basic needs, and restricted humanitarian access across the country, particularly in conflict-affected areas. They create an intricate and volatile landscape, shaping the tense context in which the upcoming 20 December 2023 general elections will occur.

Conflict levels are particularly high in the eastern provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. Eastern DRC has experienced persistent conflict for decades involving the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and a network of 120 armed groups and movements, including the most prominent March 23 Movement (M23) (Al Jazeera 05/12/2023; CFR 03/11/2023; USAID 30/09/2023). M23 controls a growing wealth of territory in the region. Since October 2022, fighting between the group and pro-government forces has intensified, particularly affecting Masisi and Rutshuru territories in North Kivu. Throughout 2023, clashes have moved closer to Goma, the provincial capital, triggering extensive displacement (France 24 01/11/2023 and 24/10/2023; BBC 27/10/2023; USAID 30/09/2023). A diplomatic crisis has also arisen between the DRC and Rwanda, as both Governments accuse each other of backing hostile groups – most notably Rwanda of supporting M23 – leading to the closure of the common border (The EastAfrican 02/11/2023).

In the western provinces of Kinshasa, Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe, there is also fighting between armed groups, in part because of the increase in intercommunal violence between the Teke and Yaka communities (ACLEd accessed 07/12/2023; USAID 30/09/2023). Unrest has extended to other regions, manifesting in riots and protests in Kasai and Katanga in particular. The protests are for a wide range of reasons, including tenure disputes, power cuts, low wages for teachers, and a perceived lack of justice and protection by the authorities (ACLEd accessed 07/12/2023).

Several violent incidents in relation to the electoral process have also been reported in 2023. These include the abduction and intimidation of political opponents, unjustified arrests and detentions, the use of disproportionate force against protesters, the propagation of hate speech and incitement to violence, and attacks against opposition party officials and campaigners (UNHRC 25/08/2023; Actualite 04/12/2023; RFI 29/11/2023; HRW 22/08/2023). Such an environment of tension raises concerns about a repetition of the violence in the 2018 elections, which were marked by political violence and wide contestation of the election results (UN 14/12/2018). The Rationale section details further considerations regarding the elections.

Map 1. Total number of violent events in the DRC, January–November 2023



Source: ACAPS using data from ACLED (accessed 07/12/2023)

Compounding the insecurity landscape in the country, in September 2023, the government in Kinshasa indicated intent to accelerate the withdrawal of UN peacekeeping forces (MONUSCO) following growing discontent among the population regarding the forces' perceived inefficacy in addressing regional conflicts. Violent demonstrations against the UN mission have led to increasing tensions and multiple deaths (Al Jazeera 21/09/2023; ICG 15/09/2023). Similarly, the military mission from the East African Community has begun

withdrawing after the Government failed to renew its mandate, and many expect the Southern African Development Community to replace it with a different military force (RFI 04/12/2023). In October 2023, DRC President Félix Tshisekedi declared the “gradual and progressive easing” of the state of emergency imposed in Ituri and North Kivu provinces, which for over two years has allowed mass pre-trial detentions and movement restrictions (CFR 03/11/2023; ICG 15/09/2023; Barrons 12/10/2023).

Besides protracted conflict and insecurity, the country faces natural hazards, such as heavy rains, floods, and landslides. It also suffers from poor basic infrastructure, including inadequate roads, decreased access to agricultural land and traditional markets, and limited service provision. These factors illustrate the deteriorated living conditions and severe humanitarian needs of the population (USAID 30/09/2023).

HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

Conflict is a major displacement driver in the DRC. As at the end of October 2023, nearly seven million IDPs lived in the country, a number that has been growing every year. Approximately 81% of these IDPs – about 5.6 million people – lived in the eastern provinces, particularly in Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, and Tanganyika. Nearly five million IDP returnees also lived in those same eastern provinces (IOM 30/10/2023).

In October–November 2023, more than 450,000 people fled their homes in Rutshuru and Masisi territories, in North Kivu, because of violence and widespread human rights violations by armed groups (UN 24/11/2023). Shelters have been insufficient in responding to the increasing demand. At the same time, authorities have been closing IDP sites in the region. Most IDPs are accommodated within host communities, which often struggle to access basic goods and services, creating precarious living situations. Women and girls are at particular risk of gender-based violence (GBV), reports of which have been increasing. Between January–June 2023, nearly 35,000 survivors accessed GBV support services in Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu provinces, but the actual number is probably much higher given underreporting, social stigma, and fear of retaliation (USAID 30/09/2023).

Between July–December 2023, an estimated 25.4 million individuals – 23% of the country’s total population – have been facing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) food insecurity or worse, including 3.5 million people in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) levels. The locations with the highest number of people in IPC 3 and above are North Kivu province (2.6 million) and Kinshasa city (2.1 million). The most affected populations are the displaced, host families, returnees, and people whose livelihoods, such as agriculture, have been disrupted by conflict or natural hazards (e.g. flooding) (IPC 29/09/2023).

The DRC has some of the highest acute malnutrition rates globally, affecting about 6.4 million people, and one of the world’s highest infant mortality rates. Four women die every

hour during labour or from pregnancy-related conditions. Other health challenges, including preventable epidemics (such as measles, yellow fever, cholera, and malaria), aggravate these conditions. Poor infrastructure, health access constraints, and low vaccination coverage contribute to high health needs among the population (OCHA accessed 13/11/2023).

Funding limitations and severe access restrictions because of insecurity and poor basic infrastructure constrain the humanitarian response, making it insufficient to address the affected population’s critical needs (USAID 30/09/2023). UN agencies estimate that around 200,000 displaced people in the eastern regions are currently cut off from aid because of the major road obstructions resulting from conflict (UN 24/11/2023).

RATIONALE

The DRC’s Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) has officially set the general elections’ ballot date to 20 December 2023, which will include polls for the presidency, national legislature, provincial assemblies, and local councils (Africanews 25/10/2023). The electoral process started in December 2022 with voter identification and registration procedures that lasted until June 2023. The electoral campaign for the presidency started on 19 November and finish on 18 December, two days before voting day. The electoral process will then continue throughout 2024 with the swearing-in of the new president scheduled for 20 January and indirect elections for the senate, provincial governorates, and other official positions scheduled to take place through September 2024 (CENI 26/11/2022; CENI accessed 13/12/2023).

The presidency, elected through a simple majority for a five-year term, will have President Félix Tshisekedi seeking re-election amid a list of 26 opponents, including prominent figures such as Martin Fayulu, a politician claiming to have won the 2018 elections; Moïse Katumbi, a wealthy businessman and politician; and Denis Mukwege, an activist and 2018 Nobel Peace Prize winner (Al Jazeera 15/11/2023; UN 11/12/2023).

Despite voter dissatisfaction with Tshisekedi’s governance, particularly regarding the prevailing insecurity, a GeoPoll Socio-Political Barometer Survey from the second quarter of 2023 indicated that the incumbent was likely to win (GeoPoll 23/08/2023). Explanations for this include perceived improvements, such as an initiative for free education; his capacity to build strategic alliances in the country; his access to state resources for campaigning; and a fragmented opposition (GeoPoll 23/08/2023; Africanews 25/10/2023). Two weeks away from the vote, Katumbi appeared best placed to challenge Tshisekedi (Radio Okapi 05/12/2023).

Presented below are relevant factors or developments (triggers) that could take place individually or in combination and lead to intensified violence levels during the electoral period.

TRIGGERS

1. Increasing concerns about lack of transparency and fairness in the electoral process

The DRC has a history of contested results and suspected rigging in past elections. In 2018, allegations of widespread irregularities, such as falsified vote counts and voter suppression and interference, marked the presidential elections. Observers, who often had restricted access to polling stations, found ballots in illegal locations, such as police stations and political party headquarters. Following the vote, the Government shut down some media stations, internet connectivity, and text messaging throughout the country (HRW 05/01/2019). Fayulu, an opposition candidate who came second in the 2018 elections, has repeatedly claimed that it was rigged (France 24 30/09/2023).

People are also beginning to question the capacity and transparency of the CENI. For the 20 December 2023 elections, the commission has the difficult task of overcoming numerous bureaucratic, logistical, and technical challenges to ensure a smooth electoral process for 43.9 million registered voters. This task is particularly challenging considering the infrastructure constraints observed in a country as large as the DRC, which also faces persistent insecurity and widespread corruption (US Embassy in the DRC 02/06/2023; The EastAfrican 06/11/2023). Opposition groups, civil society, and observers have widely raised concerns regarding the impartiality of the CENI and transparency and fairness in the electoral process (Mercy Corps 11/2023; ISS 03/11/2023; France 24 30/09/2023). Some question the Government's logistical capacity to deploy the electoral apparatus, especially considering the current desire to withdraw MONUSCO, a key logistical collaborator in electoral arrangements (Mercy Corps 11/2023). At the end of November, the EU cancelled its electoral observation mission because of insecurity concerns after the Congolese Government refused to allow observers to use their own satellite telecommunication equipment (EEAS 29/11/2023).

At the same time, reports have indicated irregularities in voting registration. In the run-up to the current polls, some opposition figures have refused to fully engage in the electoral process, alleging irregularities in voting registration in favour of the incumbent. They claim that up to ten million currently registered voters on the electoral roll are fictitious, as widespread voter card monetisation and alleged fraud during the enrolment process have allowed for some voters to have multiple voter cards (Mercy Corps 11/2023; ISS 03/11/2023; France 24 30/09/2023). According to critics, defective and poor-quality voting cards are also widespread (France 24 19/11/2023). While the CENI denies the accusations, civil society observer missions, such as the Catholic Church, have raised similar concerns (Al Jazeera 15/11/2023; The EastAfrican 06/11/2023). Insecurity has also left more than a million citizens unable to register.

Three territories, Masisi and Rutshuru in North Kivu province and Kwamouth in Mai-Ndombe province, could not fully benefit from enrolment, raising the risk of discontent and civil unrest (ICG 30/10/2023).

Logistical challenges, criticism towards the electoral commission for its alleged biases, and a defective electoral roll generate a climate of mistrust and heightened tensions, compounded by the failure of the Government and the CENI to engage with civil society observer missions. This tense situation engenders an environment that is ripe for discontent, hostility, and protests, increasing the probability of violence during the electoral cycle (ICG 30/10/2023). The opposition's reluctance to engage in the electoral process may lead to intentional election disruptions, also potentially instigating violence. At the polling stations, any denial of voter rights, perceived impartiality of officials, or restrictions imposed on observers could lead to confrontations involving officials, supporters of different political parties or rival groups, and security forces.

2. Increasing tensions and societal division

The tense political environment is heightening social and political divisions. Unresolved grievances from the 2018 contested general elections, which included some of the candidates for the current ballot, have fostered divisions and mistrust among political factions and communities (HRW 05/01/2019). The opposition is still unsuccessfully discussing the potential for a joint coalition candidate. The fractured opposition landscape, marked by diverse political ideologies and ambitions, has been a source of tension during the electoral process (Al Jazeera 15/11/2023; The Guardian 04/12/2023). The fragmentation and lack of meaningful electoral odds for some opposition candidates can lead to frustration among supporters who may feel disenfranchised, increasing tensions and the potential for confrontation between rival political factions.

Confrontations could also arise if results are contested. A re-elected incumbent and disputed results could trigger existing contentions between communities and ethnic groups to escalate into political violence (HRW 05/01/2019; USAID 30/09/2023). A losing party's refusal to accept the results could incite confrontations and protests involving groups in dispute for prominence and power, potentially escalating into greater clashes between rival communities and larger-scale political conflicts. In certain territories, communities are deeply politically attached to particular candidates, such as the Kasaï, who support the incumbent president, and the Katanga, who support Moïse Katumbi, one of the main opposition candidates. These divides could lead to strong reactions (Mercy Corps 11/2023). The constant inflammatory language of the Government and opposition figures, including contentious debates around the definition of the Congolese identity, amplifies ethno-political and intercommunal tensions and divisions and heightens the threat of confrontations (ICG 30/10/2023; Mercy Corps 11/2023).

3. Rising governmental repression and abuses by security forces

The DRC has a history of security force abuses, and security forces have often met demonstrations and protests with repression and the excessive use of power, including during the 2018 elections (UN 14/12/2018). Throughout 2023, protesters have faced strong reactions from government forces. Most notably, in August, the military killed over 50 civilians planning to protest foreign interference in the eastern DRC (ICG 15/09/2023).

In the run-up to the current elections, the police have violently repressed peaceful demonstrations by opposition parties on several occasions, leading to arrests and casualties (HRW 29/05/2023 and 22/08/2023). Security forces have been accused of blocking electoral activities and gatherings organised by opposition groups, including through the arrest of candidates and senior advisers. This has affected the media coverage of opposition parties, with a reported increase in violent acts against journalists (HRW 22/08/2023). The opposition accuses the police of sabotaging and not adequately protecting their political campaigns. At the end of November, local authorities failed to act when an opposition party activist was killed in a campaign rally (Reuters 28/11/2023). Human rights organisations have widely denounced government repression and state security agency abuses. According to the UN Joint Human Rights Office, the pre-electoral environment has been marked by a narrowing of the civic space, abductions and the intimidation of political opponents, unjustified arrests and detentions, the use of disproportionate force against protesters, and the propagation of hate speech and incitement to violence (UNHRC 25/08/2023).

Continued repression and abuses by state security forces could trigger increased resistance and dissatisfaction, sparking demonstrations, civil unrest, or violent clashes. Reports of military abuse and limits on political freedoms provoke resentment and erode trust in both state institutions and the electoral process. At the same time, heavy-handed security responses and peaceful protest suppression are expected to result in further demonstrations and civil unrest.

ANTICIPATED IMPACTS

Increased violence levels during or after the electoral cycle could take diverse forms, comprising different and potentially cascading impacts on the population. Local episodes of violence that are quickly contained, for instance, at polling stations, could cause civilian casualties. Larger-scale violence, taking the shape of protests or confrontations between rival groups or with security forces, could have more widespread and severe effects on the population. Social unrest would have a particular impact on main urban cities, such as the capital Kinshasa, Tshikapa in Kasaï province, Lubumbashi in Katanga province, and Goma in North Kivu province. The following paragraphs detail the key anticipated impacts on the population to be considered in the event of a significant increase in violence levels during the electoral period.

Increased ethnic divisions

Significant increases in violence levels would worsen existing intercommunal and ethnic tensions and conflicts, profoundly deteriorating social stability, hindering peaceful community coexistence throughout the country, and putting certain groups at particular risk of violence. The western province of Mai-Ndombe, which has been experiencing a deadly conflict between the Teke and Yaka communities, and the eastern provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu, which have assembled a large number of ethnic-based armed groups, are at a higher risk of severe ethnic conflict escalation (The Conversation 10/07/2023). The upcoming elections can act as a catalyst for conflict escalation and spread, most notably in the eastern provinces.

Protection incidents and new displacements

Protection threats, including the arbitrary killing of civilians, forced displacement, private property destruction, intimidation and extortion, exploitation, and kidnappings, would intensify. If such insecurity causes more displacement, many displaced populations will likely face shelter shortages, particularly in areas already affected by the conflict. The lack of capacity to properly accommodate an increasing number of IDPs and limited access to healthcare services, food, WASH facilities, and livelihoods would worsen already difficult living conditions (IOM 30/10/2023; USAID 30/09/2023). Among the displaced population, women and children would be at risk of GBV. Young men and children are highly vulnerable to recruitment into armed groups and separation from their families (USAID 30/09/2023; UN 24/11/2023). As humanitarian organisations struggle to respond to the growing needs, tensions escalate within IDP camps, fuelling dissatisfaction and a sense of desperation among the affected communities, leading to further episodes of violence (Al Jazeera 05/12/2023).

Reduced livelihoods and increased food insecurity and malnutrition

Increased violence would disrupt the socioeconomic stability of communities and households. Displacement and restricted access to essential resources and livelihoods, such as farming fields or markets, would lead to income loss and economic instability in an already impoverished population, making it challenging for households to meet their needs. The situation could result in heightened competition for limited resources and livelihoods and the adoption of coping mechanisms with potentially harmful consequences, such as armed group recruitment and transactional sex for money or food. In a country where around one in every four people face IPC 3 or above food insecurity levels and 6.4 million people suffer from acute malnutrition, disruptions that reduce household purchasing power and food production would significantly affect the population's capacity to meet their nutritional needs (IPC 29/09/2023; OCHA accessed 13/11/2023).

Worsened health conditions

Escalations would further strain basic service provision and the already fragile healthcare system, limiting access to medical services. This would lead to worsening health conditions and an increased prevalence of untreated diseases, including infectious diseases with epidemic potential (OCHA accessed 13/12/2023). Continued insecurity and conflict can take a severe mental health toll on the affected population, leading to trauma. Violence can also cause school closures, threaten staff and student safety, and restrict their movement, along with the long-term effect of denying children access to education.

Eastern provinces (Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu)

At particularly high risk of violence are the eastern provinces of the country, already suffering from high levels of armed violence and social instability. Goma, the capital of North Kivu province, is expected to remain one of the main military goals of both non-state armed groups and government forces in the region while already hosting more than half a million IDPs (UNHCR 05/05/2023).

As fighting increases in intensity or spreads geographically, increased attacks against civilians by armed groups and civilian casualties during crossfire would trigger large-scale displacement to nearby areas with already saturated hosting capacities. This would result in overcrowded and undersupplied IDP camps and host communities, increasing the risk of infectious disease outbreaks and overwhelming service provision, including for healthcare and education. Such conditions would prevent access to essential goods, such as food, increasing food insecurity levels. Limited access to food, shelter, water, and sanitation infrastructure in hosting sites would raise tensions, increase protection and GBV incidents,

and push women into coping mechanisms with potentially harmful consequences, such as survival sex, to access food and other basic resources. At the same time, children would be susceptible to sexual exploitation and forced recruitment (OCHA accessed 13/12/2023; USAID 30/09/2023).

If current conflict trends continue, in the short term, major road obstructions alone will likely impede 300,000 people from receiving assistance in the region (UN 24/11/2023). Should the risk of violence escalation materialise, this number is expected to significantly increase, and aid will be cut off in large areas. A surge in violence and displacement would mean further deterioration of the already dire humanitarian situation in eastern DRC, with profound and lasting consequences for the affected population.