

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Conflict across the West

CRISIS OVERVIEW

The conflict in Kwamouth territory, Mai-Ndombe province, in the western Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) erupted in June 2022 because of a longstanding dispute between the Teke and Yaka communities over land rights and customary fees. The Teke – an indigenous group that considers themselves to be from and customary owners of the villages located along about 200km of the Congo River – have clashed with the Yaka and the other ethnic groups who have arrived over the years to work in agriculture near the river (Oxford Analytica 27/10/2022; HRW 30/03/2023).

The Teke and Yaka communities, long-time neighbours along the Congo River in Mai-Ndombe province, share a complex history of coexistence. The Teke, the first to settle in the region, view themselves as the traditional owners of the land. The Yaka, who arrived shortly thereafter, have lived alongside the Teke for several decades, developing a system of shared land use and access (TV5MONDE 28/08/2022; BBC 23/09/2022).

Factors such as increasing population pressure, resource scarcity, and political manipulation have aggravated conflict between the two communities.

Since June 2022, Kwamouth territory has been the setting of protracted conflict between the Teke and Yaka ethnic groups, affecting several provinces – specifically Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe. In December 2022, the conflict even reached the outskirts of the capital, Kinshasa (NYT 19/07/2024; HRW 29/06/2023; Actualite 03/12/2022). Between June 2022 and early March 2023, Yaka militias commonly known as the Mobondo raided at least 43 largely Teke villages in Kinshasa, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe provinces. There is limited information on the precise number of villages attacked since the violence began. Teke armed groups have also attacked Yaka communities (HRW 30/03/2023).

The intercommunal violence in western DRC, especially in Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe provinces, had displaced nearly 146,000 people by 24 October 2024. It has been difficult to collect accurate data, however, and many displacements go unreported. The precise number of casualties is unknown, and the destruction of homes, schools, and healthcare facilities is not well documented (HRW 30/03/2023; IOM 24/10/2024; UNICEF 09/05/2023).

By January 2024, there were 2.78 million people in humanitarian need in Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe provinces (OCHA accessed 01/12/2024). Their main humanitarian needs were shelter, NFIs, food, WASH services, protection assistance, health services (including mental health, psychosocial support, and sexual and reproductive health), and education (IOM 01/02/2024). The conflict has also disrupted essential services, hindered humanitarian access, and created a volatile security environment.

Between 1 January and 6 December 2024, around 84 violent events were reported in Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe provinces, resulting in 191 deaths. 44 of these violent events occurred in Mai-Ndombe alone. In comparison, 2023 recorded 106 violent events and 227 deaths (ACLED accessed 06/12/2024). The highest level of violence is concentrated in the western parts of Kwilu and Mai-Ndombe provinces close to Kwamouth, where Mobondo militias seized control of several localities in December 2023 (ACLED 08/02/2024).

Map: conflict-affected provinces and the number of violent events from 1 June 2022 to 1 December 2024

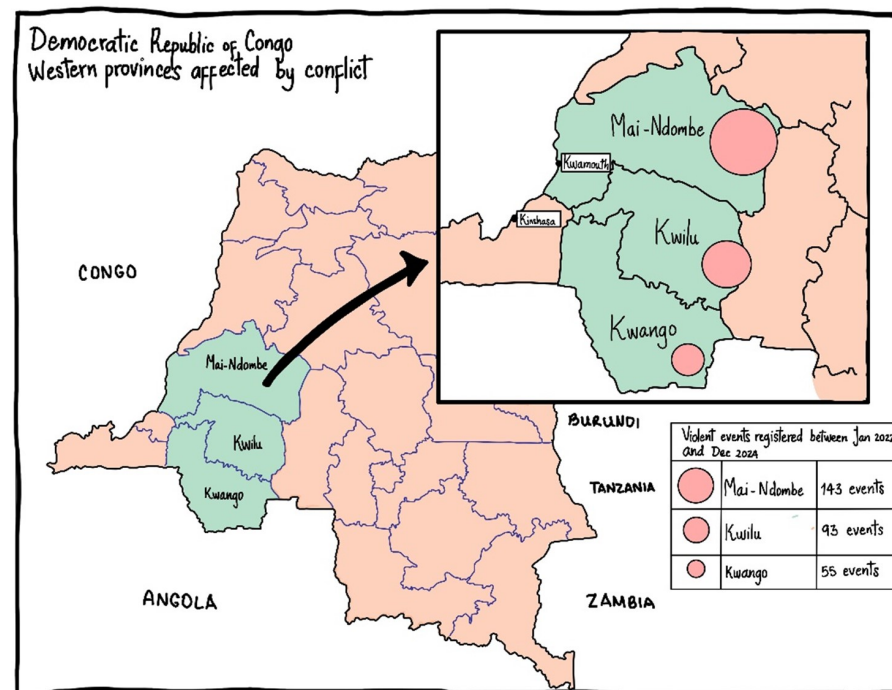
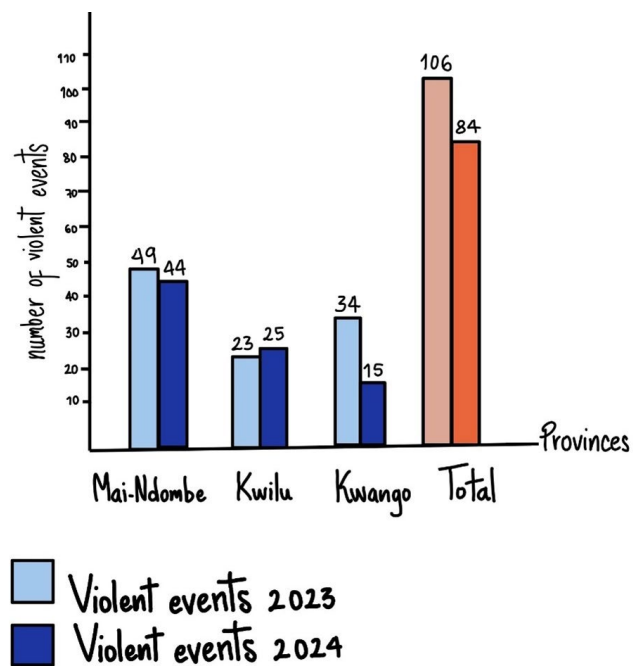


Figure 1. Number of violent events in Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe provinces between 1 January 2023 and 6 December 2024

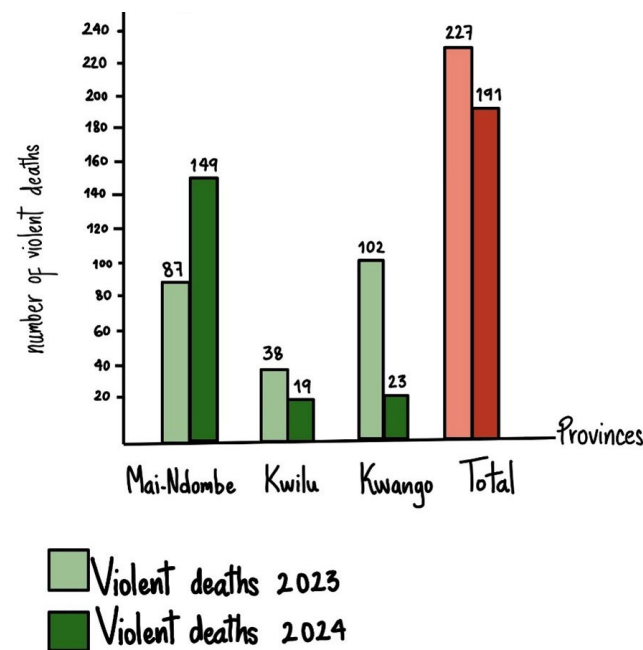


Source: ACAPS using data from ACLED (accessed 06/12/2024)

The situation deteriorated in mid-May 2024 following the failed implementation of a peace agreement in April between leaders of the Teke and Yaka communities. Hostilities escalated, destroying many villages and social infrastructure, including healthcare and educational facilities (OCHA 18/10/2024; NYT 19/07/2024).

On 13 July 2024, Mobondo attacks killed nine soldiers of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) and 70 fighters in clashes in Kinsele, Mai-Ndombe province (Africanews 17/07/2024; NYT 19/07/2024). By August, the Mobondo were still attacking Teke civilians and fighting against the FARDC and the Republican Guard, using weapons they had gained by attacking military positions and through smuggling (UNSC 04/06/2024; Africanews 12/05/2023). An outbreak of violence in western DRC in early December killed another 40 people (Reuters 11/12/2024).

Figure 2. Number of deaths in Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe provinces between 1 January 2023 and 6 December 2024



Source: ACAPS using data from ACLED (accessed 06/12/2024)

These recent waves of violence are among the deadliest for the Teke and Yaka communities since the failed peace agreement in April (Reuters 11/12/2024). With the direct targeting of the FARDC, the conflict has evolved from being solely intercommunal (Yaka/Mobondo versus Teke) to involving the engagement of state forces (HumAngle 09/12/2024).

ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

With the failed implementation of the 2024 peace agreement (for which the terms are unknown) and given the sustained hostilities, it is unlikely that there will be a near-term resolution to the intercommunal violence. Displacement in Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe provinces is likely to increase as the conflict between the Teke and Yaka continues (Geopolitical Monitor 18/07/2024; UNSC 04/06/2024; Reuters 11/12/2024; NYT 19/07/2024). Humanitarian needs are anticipated to keep growing in the coming months, putting an additional strain on host communities (IOM 01/02/2024).

The recent expansion of the conflict to include direct attacks by the Mobondo on FARDC, as well as the violence developing within 100km of the capital (the Kinsele attack), indicate a potential geographical and combatant widening of the conflict (Africanews 17/07/2024; HumAngle 09/12/2024; Reuters 11/12/2024; NYT 19/07/2024).

DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS

Intercommunal disputes over land rights

The initial dispute between the Teke and Yaka over customary fees and taxes has escalated into a broader conflict, involving deeper-rooted issues of land ownership, customary rights, and ethnic tensions. This has led to widespread violence, which has spread to the provinces of Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe (HRW 29/06/2023; Geopolitical Monitor 18/07/2024; NYT 19/07/2024; SCR 13/06/2023).

The Teke and Yaka communities have lived together in villages along the Congo River in Mai-Ndombe province for several decades. The Teke community that first settled in the area considers themselves the customary owners of the territory's villages. The Teke people possess a major part of the land in Kwamouth. Communities from neighbouring provinces that the Teke deem 'non-native', including members of the Yaka community that came to settle shortly after the Teke, traditionally serve as agricultural labourers. For several decades, cohabitation between both communities has been based on land access and use arrangements, although tensions have historically existed (TV5MONDE 28/08/2022; NYT 19/07/2024; DW 12/09/2022; TNH 12/02/2024).

The Yaka community, whose main livelihoods are agriculture and livestock, has been paying in-kind tax to the Teke community to practise these activities. In 2022, Taka customary chiefs (who have tax collection and land management rights based on Congolese law) increased taxes on agricultural products. In response, some Yaka community members refused to pay, increasing tensions when the Teke tried to enforce collections. An attack that injured a Yaka

farmer resulted in the revenge killing of a Teke chief and the burning of a village, spawning further attacks between the Teke and Yaka/non-Teke farmers (NYT 19/07/2024; HRW 29/06/2023; UNSC 30/12/2023).

Customary fees are often a source of tension between these two communities. Mediation efforts have previously enabled regional authorities to avert the escalation of violence. Some members of the Yaka community have since said that they no longer intend to pay the customary fee, as the constitution stipulates that they have the right to settle freely anywhere on national territory. One prominent farmer, Kiamvu, emerged as a self-proclaimed spiritual leader of the Yaka and founded the Mobondo militia. Besides the emergence of this group, both the Teke and Yaka communities also remain armed and mobilised (TV5MONDE 28/08/2022; RFI 02/09/2022; Radio Okapi 26/07/2022; HRW 29/06/2023; TNH 12/02/2024).

The Mobondo militia, which claims to be defending the Yaka people, primarily recruits from the Mbala, Ndinga, Songo, Suko, and Yaka ethnic groups. They use machetes, spears, hunting rifles, and military assault rifles to attack Teke villages. Despite the Congolese army's efforts, the militia has managed to evade military suppression. The Mobondo's actions exploit domestic grievances with the intention of driving the Teke off their land, which resulted in widespread violence involving national security forces and complicating the pursuit of enduring peace (HRW 29/06/2023; Geopolitical Monitor 18/07/2024; UNSC 30/12/2023).

In April 2024, leaders from the Teke and Yaka communities signed, through the mediation of Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi, but failed to uphold a peace agreement, with Mobondo militias killing several civilians just the day after. Violence has since continued and escalated (NYT 19/07/2024; Geopolitical Monitor 18/07/2024; UNSC 04/06/2024).

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

Mobondo fighters control extensive territories, hampering humanitarian access to those areas (NYT 19/07/2024). Since 2023, Mobondo militias have progressively seized territory in Kwamouth (Mai-Ndombe province) and Bandundu (Kwilu province), with military forces patrolling the major national roadways. In January 2024, state forces closed the main road from Kinshasa to Mai-Ndombe province because of insecurity and rising looting by Mobondo militias (ACLEDD 08/02/2024).

Both the Teke and Yaka have set up checkpoints in Mai-Ndombe province, impeding movement (UNSC 30/12/2023).

Since mid-2023, the Government has imposed a ban on journalists' access to the three provinces – Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe – where violence and insecurity have affected communities (Le Monde 15/07/2024; TNH 12/02/2024). The Government has accused journalists

of misreporting events in these areas, leading to the restriction of media coverage. This move has further limited transparency and the flow of accurate information about the conflict, increasing difficulties for humanitarian organisations, researchers, and international bodies seeking to assess the situation (Internews et al. 11/2023). The ban on access for journalists has contributed to a significant information gap, making it more challenging to fully understand the scale of the crisis and to provide timely support to affected populations (Le Monde 15/07/2024; TNH 12/02/2024; Internews et al. 11/2023).

Poor transport and communication networks in the country further contribute to delays in reporting attacks. This hinders prompt responses from security forces and humanitarian organisations (Geopolitical Monitor 18/07/2024). Because of the lack of security and poor infrastructure in the area, it may take several days to file reports of deadly attacks (VOA 16/07/2024).

Violence and insecurity have led some humanitarian organisations to suspend operations in Kwamouth territory. Insecurity has resulted in organisations advising against travel and operations in Mai-Ndombe (Govt. UK accessed 20/11/2024). On 20 November 2024, in response to the escalation of violence in Kwamouth territory (Mai-Ndombe Province) in August, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office issued a travel advisory recommending against all travel to the territory, including the towns of Kwamouth and Bandundu and the southern border of the province (Gov.UK accessed 20/11/2024; Africanews 30/06/2023).

CRISIS IMPACTS

Protection

Since the conflict erupted in western DRC, it has resulted in many protection risks, such as torture, kidnappings, gender-based violence, forced marriages, civilian killings, the armed recruitment of children, looting, theft, and forced eviction from personal property (NYT 19/07/2024; ACLED 08/02/2024; HRW 30/03/2023). The violence and crimes in conflict-affected provinces remain significantly underreported (UNSC 30/12/2023). By January 2024, there were over 812,000 people in need of protection in Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe provinces (OCHA accessed 01/12/2024). Some people have drowned in the river in an attempt to escape the violence (Radio Okapi 16/11/2022).

There are cases of conflict-related family separations, but there is a lack of adequate monitoring, and the number of cases is unknown (UNICEF 09/05/2023). The impact of the violent separations is particularly devastating for unaccompanied and separated children, who are left without the protective support of caregivers in an already perilous environment. For these children, the lack of family support increases their vulnerability to exploitation,

trafficking, and armed group recruitment, further compounding the risks they face. In the chaos of fleeing conflict, these children often become invisible and marginalised, with limited access to humanitarian aid and protection services (UNSC 15/10/2024; STC 27/06/2023). The breakdown of family structures also impedes their ability to find safety, as they may be unable to navigate the dangers of displacement alone. As such, the violence and insecurity along routes such as Nkana-Kwamouth not only traumatise these children in the immediate term but also jeopardise their future wellbeing and development (HRW 30/03/2023; Radio Okapi 16/11/2022).

Displacements

By 24 October, there were almost 146,000 displaced people and over 65,000 returnees in Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe provinces (IOM 24/10/2024). Mai-Ndombe province hosts over 112,000 displaced people, more than 108,000 of whom stay near Kwamouth territory, one of the main areas of the conflict. It is the largest displaced population in the country outside the eastern DRC. Because of the intercommunal conflict between the Teke and Yaka and general insecurity, many people in the province have relocated to comparatively safer areas within or outside the province (IOM 24/10/2024; UNSC 30/12/2023). From the start of the conflict in June 2022 until late 2023, around 160,000 people (more than 60% of the Kwamouth territory population), including over 55,000 children, were displaced (UNSC 30/12/2023; UNICEF 09/05/2023).

Usually, displaced people stay in host communities (KII 02/12/2024). There are also IDP sites available to host displaced people, albeit not in optimal conditions. For example, by November 2024, around 1,500 people were living without access to WASH services at the Malebo site in Bandundu town (Kwilu province) (Radio Okapi 02/11/2024).

Displacement figures are likely underestimated given challenges in data collection (HRW 30/03/2023). The lack of comprehensive data on the conditions of displaced people hinders a clear understanding of their humanitarian situation (IDMC 26/11/2024).

Health

Owing to insecurity, health activities are limited, resulting in a decline in the quality of medical and nutritional care at health facilities (UNICEF 09/05/2023). Since June 2022, the conflict has damaged or destroyed several health facilities in Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe provinces, severely affecting people's healthcare access (HRW 30/03/2023). The precise number of healthcare facilities affected remained unknown by 21 November 2024.

19 of the 23 health areas in Kwamouth health zone have been nonoperational since the start of the conflict. The displacement of medical personnel because of ethnic violence has interrupted operations at 53 healthcare facilities in the health zone. 26 facilities have either been looted or destroyed, with 19 nonoperational by April (UNICEF 09/05/2023).

Prolonged conflicts in the eastern and western parts of the DRC have significantly affected the country's healthcare system and interrupted the delivery of health-related items (WB accessed 01/12/2024).

Western DRC, particularly Mai-Ndombe province, is experiencing an epidemic of diseases, including cholera, measles, malaria, and mpox (OCHA 18/10/2024). On 29 November 2024, the Ministry of Public Health raised an alert concerning a rise in fatalities from an undiagnosed illness in Panzi health zone of Kwango province. Symptoms include fever, headache, cough, runny nose, and body aches. The majority of cases reported are among children under five (WHO 08/12/2024).

Food security and livelihoods

Escalating violence and insecurity in Mai-Ndombe province have severely affected livelihoods by forcing many farmers to abandon their lands, significantly disrupting agricultural activities in a region heavily reliant on farming for economic survival. The violence has also disrupted the movement of people and goods, reducing agricultural employment opportunities and limiting access to key markets. This disruption has not only reduced food production but also undermined food security, leaving many households to face hunger and poverty (FEWS NET 15/11/2024). Because of insufficient humanitarian aid and the suspension of agricultural activities in conflict-affected communities for more than two harvest seasons, the displaced population is suffering from starvation (UNSC 30/12/2023).

The Mobondo have looted property, burnt houses, and targeted infrastructure. They have also targeted businesses and confiscated property, such as crops and other agricultural products, to support fighters or fund military activities. This has significantly disrupted people's livelihoods. Conversely, the Teke have also been involved in violent incidents targeting the livelihoods of the Yaka people, particularly their shops and homes (NYT 19/07/2024; HRW 30/03/2023; UNSC 30/12/2023).

Conflict remains a primary driver of acute food insecurity in the DRC. Between October 2024 and May 2025, Crisis (IPC Phase 3) levels of acute food insecurity are projected in Mai-Ndombe province as a result of the conflict and insecurity (FEWS NET 21/11/2024).

Across DRC, the June 2024 and January 2025 harvests are expected to be significantly below average. Some displaced households in the affected provinces in the northeast and central-east areas, who are unable to cultivate and are struggling to recover their livelihoods, are expected to be in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) (FEWS NET 26/07/2024 and 21/11/2024).

The conflict has severely disrupted agriculture, which is critical to rural livelihoods. Farm abandonment and reduced access to fields have led to a significant decline in cultivated areas, diminishing agricultural labour demand and resulting in poor harvests. Because of this, food prices have remained high, with seasonal declines in prices typically seen during harvest periods barely or not materialising, making food increasingly unaffordable for affected households (FEWS NET 30/09/2024 and 26/07/2024).

As a result, most households are expected to adopt potentially harmful coping strategies, such as selling remaining assets or begging, to mitigate their food consumption deficits. The presence of a large number of displaced people in several areas also increases competition for resources and income opportunities while aggravating already high prices for food and non-food items (FEWS NET 26/07/2024 and 15/11/2024).

Education

By June 2024, most schools in the conflict-affected areas of western DRC had been closed for two years, stopping children from attending. 70% of schools in the vicinity of Kwamouth and Maluku were affected (Caritas International 25/06/2024). In Kwamouth 1, there were 152 schools before the crisis. 103 were nonfunctional by April 2023, while 49 were destroyed and five relocated to Kwamouth city. By the same month, all schools in Kwamouth 2 had been nonfunctional since the onset of the conflict. Only seven schools were functional in Camp Banku (UNICEF 09/05/2023). In Kwango province, 81 schools had been burnt by June 2024 (Caritas International 25/06/2024).

COMPOUNDING/AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Nationwide insecurity

Given the scale of the conflict in the eastern DRC, there is a humanitarian and security vacuum in western DRC, since attention and resources are directed more towards the east (HRW 30/03/2023; KII 02/12/2024).

The security situation in the eastern DRC in Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu provinces has significantly worsened since November 2021, with clashes between the military and armed groups driving displacement by compelling hundreds of thousands of people to relocate. The conflict in the eastern DRC has displaced nearly three out of every four people in 2024 (iDMC 23/09/2024; IPIS 16/11/2023). Between January–June, more than 2.7 million people were displaced in Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. The two main forces involved in the conflict are the FARDC and the March 23 Movement. Other armed groups are also active in the eastern DRC, including the Islamic State-affiliated Allied Democratic Forces, Mayi Mayi groups, and Wazalendo and Nyatura militias. In total, there are more than 120 armed groups in the eastern provinces of the DRC, harming and displacing the population (WB accessed 01/12/2024; CFR 20/06/2024; UNSC 21/02/2024; Le Monde 19/12/2023).

The planned withdrawal of MONUSCO by the end of 2024 raises concerns about the potential deterioration of the security situation in the country (HRW 16/05/2024; Africanews 22/11/2023). The mission's mandate is set to expire on 20 December 2024. The UNSC appears likely to extend the mission's mandate, although the terms of its continued operations remain unclear (ACSS 20/05/2024; SCR 01/12/2024).

In the western provinces of the DRC, ethnic group conflicts have led to the mass displacement of civilians (WB accessed 01/12/2024; NYT 19/07/2024; HRW 29/06/2023). The influx of IDPs worsens the strain on the already weak and poor social systems within host communities (IOM 01/02/2024).

Between 1 January and 28 November 2024, over 2,500 violent incidents occurred across the DRC, killing nearly 3,700 people (ACLED accessed 28/11/2024).

Poverty

Insecurity across the DRC has hindered development, foreign investment, and economic growth, reducing overall wellbeing and increasing poverty. Decades of conflict and instability have resulted in the DRC ranking 164th out of 174 countries on the 2020 Human Capital Index, which correlates specific human capital outcomes with productivity and income levels (WB accessed 01/12/2024; WB 19/03/2019).

In 2023, the DRC ranked among the five most impoverished nations globally, alongside Burundi, the Central African Republic, Somalia, and South Sudan (WB accessed 22/11/2024). The country's GDP per capita was USD 649 (WB accessed 27/11/2024). By 2024, approximately 78 million Congolese (nearly 73.5% of the population) were living on less than USD 2.15 per day, the national poverty rate (WB accessed 22/11/2024; WB accessed 01/12/2024; WHO accessed 28/11/2024; GF 06/05/2024). The national central bank reported that inflation surged to 22.6% in 2023, a significant increase from 9.2% in 2022, primarily driven by the devaluation of the Congolese franc (FAO 06/06/2024).

RESPONSE CAPACITY

By July 2024, there were ten operational responders in Kwango, Kwilu, and Mai-Ndombe provinces implementing 14 humanitarian projects, including the provision of nutrition, NFI, health, food security, and WASH assistance (OCHA 14/11/2024).

In March 2023, the Congolese Government provided food, medicine, fabric, mattresses, buckets, and kitchen utensils to the displaced people in western DRC (HRW 30/03/2023). The state response is very limited in the region, however, despite the fact that the conflict is relatively close to the capital, Kinshasa. Because of weak data collection in 2024 in western DRC, specific details on the current state response are unavailable (KII 02/12/2024).