

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Conflict escalation in Goma (North Kivu)

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

Since the beginning of 2025, conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has escalated significantly, with the March 23 Movement (M23) non-state armed group and allied Rwandan forces entering Goma, the capital of North Kivu, on 26 January. By 27 January, the M23 had claimed operational control of large parts of the city amid heavy fighting with DRC forces. The fighting had internally displaced over 700,000 people in Goma by 3 February (MSF 24/01/2025; VOA 27/01/2025; BBC 28/01/2025; DW 27/01/2025; WFP 03/02/2025; WHO 03/02/2025).

Until 3 February, the exact number of people killed and injured during the attacks remained unknown, although media outlets report around 900 civilians and a combined MONUSCO and SADC 20 peacekeepers killed, as well as almost 2,900 civilians injured (OCHA 04/02/2025; AA 02/02/2025).

On 3 February, M23 forces announced a ceasefire, halting all hostilities in the eastern region of the country for humanitarian purposes, aimed at providing a safe corridor for humanitarian aid and displaced people (France24 04/02/2025; Democracy Now 04/02/2025).

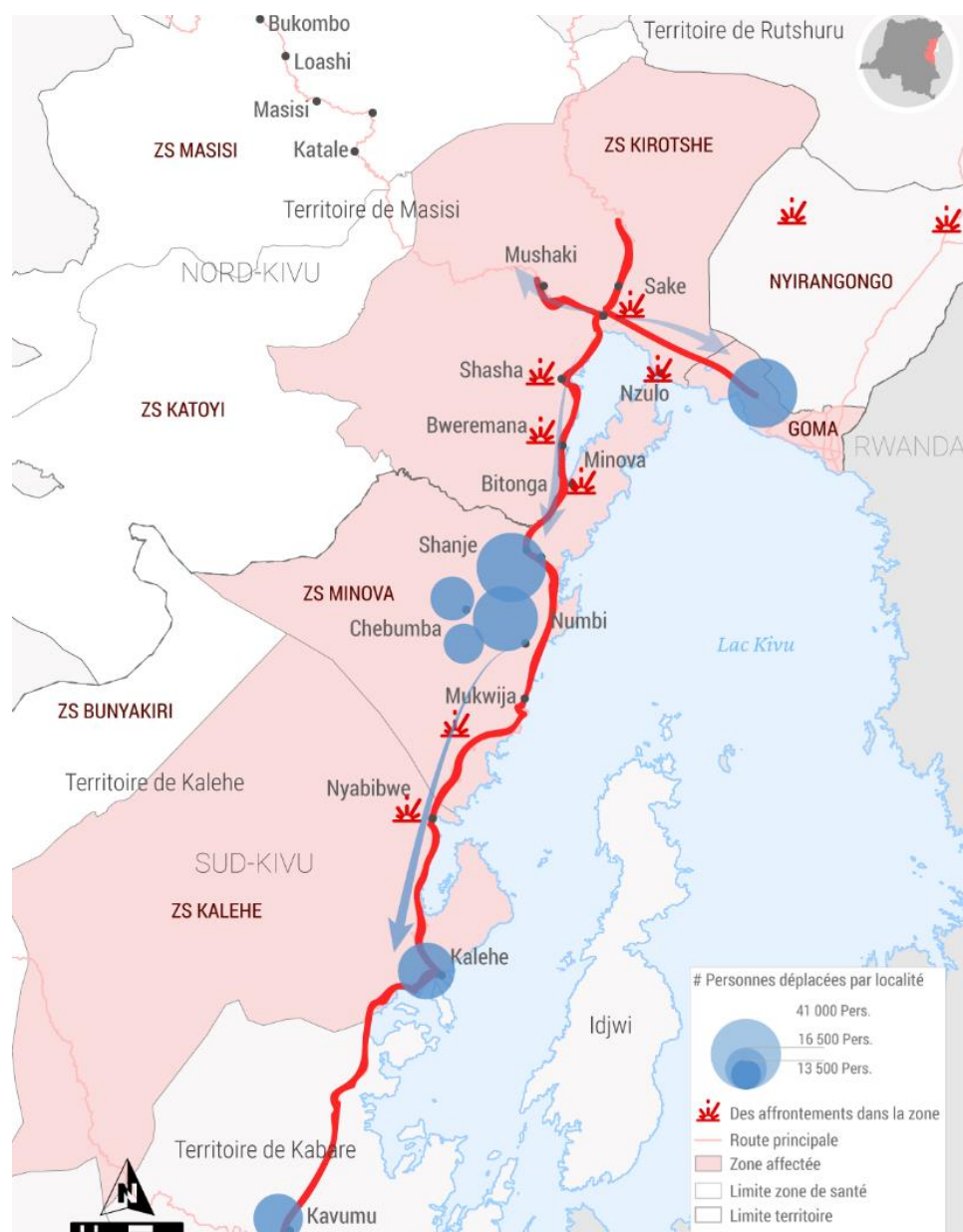
In December 2024, the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) resumed direct operations with M23 rebels in North Kivu, breaking a ceasefire agreement reached with the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) on 30 July. The M23's area of operations and territorial control have also swiftly expanded in recent months. This means that they have not only broken the ceasefire with their operations but also gained territorial control, leading up to the events in Goma (ACLEDD 14/01/2025; ICCT 09/08/2024).

Until 27 January 2025, approximately three million people, including 1.5 million children, lived in Goma. This population included one million displaced people, who are particularly vulnerable in the current crisis given pre-existing conditions, such as prior conflict-related displacement, a lack of permanent housing, disease outbreaks, and exposure to environmental hazards and volcanic activity (STC 27/01/2025; Reuters 10/07/2024; Africanews 27/05/2021). Women, children, older people, and people with disabilities face heightened risks while living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, where access to food, water, and healthcare is limited (WFP 26/01/2025).

The humanitarian impact has been devastating. Hospitals, including Ndoshho and Charité Maternelle General Hospitals, are overwhelmed, operating far beyond their capacity with the influx of injured civilians. Explosive remnants from clashes have caused injuries, and access to displacement camps remains impossible. Reports also highlight incidents of sexual violence, including gang rape, and severe risks for children, such as malnutrition, separation from families, and exploitation (STC 27/01/2025; Unicef 24/01/2025; RFI 27/01/2025). Electricity, internet, and water outages since 24 January have worsened these dire conditions. Until 29 January, only mobile networks were functional (DW 27/01/2025; BBC 28/01/2025; VOA 29/01/2025).

The M23 had previously seized Goma in 2012, holding the city for several days before withdrawing under significant international pressure (DW 28/01/2024). Despite their retreat, tensions between the FARDC and the M23 have persisted, leading to intermittent clashes over the years. In December 2024, a fragile ceasefire agreement between the FARDC and M23 collapsed following renewed M23 attacks in Lubero and Masisi territories. These offensives not only marked a continuation of hostilities but also set the stage for the group's current escalation into Goma. This latest advance signifies a major escalation in the M23's stated objectives and risks, aggravating the already dire humanitarian situation in eastern DRC (ISW 24/01/2025; Council of the EU 25/01/2025).

Map 1. Armed clashes in North and South Kivu provinces by 28 January 2025



Source: OCHA (29/01/2025)

ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

The situation in eastern DRC is expected to deteriorate further as the conflict intensifies, with fighting likely to continue in Goma and surrounding areas. The M23's advances heighten the likelihood of additional confrontations between the M23 and allied Rwandan forces on one side and the FARDC, along with other supporting forces in the DRC, on the other. These engagements would not only escalate violence but also increase the diplomatic and economic repercussions for the M23 and Rwanda, potentially resulting in the imposition of sanctions against Rwanda as called for by the DRC (ISW 24/01/2025; News Central 27/01/2025; TBT 27/01/2025). On 27 January, the DRC Government characterised the M23's announcement of their capture of Goma as a "declaration of war" by Rwanda, further signalling the potential for regional destabilisation (AJ 27/01/2025; The Guardian 27/01/2025).

Hostilities in Goma and across North Kivu could increase tensions in the region, since Rwandan soldiers are already fighting alongside the M23, and there is also evidence indicating direct support from Uganda for the M23. On the other hand, Burundian troops are providing support to the FARDC and actively fighting against the M23. That said, there is a lot of tension and an erosion of trust between the Burundian and FARDC forces. The repercussions for civilians of a wider conflict would be catastrophic, since it could spread within the DRC as well as draw in other countries in the region (ICG 28/01/2025; UN 24/01/2025; UNSC 04/06/2024; Militaryny 27/01/2025; The Guardian 25/01/2025; The Great Lakes Eye 26/01/2025).

Given the strategic importance of Goma as a transit hub for critical minerals as well as its role as a humanitarian hub, this current conflict is likely to aggravate the already dire humanitarian conditions in the region, increasing the number of displaced individuals and further straining limited resources in displacement sites and urban centres. The disruption of key trade routes and the closure of Lake Kivu ports will also continue to hinder aid delivery and heighten food insecurity in affected areas.

The complete seizure of Goma by the M23 will likely increase the risk of prolonged conflicts with the FARDC and armed groups associated with the Congolese army.

The M23 and Rwandan forces continue their advance towards Bukavu, the provincial capital of South Kivu, increasing their influence in the province. By 3 February, they were approximately 80km north of the city (The Africa Report 03/02/2025; AP accessed 28/01/2025).

On 28 January, reports of possible power cuts revealed the risks associated with the spread of viruses, including Ebola, from a laboratory in Goma (franceinfo 28/01/2025). The last Ebola outbreak in North Kivu was declared over in September 2022 (WHO 27/09/2022).

People have been staging protests in Kinshasa and attacked several embassies, including those of Belgium, France, Kenya, the Netherlands, Rwanda, Uganda, and the US, as they demand action from international governments. The rallies have disrupted socioeconomic activities. There are more demonstrations scheduled for the next coming days (Radio Okapi 28/01/2025; AJ 29/01/2025). This could cause widespread destabilisation across the whole country.

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

Insecurity, roadblocks, and clashes have increasingly restricted access to the affected areas. Armed groups are controlling key routes, including the RN2, RP1030, and RP529 roads, which connect Goma with the rest of the country and are critical for humanitarian operations. On 21 January, the M23 and Rwandan forces captured Minova, a town 40km from Goma, effectively cutting off key supply routes to the city (HRW 24/01/2025; ISW 24/01/2025).

The closure of Lake Kivu ports and movement restrictions have further limited evacuation and aid delivery options, intensifying challenges in reaching affected populations (ISW 24/01/2025; WFP 26/01/2025). The seizure of Goma International Airport would also have a significant impact on humanitarian access to conflict-affected areas. On 29 January, reports indicated that the M23 had taken control of the airport (DW 29/01/2025).

Humanitarian organisations, including the WFP, have temporarily suspended operations in North Kivu, leaving approximately 800,000 priority beneficiaries without food and nutritional assistance. Limited personnel are maintaining essential services, such as water distribution and healthcare, but these efforts are insufficient to meet the scale of the crisis (WFP 26/01/2025).

The UN has relocated nonessential staff from Goma in response to the deteriorating security situation. Essential personnel remain, focusing on life-saving activities, including food distribution and medical care. Reports of GPS jamming (which overwhelms satellite navigation receivers with radio signals, drowning out GPS satellite signals), misinformation campaigns, and violence against humanitarian infrastructure further complicate relief efforts (MONUSCO 25/01/2025). There are reports that some aid workers have been caught in the crossfire (HRW 24/01/2025; MSF 29/01/2025; AP accessed 28/01/2025; PNI accessed 04/02/2025).

CRISIS IMPACTS

Displacements and shelter

Between the start of January and 3 February 2025, escalating violence has displaced over 700,000 people in Goma. In total, around three million people were displaced in eastern DRC in 2024. The towns of Goma, Masisi, and Minova have experienced significant population movements since the escalation of violence, with at least 80% of the population fleeing towards Goma from Minova following intense clashes in South Kivu in 2025 (UNHCR 24/01/2025; HRW 24/01/2025; WFP 03/02/2025; WHO 03/02/2025). Following Masisi's capture by the M23 on 4 January, the group has issued an order to dismantle two displacement sites (HRW 24/01/2025; ISW 24/01/2025). Until 29 January, over 1,200 displaced people had fled to Rwanda from Goma (Le Point 29/01/2025).

Displaced people face overcrowded, unsanitary conditions in schools, churches, and informal settlements. Basic needs such as food, water, and medical assistance remain unmet for many, and movement restrictions resulting from roadblocks and port closures aggravate the crisis (WFP 26/01/2025). Many IDPs in Goma are living with host families who have limited resources to support them. These families have reported a severe lack of access to water and food, as well as more frequent electricity cuts than before (Radio Okapi 29/01/2025). Reports indicate that, on 23 January, small-boat travel on Lake Kivu was prohibited by North Kivu authorities, limiting evacuation options for those attempting to flee (ISW 25/01/2025). Regardless, until 30 January, people were still fleeing, often using unsafe makeshift boats, along the lake (UN 30/01/2025).

Protection

The conflict has heightened protection risks, with multiple reports of violence, including forced recruitment, robbery, and sexual violence, particularly targeting women and children. The incidence of sexual violence has increased along the routes that armed groups are taking as they advance south. Armed clashes and insecurity around displacement camps have exposed residents to further abuses, including extortion and harassment by both state and non-state armed groups (HRW 24/01/2025; UNICEF 24/01/2025; UN 28/01/2025).

Non-state armed groups have been implicated in forced labour and other human rights violations in territories under their control. Similarly, the use of artillery near displacement sites by Congolese forces has further endangered civilian populations and interfered with aid delivery (HRW 24/01/2025; STC 27/01/2025).



Health and WASH

Hospitals in and around Goma and Minova are overwhelmed, operating at more than double their capacity because of the influx of patients injured in the conflict (WFP 26/01/2025). There are reports that the shelling of the Charité Maternelle General Hospital in Goma killed civilians, including women and newborns (AP 28/01/2025). In general, hospitals in Goma, including Ndosho and Charité, are struggling to meet the demand for care, with civilians comprising 30–40% of the injured seeking medical assistance. Most injuries are caused by gunshots and shrapnel (HRW 24/01/2025; UN Peacekeeping 28/01/2025). The M23 seizure of the airport in Goma on 28 January may reduce access to supplies to treat trauma and complex emergencies and prevent infections (Reuters 28/01/2025). Clashes have also directly threatened medical personnel and infrastructure; for instance, two Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff members were injured when rockets struck near Masisi's general reference hospital (HRW 24/01/2025).

On 28 January, the Virunga general reference hospital recorded at least 400 wounded and around 20 dead, both soldiers and civilians, including children. The hospital lacks sufficient medical supplies and has reported damage to its electrical generators, and its morgue has limited capacity. These conditions pose a risk to injured civilians and medical personnel (Radio Okapi 28/01/2025).

Electricity and water outages in Goma since 24 January have further strained healthcare services. Many displaced people lack access to adequate sanitation, increasing the risk of disease outbreaks in overcrowded camps (UNICEF 24/01/2025; WFP 26/01/2025). North Kivu was the epicentre of the outbreak of the new strain of Mpox, declared a public health emergency of concern in August 2024. The conflict creates significant challenges in monitoring and managing the disease, while overcrowded conditions may facilitate additional transmission (UN Peacekeeping 28/01/2025).

Livelihoods

Since mid-2022, the M23's control over supply routes, including those in Masisi and Minova, has severely disrupted food supplies to Goma and other areas in North Kivu. The closure of roads and ports has led to the inflation of food prices, aggravating the socioeconomic strain on affected communities. Displaced families are left without stable access to food, worsening their vulnerabilities amid the current conflict (ISW 24/01/2025; WFP 26/01/2025; HRW 24/01/2025; ITA 04/04/2024).

Education

Since 22 January, regional authorities have requested the closure of all education facilities in Goma, mainly because of insecurity but also to allow many to serve as IDP sites. In North Kivu, over 1,480 schools have closed, affecting over 493,000 students; in South Kivu, over 200 schools have closed. 19 are being used by armed groups, and ten are being used as IDP shelters. The total number of children affected in South Kivu is not available (OCHA 29/01/2025; Education Cluster 27/01/2025). There is limited information available, but children are expected to be among the most affected by displacement and conflict. The intensification of hostilities in the coming weeks is likely to further disrupt education, resulting in a significant interruption to the school year.

DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS

M23 and Rwandan military intervention

In December 2024, the RDF renewed direct operations in North Kivu alongside M23 rebels, marking the conclusion of a five-month period of lowered violence involving the RDF. As a result, a ceasefire agreement reached on 30 July with the FARDC through Angolan mediation was ultimately broken on 15 December (ACLED 14/01/2025; ICCT 09/08/2024).

The UN indicates that, in December 2024, there were between 3,000–4,000 Rwandan troops in eastern DRC engaged in combat alongside the M23 and that provided sophisticated weapons to support the M23 offensive (ISW 24/01/2025; VOA 27/01/2025; AA 28/01/2025). There have also been reports that RDF troops had been unofficially crossing the DRC border to support the M23 militants in their offensive in the days leading up to the escalation of violence in Goma (Militarnyi 27/01/2025; The Guardian 25/01/2025). Rwanda continues to officially deny any involvement in M23 support (BBC 30/01/2025; NPR 26/01/2025). The allegations of support arise from the assertion that Kagame consistently claims the DRC houses the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a Hutu militia involved in the genocide, while the M23 purportedly seeks to protect the Tutsi community in Eastern DRC (FA 13/04/2023; ICG 28/01/2025; The Conversation 28/01/2025).

North Kivu is currently experiencing a highly complex and protracted conflict with the presence of multiple armed factions, including the M23, the FARDC, and their respective allies (IOM 11/06/2024). This conflict has resulted in a significant displacement of people and a growing population requiring humanitarian aid and essential resources (food, shelter, healthcare), which are still very challenging to access (IOM 01/03/2024; WFP 26/01/2025). The recent escalation has peaked in recent weeks, further aggravating these needs.



Following the end of the M23's 2013 rebellion, the group was largely dormant until it re-emerged and launched its March 2022 offensive (AI 20/02/2024; CFR accessed 27/01/2025; IPIS 16/11/2023; ACLED 23/03/2023; TV5MONDE 27/05/2022). In March 2022, the M23 launched a major large-scale aerial and artillery offensive. Over the following year, the group gained control of large parts of North Kivu, including almost all of Rutshuru and parts of Masisi (AJ 15/02/2024; CFR accessed 27/01/2025; IPIS 16/11/2023). In early March 2023, the M23 and the FARDC agreed on a ceasefire, which provided for the M23's withdrawal from Rutshuru and Masisi. Both sides repeatedly violated the ceasefire, which expired on 28 December 2023 (IPIS 16/11/2023; UNSC 21/02/2024). The continued proxy conflict following the peace agreements and ceasefire arrangements between Rwanda and the DRC in mid-2024 heightened the probability of the RDF's direct re-engagement in the DRC. In 2023, a comparable scenario unfolded, characterised by the collapse of peace agreements amid continuing confrontations between the M23 and Wazalendo, which led to a notable increase in RDF violence (ACLED 14/01/2025; ICCT 09/08/2024).

For its part, since 2022, the DRC Government has created a reserve force known as the *Réserve armée de la défense* or Wazalendo militia (which consists of irregular pro-government fighters) to respond to M23 attacks (The Conversation 28/01/2025; GCR2P 01/12/2024; The Guardian 17/05/2024).

Control over mineral resources

The mineral resources of the DRC are estimated to be worth around USD 24 trillion (AP accessed 28/01/2025). These mineral resources are particularly valuable for the production of batteries, electric vehicles, smartphones, etc. Many of the areas where fighting is taking place in eastern DRC are rich in mineral resources, such as gold, diamonds, cobalt, coltan, and tantalum (Militarynyi 27/01/2025; ISW 24/01/2025; ICG 28/01/2025; OHCHR accessed 28/01/2025). Recent fights strengthen the M23's control over critical mineral resources and supply routes between the DRC and Rwanda. Between 16–21 January, the M23 seized Ngungu (North Kivu), Numbi (South Kivu), and several other areas, signifying an expansion of the M23's territorial gains in mineral-rich areas. Following the M23's seizure of Masisi on 4 January, the group's influence has expanded into areas rich in coltan and cassiterite, which are ores of tantalum and tin, respectively, along with gold (ISW 24/01/2025; HRW 24/01/2025). In May 2024, the M23 took control of Rubaya, a mining town located near Goma that generates 15% of the world's coltan, an essential component in cell phones and computer chips. This has involved the construction of a road designed to facilitate the direct transportation of minerals to Rwanda. UN sources indicate that this mine is producing USD 300,000 per month (Reuters 30/09/2024; GI-TOC 30/01/2025).

COMPOUNDING/AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Pre-existing humanitarian needs

The M23's attacks since the beginning of the year have forced thousands of IDPs across eastern parts of the country to seek refuge in Goma. This massive influx has added to the already limited resources and services available, intensifying the humanitarian crisis (AA 29/01/2024; WFP 26/01/2025; UNHCR 24/01/2025). By 3 February, the escalating violence in Goma had displaced more than 700,000 people since the beginning of 2025. As the hostilities continue, the number of displaced people is expected to increase significantly. The capacity of host communities in eastern DRC is already stretched as insecurity displaced over three million people throughout 2024 (WFP 03/02/2025; WHO 03/02/2025). By September, around 645,000 people were sheltering in overcrowded camps around Goma (MSF 18/11/2024).

The additional burden will worsen existing access constraints. The geographic location of Goma, situated directly at the border with Rwanda, along with the closure of ports on Lake Kivu, presents significant challenges for the evacuation of civilians and the supply of humanitarian aid. This situation results in heightened isolation and vulnerability for communities (WFP 28/01/2025; RBC Ukraine 27/01/2025; MSF 29/01/2025).

Disease outbreaks

Rising health concerns, such as cases of Mpox and cholera in North Kivu, have also worsened the humanitarian crisis (MSF 18/11/2024). Between 1 January 2024 and 19 January 2025, there were 14,530 confirmed cases of Mpox and 43 related fatalities in the DRC (WHO 28/01/2025 a). Mpox normally transmits through close contact with an infected person, including skin-to-skin interactions (such as touching and sexual activity) and oral contact (such as kissing). Proximity to an infected individual, such as conversing or breathing closely, may also generate infectious respiratory particles (WHO accessed 28/01/2025). While Goma airport is under M23 control, it will be challenging to transport the recent batch of LC16 Mpox vaccines donated by Japan that arrived in Kinshasa (NHK 27/01/2025; UNICEF 05/10/2025; Reuters 29/01/2025). Since 5 October, there has been a continuing vaccination campaign to stop the Mpox outbreak in the country (France 24 05/10/2024).

In 2024, there were nearly 32,000 reported cholera cases and 425 related fatalities in the country (WHO 28/01/2025 b). North Kivu has been the most affected province in the DRC, with over 17,000 cholera cases reported between 1 January and 30 November 2024 (UNICEF 18/12/2024). Cholera usually spreads through contaminated water, although it can also be spread through contaminated food. The disease spreads rapidly in areas with poor sewage and drinking water systems (CDC accessed 29/01/2025).

Overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in displacement sites increase the risk of disease outbreaks, placing further strain on an already overwhelmed healthcare system (OCHA 19/01/2025). In October 2024, people at displacement sites around Goma were receiving an average of merely 7.8L of water per person per day. Some places were even providing as little as 2–4L per person. This amount significantly falls short of the international emergency standard of 20L per person per day. Such extreme unsanitary conditions are concerning, particularly because of the significant risks associated with the spread of various diseases, such as Mpox, cholera, and other waterborne diseases (MSF 18/11/2024; WHO 01/2013).

RESPONSE CAPACITY

Different organisations are attempting to respond to the people affected, although insecurity issues and blocked transport and supply routes are limiting the response. On 28 January, non-essential UN humanitarian staff were reported to be relocated to reduce risks, but essential staff remained in Goma city (UN 28/01/2025).

International Medical Corps currently provides mobile medical unit support in Goma and Minova. They provide people with Mpox-related infection prevention and control services and training (IMC 29/01/2025). MSF currently supports Kyeshero Hospital to take care of some of the wounded and relieve the International Committee of the Red Cross, which is on the front line in their care at Ndosho Hospital. MSF is also present in North and South Kivu (MSF 24/01/2025).

The largest donor for humanitarian aid to the DRC is the US Government, providing over USD 1 billion in humanitarian and bilateral assistance per year (US Embassy in the DRC 23/01/2025). Given President Donald Trump's executive order on 21 January 2025 imposing a "90-day pause on United States foreign development assistance", it is unclear how much funding the US will give the DRC in 2025 (The White House 20/01/2025). Funding for UNICEF from the US Agency for International Development's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance was announced to be suspended from 29 January, directly affecting WASH and protection projects (OCHA 29/01/2025).