UN investigators cite war crimes, sexual violence in DR Congo conflict

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Russian Foreign Ministry's security and disarmament department head Mikhail Ulyanov (R) along with other attendees hold a briefing to present analysis of the report by UN investigators which blamed a sarin gas attack in Syria's Khan Sheikhun on Bashar al-Assad's regime, in Moscow on November 2, 2017. (Photo by Alexander NEMENOV / AFP)  
  
Rwanda-backed M23 militia and the Congolese military and its affiliates have all committed gross rights violations in eastern DR Congo, UN investigators said on Friday, warning of possible war crimes and crimes against humanity.  
  
A United Nations fact-finding mission on the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s North and South Kivu provinces determined in a report that all sides in the devastating conflict had committed abuses since late 2024, including summary executions and rampant sexual violence.  
  
The findings “underscore the gravity and widespread nature of violations and abuses committed by all parties to the conflict, including acts that may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity,” the report said.  
  
The eastern DRC, a region bordering Rwanda with abundant natural resources but plagued by non-state armed groups, has suffered extreme violence for more than three decades.  
  
Since taking up arms again at the end of 2021, the M23 armed group has seized swathes of land in the restive region with Rwanda’s backing, triggering a spiralling humanitarian crisis.  
  
A fresh surge of unrest broke out early this year when the M23 captured the key cities of Goma and Bukavu, setting up their own administrations.  
  
The Congolese and Rwandan governments signed a peace deal in June, and the Congolese government signed a separate declaration of principles with the M23 in July, including a “permanent ceasefire” aimed at halting the conflict.  
  
But violence has continued on the ground.  
  
– Rampant sexual violence –  
  
“With new reports of violations continuing, both the Congolese and Rwandan governments must take urgent actions to ensure strict respect for international law by their own national forces and affiliated armed groups, while ceasing to support the latter,” the report said.  
  
The fact-finding mission (FFM), established by the UN Human Rights Council in February, said it had documented the failure of all parties to adequately protect civilians, especially during the takeover of Goma, as well as attacks on schools and hospitals.  
  
The M23, after capturing territories, “engaged in a campaign of intimidation and violent repression through a pattern of summary executions, torture and other forms of ill-treatment”, the report said.  
  
It also decried forced recruitment, including of children, as well as “widespread” sexual violence.  
  
The FFM said it had “reasonable grounds to believe that M23 members may have committed… the crimes against humanity of murder, severe deprivation of liberty, torture, rape and sexual slavery”.  
  
It faulted Rwanda not only for backing the M23 but found its armed forces had directly committed violations on DRC territory, and noted “credible allegations concerning the covert presence of RDF personnel within M23”.  
  
– Child soldiers –  
  
The investigators also documented grave violations committed by the DRC armed forces and affiliated armed groups, like the Wazalendo.  
  
The FFM, among other things, documented “deliberate killings of civilians” by the DRC military after in-fighting with the Wazalendo.  
  
And it identified “a pattern of widespread use of sexual violence and looting” by members of the armed forces and of Wazalendo during the retreat from the front lines in January and February.  
  
It also determined that Wazalendo fighters recruited children under the age of 15, including for use in combat, with girls also “used for sexual purposes”.  
  
“The atrocities described in this report are horrific,” UN rights chief Volker Turk said in a statement.  
  
“It is imperative to promptly and independently investigate all allegations of violations with a view to ensuring accountability and victims’ right to truth, justice and reparations, especially guarantees of non-repetition.”  
  
The FFM’s work will conclude once it presents its findings to the Human Rights Council, which kicks off its final session of the year next week.  
  
In February, the council had ordered the creation of a commission of inquiry (COI) — the highest investigation in its armoury — to carry on the probe once the FFM winds up, but funding cuts across the UN system have delayed its establishment.  
  
Turk stressed Friday that the swift creation of the COI “to continue this vital work is essential”.  
  
“We owe no less to the untold number of victims.”  
  
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