Congolese refugees caught between war and closing doors

As fighting continues in eastern DRC, shrinking aid and tighter security in host countries undermine the rights of refugees.

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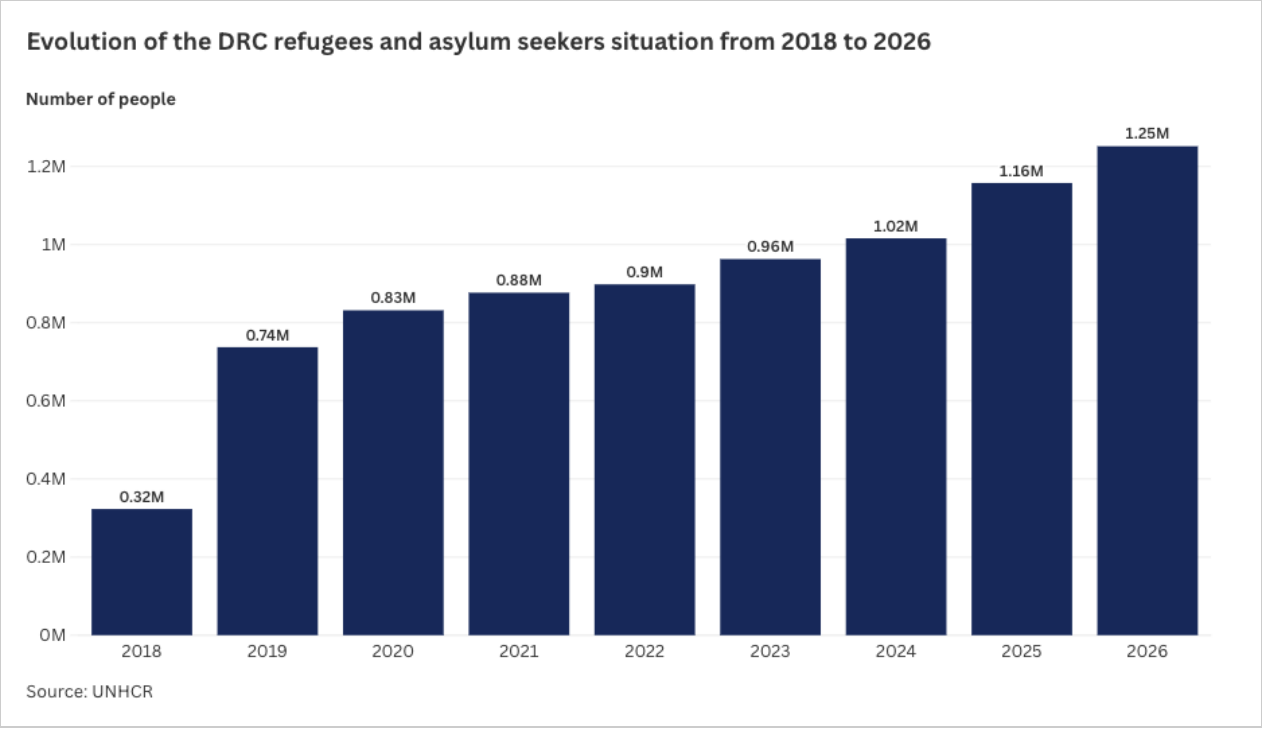
In June, the governments of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) reaffirmed their commitment to the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees between the two countries.

This builds on provisions in the 2025 Washington peace accords and the provisional agreement between the DRC government and the *Alliance Fleuve Congo* (AFC)/M23, now *Front pour la Refondation de la Nation* (FRN)/M23, ur the Doha Process.

Previous peace deals failed to secure lasting solutions for refugees or reflect evolving realities on the ground. Continued insecurity, renewed displacement and worsening conditions in host countries have aggravated the plight of refugees.

War in eastern DRC has turned a protracted refugee situation into a regional emergency, particularly after M23 captured Goma and Bukavu in early 2025. In June 2026, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) counted 1.25 million Congolese refugees and asylum seekers, 80% of whom are hosted in DRC's neighbouring countries. Over 245 000 new arrivals were registered between January 2025 and April 2026.

Burundi has been particularly affected, with about 142 000 new arrivals, including some returning Burundians. Most entered following the capture of Bukavu in February 2025 and Uvira in December 2025, straining an already overburdened reception system. Uganda hosts 53% of the Congolese refugee population. It registered over 236 000 arrivals between 2022 and 2025, on top of an additional 139 500 South Sudanese refugees since 2022.



International funding cuts have decimated humanitarian response capacities. February, the UNHCR reported that only 20% of the US$35 million required for

its 2026 lifesaving assistance in Burundi had been received. In January, the International Rescue Committee warned that Uganda's refugee health response had secured only 6% of the funding required for 2026, forcing it to cut health services for over one million refugees.

These conditions shape returns. Within a month of the Burundi-DRC border reopening in February 2026, following M23's retreat from Uvira, 33 000 Congolese refugees spontaneously returned to the DRC, despite the fragile situation in South Kivu.

Continued fighting and rebel occupation create an unsustainable environment for returns. The UNHCR maintains a non-return advisory for South and North Kivu, while facilitated returns to M23-held areas are not possible. Over 80% of Congolese refugees in Rwanda have indicated their willingness to return to the DRC but await the right conditions.

While M23 encourages spontaneous returns to areas it holds, which it considers 'post-conflict', its actions threaten the rights of refugees and displaced people. When it captured Goma, it dismantled internally displaced persons camps, forcing hundreds of thousands of civilians to leave.

M23 is responsible for widespread violence against civilians, including Rwandan refugees. Many are targeted on suspicion of ties to the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) or Wazalendo, a network of community-based militias fighting M23. Several Rwandan refugees have been forcibly transferred to Rwanda, including through interference with the UNHCR screening process.

M23's encouragement of Congolese refugee returns fuels suspicion of a broader strategy to consolidate rebel control and Rwandan influence in eastern DRC, complicating refugees' reintegration. Due to longstanding disputes over the citizenship of Congolese Tutsi, their (perceived) association with M23 and Rwanda risks deepening community tensions.

In the Great Lakes Region, protracted displacement has profoundly shaped conflict dynamics. The fallout of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, the DRC's regional wars and domestic conflicts in Burundi uprooted communities, forcing many into prolonged exile in neighbouring countries.

Armed groups including M23, the FDLR and Burundian rebels use the

unresolved refugee situation to justify their fight and mobilise support. The UN Group of Experts reports that these militants recruit among refugee populations, including in camps in Rwanda and Uganda. This heightens fears of armed infiltration in host countries, creating regional security dilemmas that hamper political solutions to the refugee situation.

Land border closures between Burundi and Rwanda from 2015-2023 and since 2024 have brought repatriation to a halt. Burundi's position has even hardened. In October, Interior Minister Léonidas Ndaruzaniye announced that people coming from or transiting through M23-controlled areas would not be allowed to enter Burundi.

Uganda has also tightened restrictions on cross-border movement over Ebola concerns. Measures announced last month require Congolese travellers deemed non-essential to be returned to DRC. This could prevent refugees from accessing protection and goes against Uganda's 'open-door' refugee policy.

Regional tensions fuel host country suspicion towards foreign nationals, including refugees. In Burundi, Congolese refugees face tighter encampment policies, restricting work and movement. In some cases, police and ruling party youth, Imbonerakure, reportedly detain refugees before sending them back to official sites in remote areas.

Heightened surveillance is reported, particularly of Banyamulenge refugees suspected by authorities of collaborating with M23. While Congolese refugees are generally granted access to national services in Rwanda, many remain dependent on humanitarian assistance and have been subjected to excessive force when protesting against their conditions.

There is a gap between repatriation commitments in peace processes and the realities of forced and spontaneous returns. At the same time, refugee protection needs extend beyond the DRC and Rwanda to the wider region.

Three sets of measures can close this gap. First, peace efforts should focus not only on repatriation but on respect for refugees' rights and protection, including through diplomatic engagement and independent monitoring of conditions of displacement and return.

Second, integrated regional solutions are needed to address the situations of

Congolese, Burundian and Rwandan refugees, and linkages with armed groups. Refugees should be involved in developing these processes – not only the states that are often responsible for their exile.

Third, donors and host states must keep protection in place, including sustained funding, so that return is voluntary and not driven by deprivation.

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