

Three decades of conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have produced repeated peace deals, sanctions and diplomatic initiatives, while civilians continue to face killings and displacement.

President Paul Kagame says one issue remains largely unresolved: the presence of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a Rwandan armed group operating in eastern DRC and a longstanding source of tension between Rwanda and Congo.

Speaking to journalists in Kigali on Monday, 24 August, Kagame said the conflict could not be understood without looking at the history of the FDLR and what he described as the failure to address its presence in eastern Congo.

“The problem of the FDLR is not difficult to understand,” Kagame said. “It’s a problem that has been there for decades.”

He said the conflict involved more than Rwanda and the DRC, pointing to the role of neighbouring countries and the wider international community.

“There are many parties to the problem,” he said. “All these have a way to contribute to the problem and contribute to the solution.”

Kagame argued that successive peace efforts had fallen short because they had not addressed what he considers the root causes of the conflict.

“Nobody addresses the root cause of the problem,” he said. “I have not heard of any solution to address the root cause.”

Rwanda rejects M23 accusations

Kagame’s comments come as Rwanda continues to face international accusations that it supports M23, the armed group that has seized large areas of eastern DRC, including the provincial capitals of Goma and Bukavu.

Rwanda denies supporting M23 and says its security concerns are linked to the presence of the FDLR and armed groups operating alongside forces in eastern Congo.

The United States, however, has accused Rwanda of providing military support to M23. On 2 March, the US Treasury Department sanctioned the Rwanda Defence

Force (RDF) and four senior Rwandan military officials, accusing them of supporting, training and fighting alongside M23. Rwanda has rejected the allegations.

Washington has also imposed sanctions on commanders from both M23 and the FDLR, saying the two groups have contributed to instability and human rights abuses in eastern Congo.

Kagame criticised the sanctions, arguing that they punish Rwanda instead of addressing the security problem.

“Instead of sanctioning FDLR or those who work with them, they punish those fighting them. I don’t understand them,” he said.

The US position is broader. Washington has called on the DRC to neutralise the FDLR while also demanding that Rwanda withdraw its forces from eastern Congo and end its support for M23. Both demands form part of the wider peace framework.

Washington agreement under pressure

Rwanda and the DRC signed the US-brokered Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity on 4 December 2025, committing the two countries to steps aimed at ending the conflict and easing tensions.

The agreement includes commitments for the DRC to neutralise the FDLR and for Rwanda to disengage its forces and lift defensive measures in eastern Congo.

Implementation, however, has remained difficult.

The US has continued to impose sanctions on individuals and entities linked to the conflict. In April, Washington sanctioned former DRC president Joseph Kabila over alleged support for M23 and the Congo River Alliance. In June, it sanctioned an FDLR commander and an M23 commander.

In another June action, the US targeted a network it accused of helping smuggle minerals from eastern DRC to Rwanda, including Rwanda-based Gasabo Gold Refinery. Washington said the illicit mineral trade was helping finance the conflict.

Kagame said Rwanda had repeatedly raised the FDLR issue but questioned why Kigali was being pressured while, in his view, insufficient action was being taken

against the group.

“Our problem has been FDLR in DRC. If the problem is not resolved, of course Rwanda will remain as part of this problem,” he said.

FDLR disarmament remains a sticking point

There has been some movement on the FDLR issue in recent weeks.

On 28 July, the Congolese government announced that a faction of the FDLR had signed a protocol covering disarmament, demobilisation and cantonment.

The International Contact Group for the Great Lakes region, which includes the US, EU, France, Germany, the UK and other countries, welcomed the announcement but urged Kinshasa to produce an operational plan and a realistic timetable for the group’s effective neutralisation.

That distinction is important. The signing of the protocol does not mean the FDLR has already been dismantled.

Rwanda’s Foreign Minister, Olivier Nduhungerehe, has also questioned whether the protocol goes far enough, arguing that it does not remove Kinshasa’s obligation under the Washington Accords to neutralise the FDLR.

The issue remains central to Kigali’s security argument.

For Rwanda, the concern is not simply whether FDLR fighters surrender their weapons, but whether the group is genuinely dismantled and can no longer operate from eastern Congo.

A separate track with M23

At the same time, the DRC government and AFC/M23 have been pursuing a separate diplomatic process through talks mediated by Qatar.

Representatives of Kinshasa and AFC/M23 met in Switzerland from 17 to 21 August and agreed on a roadmap setting out steps and timelines for further negotiations.

The roadmap also provides for mechanisms to monitor implementation and report alleged ceasefire violations.

The process is separate from the Washington agreement between Rwanda and the DRC, although the two tracks are closely connected.

The Washington deal addresses relations between Kigali and Kinshasa, while the Doha process brings the Congolese government and AFC/M23 directly into negotiations.

The agreements have created new diplomatic openings, but they have yet to produce a lasting end to the fighting.

Civilians still paying the price

The diplomatic efforts have unfolded against a worsening humanitarian backdrop.

UN reporting has documented killings, human rights abuses and large-scale displacement in eastern DRC, with armed groups among the main perpetrators.

The US has described M23's offensives as contributing to a mass displacement crisis, while the UN continues to report serious protection concerns affecting civilians.

The conflict has also been tied to the illicit exploitation of eastern Congo's mineral resources. Washington has accused armed groups and networks operating around M23-controlled areas of using mineral revenues to finance the conflict.

For civilians caught between armed groups and government forces, however, the diplomatic distinctions matter less than whether they can return home safely.

Kagame said Rwanda would continue to participate in efforts to find a solution while protecting what he described as its national security interests.

"We shall keep contributing to finding the solution to the problem," he said.

The challenge now is whether the different peace tracks can move beyond agreements, protocols and roadmaps and produce tangible changes on the ground.