

Rwanda's fire and rescue service was called in to help tackle a deadly fire in Bukavu, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, (DRC) that killed at least 24 children and injured several others, local sources say.

The fire broke out on Thursday on Kasheke Avenue before spreading to the Furaha and Ujamaa primary school complexes, triggering a stampede among pupils.

Hospital sources said the death toll remained provisional. About 20 bodies were being held at Bukavu General Hospital, while others were taken to the University Clinics.

Several other pupils were being treated at hospitals in the area after suffering from smoke inhalation and asphyxiation.

Local leaders said nearly 50 homes were also destroyed by the fire.

Civil society groups said the blaze began in a house before spreading to the nearby school complexes.

Bukavu authorities turned to Rwanda for help because the city lacked the equipment needed to deal with a fire of such scale.

Rwanda's fire and rescue service was called in to help tackle a deadly fire in Bukavu, a city controlled by the AFC/M23 rebel group in eastern DRC, after at least 24 schoolchildren were killed.

The intervention has also drawn attention to the lack of adequate firefighting and emergency response capacity in Bukavu.

The South Kivu provincial government said the disaster exposed shortcomings in fire prevention, particularly as the city has experienced a series of major fires in recent weeks.

Its spokesman, Didier Kabi, criticised the collection of taxes from residents without effective protection mechanisms being put in place.

Sylvano Safari, coordinator of the Dynamics of Actors for National Issues, said the tragedy showed the limits of the authorities' approach to disaster prevention.

He said the state's responsibility should not begin after a disaster but should

include enforcing urban planning and housing regulations to reduce the risk of fires.

Mr Safari called for stronger and more practical measures to prevent similar incidents.

Romuald Lwamba, a member of the Citizens' Parliament for Good Governance and Peace, also called for greater investment in emergency services.

He said residents and local authorities should be involved in strengthening fire prevention and response, including providing more resources and specialist firefighting teams.

The deaths have left residents in Bukavu grieving, while civil society groups are calling on the authorities to strengthen fire prevention, enforce housing standards and improve the city's emergency response capacity.