

# East DR Congo rebel crisis threatens endangered mountain gorillas

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Mountain gorillas as under threat.

M23 rebel activity in volatile eastern DR Congo is threatening mountain gorillas in Virunga National Park and leaving the endangered species vulnerable to poachers, a spokesman said on Tuesday.

About a third of the global population of mountain gorillas lives in the park, a renowned wildlife reserve spanning 7,800 square kilometres (3,000 square miles) on the border with neighbouring Uganda and Rwanda.

But M23 rebels in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo have seized swaths of territory in the park in a recent offensive, restricting conservationists from areas inhabited by the great apes, said spokesman Bienvenu Bwende.

Specialist teams from Virunga National Park are no longer tracking the mountain gorillas, he told AFP, which means the animals will lack [medical care](#) should they fall ill.

"There is above all the risk of falling into poachers' traps," Bwende added.

Virunga National Park—a [world heritage site](#)—counted some 234 [mountain gorillas](#) in September, when its agents could still circulate with relative freedom.

Over 120 [armed groups](#) are active in eastern DRC, many of which are a legacy of regional wars that flared at the turn of the last century. The sprawling Virunga park has long served as a rear base for militias.

The M23 first leapt to prominence when it captured the eastern Congolese city of Goma in 2012, before being driven out and going to ground.

But the Tutsi-led group reappeared late last year, claiming the DRC had failed to honour a pledge to integrate its fighters into the army, among other grievances.

M23 rebels have since surged across North Kivu province and come within several dozen kilometres (miles) of Goma. The violence has also displaced hundreds of thousands of people.

The DRC accuses its smaller central African neighbour Rwanda of backing the M23, something US and French officials as well as United Nations experts agree with, although Rwanda denies.

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