

Online Negative Sentiment Towards International Community Further Underlines Reputational Risks to Humanitarian Agencies in the DRC

February 2024



To support the humanitarian response in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), [Insecurity Insight](#) is conducting ongoing social media monitoring to understand perceptions and key concerns around the aid response, with the aim of contributing to the development of aid agencies' communication strategies in response to community sentiment.

Summary

In February 2024 Kinshasa reeled from violent riots targeting United Nations (UN) and UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) staff and vehicles and foreign embassies in response to the degrading security situation near Goma. This social media monitoring brief provides an overview of DRC public sentiment expressed in the public social media space on Facebook and X from 9 to 11 February 2024 on topics related to the international community and humanitarian organisations in the DRC.

Findings:

- Negative sentiment is generally expressed by social media users towards the international community, which is seen as indifferent at best to the situation in the DRC, or directly complicit with Rwanda and its M23 proxy at worst.
- Western countries, including the United States (US), France and the United Kingdom (UK), were the subject of significant negative sentiment on public social media. In contrast, sentiment towards Russia appears to have been generally positive.
- Many DRC social media users seem to make a distinction between international actors and humanitarian agencies on public social media platforms, with criticism towards the humanitarian sector tending to be limited to UN aid agencies.
- However, messages circulating on encrypted WhatsApp channels suggest that this distinction between international actors and humanitarian agencies is not always made. Consequently, and in view of the general circumstances, the risk of the DRC public's frustration with the international community spilling over onto the aid sector remains significant.

Context

The March 23 Mouvement (M23) ongoing offensive that started in 2022 marks a resurgence of the rebel group in the eastern DRC. Following a period of relative dormancy after its defeat in 2013, M23 re-emerged as a significant security threat in the region, with the rebel group having made significant territorial gains in North Kivu province, seizing control of key towns and strategic areas.

Mailing List

The humanitarian consequences of the armed clashes involving M23 have been highly concerning, with up to one million people [estimated](#) to have been displaced in North Kivu province by the end of 2023.

With a [worsening security situation](#) in North Kivu, where in February M23 rebels threatened to [isolate](#) Goma by surrounding the neighbouring key city of Sake, on Saturday 10 February riots erupted in the DRC capital city, Kinshasa, targeting [UN and MONUSCO staff and vehicles](#), with unverified videos showing crowds attacking and setting fire to a marked UN vehicle. [Embassies](#) were also targeted, including those of the UK, the US and France.

Protests [continued](#) on Monday 12 February, with protesters burning tyres and flags near Western embassies and UN offices.

Findings

- **Negative sentiment is generally expressed by public social media site users towards the international community, which is seen as indifferent at best to the situation in the DRC, or directly complicit with Rwanda and its M23 proxy at worst.**

Sentiments expressed on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) towards the UN and MONUSCO are overwhelmingly negative.

Negative sentiment tends to be expressed in a number of ways. Online users perceive the UN and MONUSCO as being indifferent to the disastrous security and humanitarian situation in eastern DRC, where many believe a “genocide” is being perpetrated by M23 militia against the local population. In turn, this indifference – often directly compared to the international community’s frenetic response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine – is commonly interpreted as a sign of UN and MONUSCO support for Rwanda and its M23 proxy in their

aggression against the DRC. Indeed, many users expressed frustration with the UN for not putting enough pressure on Rwanda to cease its aggression, or with MONUSCO for being ineffective or unwilling to engage militarily with M23 to protect civilians.

These views have to be seen against the background of repeated violent riots targeting UN and MONUSCO staff in the DRC in recent years, and appear in the context of increasingly expressed anti-UN views, which culminated in President Felix Tshisekedi [asking](#) MONUSCO to accelerate its withdrawal from the DRC.

Apart from the UN and MONUSCO, criticism of the **international community** also tended to focus on foreign countries, in particular the US, the **UK, Belgium, Russia and France**. Indeed, as Figure 2 indicates, hundreds of public posts appeared on Facebook and X between 9 and 11 February 2024 mentioning these countries,¹ with most sentiments expressed tending to be negative, with the exception of Russia, towards which opinions on

Figure 1: An image circulated on X showing the UN protecting advancing M23 rebels while a MONUSCO soldier looks on, with President Felix Tshisekedi depicted as profiting from the situation



Source: Insecurity Insight

social media appear to be favourable. For example, referring to the Wagner Group and Russian presence in the Central African Republic, one user suggested that the DRC needs to follow its neighbour's path: *"Russia is needed for a durable solution in the East ... with Russia the Central African Republic has totally changed"*.

The positive sentiment towards Russia may appear contradictory in view of the parallels often drawn between the DRC and Ukraine (see Figure 3). Indeed, Western countries are clearly perceived as providing selective support to Ukraine, which in the eyes of many members of the DRC public contrasts deeply with their belief that the DRC is not receiving the support it needs. However, pro-Russia sentiment might be explained by the seemingly general perception of Russia as being more efficient in dealing with rebels than Western powers, as can also be noted in the comment referring to the Central African Republic.

Apart from Ukraine, some online users also drew a parallel with the situation in the DRC, which is often qualified as a 'genocide' by the public, with the situation in Gaza (see Figure 4).

Figure 2: Number of Facebook and X posts in the DRC mentioning foreign countries, 9-11 February 2024

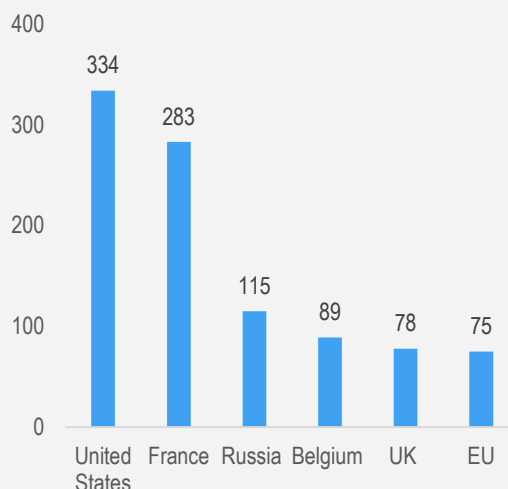


Figure 3: Post on X aiming to show the international community's selective support, with Western countries heavily represented in the image

TRISTE RÉALITÉ 🙄🙄🙄

Le conflit en Ukraine a suscité une vague de soutien de la part de la communauté internationale

Le génocide qui perdure en RDC depuis des décennies est accueilli par un silence assourdissant de la part de la même communauté internationale 🙄🙄🙄

Translate post



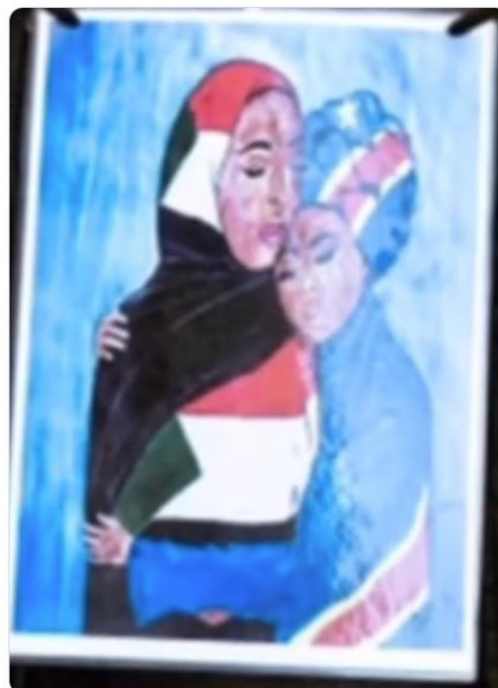
Yori Ndjoli and 7 others

4:12 PM · Feb 11, 2024 · 1,121 Views

Source: Insecurity Insight

Figure 4. A Congolese woman hugging a Palestinian

Les USA et l'UE font un génocide de masse en RDC et en Palestine.
Translate post



4:13 PM · Feb 9, 2024 · 10 Views

Source: Insecurity Insight

Moreover, the opinion is often expressed that these Western countries are complicit with Rwanda and the M23 rebels, including through providing military and financial aid. For example, in reaction to reports that a European country has publicly condemned the latest M23 offensive, one commentator said: *“They condemn with words [and] support financially and militarily with their action”*, possibly referring to the donation of EUR 20 million by the European Union (EU) to the Rwandan army to finance its operations in Mozambique. This perceived hostility and partiality on the part of the international community appears to be key in motivating civilians to attack embassies. For instance, one user suggested: *“It is better to get rid of all the ambassadors of colluding countries in the DRC”*.

Figure 5: Rwandan president Kagame dressed as a Nazi shown stabbing the DRC using M23 as a sword while the EU, France and the UN deliberately choose to close their eyes



Source: Insecurity Insight

The comments on public social media highlight that social media users in the DRC perceive Western countries to be central to the international community and criticise them both for their lack of action to help the DRC through the international system and their perceived colonial self-interest in the country. Parallels may be drawn with anti-Western criticism expressed on social media in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, where frustration with the increasing insecurity has led to calls that individual European countries should leave.

- **Aid organisations were also targeted on public social media and through private social media channels, although to a much lesser extent than the UN, MONUSCO and foreign countries.**

A systematic review of public social media posts and comments mentioning aid organisations in the DRC between 9 and 11 February indicates that public attention on social media does not appear to be focused on the humanitarian sector. With some exceptions involving UN humanitarian agencies, aid organisations do not seem to have been targeted in particular on public social media spaces, which might indicate that the anger and frustration with the international community on public social media platforms have not spilled over onto the aid sector, and that social media users may be able to distinguish between the objectives of humanitarian aid agencies, on the one hand, the role of the UN and international politics, on the other hand.

Nevertheless, there are indications that at least in some instances violence against aid organisations was incited on private social media channels on the pretext that these organisations form part of the international community. An aid organisation operating in the DRC forwarded a WhatsApp message to Insecurity Insight in which “NGOs” were specifically mentioned, suggesting that in some cases aid organisations are being viewed in the same light as an international community seen as colluding with the Rwandan enemy.

The WhatsApp message reads as follows:

*“C'est le tour de l'ambassade de la France après celle des USA à Kinshasa. Prenons tous conscience et brûlons tous consulats des USA, France, Angleterre, Grande Bretagne, Pologne et tous les véhicules **MONUSCO, PAM, UNHCR**. Bref tout ce qui est **UN en RDC y compris leurs ONGs qui leurs servent des services de renseignements**. La Patrie ou la Mort, on doit se libérer de nos vrais oppresseurs. Le Rwanda n'est qu'une coquille vide qu'on peut écraser en un clin d'œil. Prenons courage bana mboka.”*

This message underlines the risks facing humanitarian organisations operating in such an incendiary political and security environment, and underlines the extent to which frustration with the international community risks spilling over onto the aid sector. It further underlines that the most extreme views are often expressed on private social media channels. Public social media platforms provide an insight into dominant existing sentiments that many people share and that will influence how individuals will interpret and respond to disinformation or incitement to violence circulated via private channels.

Recommendations for agencies

- Monitor the way in which aid programmes are represented on social media and design strategies to counter misinformation and disinformation about aid agency objectives.
- Strengthen the understanding of the humanitarian principles and the narrative that humanitarian aid agencies are distinct from the UN, MONUSCO, and the interests of any foreign country.
- Be aware that the humanitarian imperative to provide food and medical aid without discrimination is very easily turned into social media disinformation that accuses aid programmes of favouring a particular social group or even rebel groups.
- Communicate realistic objectives for your intervention.
- Put as much support as you can in place for local staff and partners so that they do not feel abandoned when programmes have to be reduced due to deteriorating security.
- Be aware that the expectations among the public that the aid system should ensure the protection of civilians and bring peace and stability to the country are high and that failure to live up to these expectations can cause resentment, frustration and despair.
- Be aware of the media environment and outlets, and work closely with media outlets to ensure that they play a supporting role in tackling disinformation in the public sphere

Methodology

Publicly available social media data was first collected in the DRC for the period 9-11 February 2024 using key words in French linked to or referring to the international community and the humanitarian sector. To do so, Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to identify pertinent data on X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook.

Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: info@insecurityinsight.org

¹ These figures do not include comments, which could run into the hundreds.

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