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Sultani Makenga: The M23 Movement's Mysterious Leader in the DRC

Jacob Zenn

Executive Summary

- General Sultani Makenga has led the Rwanda-backed March 23 Movement against the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for many years. Makenga currently stands at the height of his power, having seized the eastern DRC's two main population centers, Goma and Bukavu, in early 2025.
- Makenga tends to be secretive, but has always justified his militancy in propaganda as a means to protect the Tutsi population. His recent successes represent a major turnaround from the group's nadir in November 2013, when Makenga himself was captured in Uganda.

As Rwanda-backed M23 (March 23 Movement) militants solidify their control over the resource-rich eastern territory of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), General Sultani Makenga stands out for his long-time leadership of the movement. A ceasefire between the M23 Movement and the DRC was negotiated in April with the backing of Qatar. Even so, Makenga has still maintained control over the eastern DRC's two main population centers, Goma and Bukavu, since they were seized in early 2025 ([France24](#), April 24). This places the 51-year-old Makenga at the height of his power, and makes his moniker "The Warlord of Kivu" (referring to the area of the eastern DRC where he operates) more accurate than ever ([Aberfoyle International Security](#), June 2).

During his career, Makenga has experienced ups and downs. Just over a decade ago, he was labeled a "defeated Congolese rebel leader" when he was captured in Uganda in November 2013. At that time, DRC troops had chased him over the border, where he was captured and disarmed. This offered the region a "glimmer of hope" because he and his 1,700 fighters were infamous for forcible recruitment of the local population, sexual

violence, and the massacre of civilians ([The Guardian](#), November 7, 2013; [Human Rights Watch](#), September 11, 2012).

Makenga has always justified his militancy as a means to protect the Tutsi population, which he alleges the DRC and mercenaries it employed were mistreating. He claimed, for example, that government-affiliated mercenaries had burned down a village “only because they were populated mainly by Tutsi.” Makenga condemned the government and responded that, “We must overcome this ethnic ideology of hatred and promote reconciliation” ([The New Times](#) [Rwanda], March 13). This is consistent with the ideology of his backers in the Paul Kagame-led government of Rwanda, which has prohibited open ethnic identification since the end of the genocide in 1994.

Makenga first became engaged in militancy during the Rwandan civil war in the 1990s. At the time, he fought for the Kagame-led Rwandan Patriotic Front and witnessed the genocide against his fellow Tutsis. However, unlike Kagame, Makenga was born in North Kivu in the DRC, making him uniquely situated to lead the M23 Movement. Makenga was notably not handed back to the DRC by Ugandan forces after his capture in 2013. Instead, when a peace agreement was reached in 2016, he was placed in a demobilization camp; by 2017, he was again leading the M23 Movement, allegedly with both Ugandan and Rwandan backing. In return, M23 was expected to provide the government with minerals extracted in the DRC ([Foreign Affairs Forum](#), January 30). With little concern for international law, Makenga was able to build up M23’s forces rapidly by recruiting numerous child soldiers.

Nowadays, Makenga only makes rare appearances in public, where he is almost always seen wearing his signature khaki cap that hangs low to conceal his face ([Le Monde](#), February 2). Makenga is so secretive that he has never publicly addressed the local population in the eastern DRC, but rather communicates

with the people through intermediaries or spokesmen. Notwithstanding his clandestine tendencies, the past three years have been perhaps the most militarily successful of his career and have enshrined M23’s militants as a force to be reckoned with in the eastern DRC and across its borders.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Militant Leadership Monitor.

Dr. Aminul Haq: Osama bin Laden Associate Released from Prison in Pakistan

Osama Ahmad

Executive Summary

- Top al-Qaeda leader Dr. Aminul Haq has been in and out of Pakistani prisons over the years. Most recently, he was released in April 2025 and deported to Afghanistan after having been arrested in July 2024. Officially designated as a terrorist by the United Nations as far back as January 2001, Haq has long been a crucial leader within al-Qaeda. His release could help catalyze a revival of al-Qaeda activity in the region.
- Haq also remains one of the group’s senior-most leaders, and one of the few remaining individuals who were closely associated with Osama bin Laden as far back as the 1980s. Haq had served as one of Osama bin Laden’s personal bodyguards and is believed to have escaped Tora Bora with him.

On July 19, 2024, Pakistan arrested Dr. Aminul Haq, a top leader of al-Qaeda in Gujrat, Punjab province. Shortly after, the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) of the Punjab Police registered a legal case against Haq for planning to sabotage key installations in the province. According to the authorities, he was also plotting a "large-scale terrorism project" in Pakistan ([Dawn](#), July 19, 2021).

The 15th report of the United Nations Security Council's Islamic State/al Qaeda/Taliban Monitoring Team contradicted Pakistani reports. It states that Haq was arrested during a routine border security action, rather than a targeted counterterrorism operation. The report further claimed that Haq was arrested for the illegal possession of weapons while crossing from Pakistan to Afghanistan in March 2024, four months before the arrest was actually announced ([WION](#), July 21, 2024). He was then deported back to Afghanistan in April 2025, when a Pakistani court ordered Haq's release due to a lack of incriminating evidence ([The Express Tribune](#), April 18).

Haq was a crucial member of al-Qaeda and sustained the organization's global operations during a period of significant leadership losses. This led to him being designated a terrorist by the United Nations Security Council as early as January 25, 2001 ([United Nations Security Council](#), accessed August 1). His contributions proved instrumental in maintaining al-Qaeda's operational capacity throughout South Asia ([Amu TV](#), July 20, 2024). Haq was also arrested by Pakistan in 2008 in Lahore at the base of a different terrorist group, al-Qaeda-aligned Lashkar-e-Taiba ([Amu TV](#), July 20, 2024). As would later be the case, Haq was released in 2011 by a Pakistani court, owing to a lack of evidence ([ABP News](#), August 31, 2021). This suggests that Pakistan's security forces have not been interested in keeping him detained in the long term.

Associating With bin Laden

A trained medical doctor who specialized in urology, Haq was born in 1960 in Nangarhar, eastern Afghanistan, and his family name was Saam Khan. He began his jihadist career as a member of Hizb-i-Islami Khalis (HIK), a faction of Hizb-i-Islami that was founded by Maulvi Mohammed Yunis Khalis. HIK was one of the many jihadist groups fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, but the faction was particularly instrumental in welcoming bin Laden to Afghanistan after Sudan ejected him in 1996 ([Firstpost](#), September 3, 2021). Haq grew close to bin Laden in the 1980s, when he worked with Abdullah Azzam in Maktab al-Khidmat. After this, Haq would emerge as one of bin Laden's closest associates after his arrival in Afghanistan ([India Today](#), August 30, 2021).

Being a close associate of bin Laden, Haq was involved in the unit responsible for bin Laden's security. Haq helped bin Laden escape the U.S.-led Operation Anaconda in March 2002, when senior al-Qaeda leadership was holed up in the Tora Bora cave complex in Afghanistan. Three of Haq's comrades also responsible for the escape had been members of HIK during its war against the Soviet Union ([ThePrint](#), August 31, 2021).

Return to Kabul

After the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021, Haq returned to Afghanistan, where he was warmly welcomed ([India Today](#), August 30, 2021). However, rumors circulated that he was living in Afghanistan the whole time after his first release from prison in Pakistan, suggesting he was merely appearing in public for the first time rather than returning to the country. Still, several sources claim that Haq was living in Pakistan using fake documents before returning to Kabul ([Lead Pakistan](#), July 23, 2024). A video circulating on social media at the time of his alleged return showed a convoy transporting Haq from Pakistan to Nangarhar Province, where a small crowd

of Taliban members surrounded Haq's vehicle to shake his hand and take photos with him ([ABP News](#), August 31, 2021). Hundreds of fighters were reportedly under Haq's command at that time, who had allegedly harassed Afghans attempting to flee Kabul following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Ultimately, the threat of being hit by a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan—as had occurred with then-al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri on July 31, 2022—pushed Haq to return to Pakistan, where he took refuge with friendly groups.

Conclusion

Although al-Qaeda was initially paralyzed by the killing of bin Laden in 2011, the organization's operational capacity in the region was not truly diminished until a decade later. The death of Ayman al-Zawahiri in July 2022 and the continued campaign to eliminate other top figures made the dwindling number of senior leaders who still lived increasingly vital to al-Qaeda's survival. The arrest of Amin ul-Haq was yet another blow to al-Qaeda's already fragmented command structure. However, his release to Afghanistan in April could help once again revive al-Qaeda in the region if the Taliban fails to rein him in.

Osama Ahmad is an Islamabad-based journalist and researcher.

Rahman Gul: The Former Pakistani Army Captain Now Commanding the BLA's Majeed Brigade

Imtiaz Baloch

Executive Summary

- Captain Rahman Gul, the Baloch Liberation Army's second-in-command, is thought to be behind the group's turn toward sophisticated suicide attacks in recent years. A poet and former member of Pakistan's security forces, Rahman Gul provides his group with both military training and effective propaganda material.
- Rahman Gul hails from an elite family within his region. It is thought that he was radicalized when he served with the 19th Battalion of the Frontier Force Regiment for eight years in troubled areas and presumably witnessed the repression of his fellow Baloch.

In 2018, a new wave of violence swept across Pakistan, particularly in the southwestern Balochistan province. This coincided with a rise in suicide attacks by secular Baloch militants targeting Pakistani security forces and Chinese officials involved in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC, which is the cornerstone project of China's One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR), has become a prime target for Baloch militant groups, who view the project as one meant to exploit Baloch resources without the consent of the Baloch people ([China Daily](#), May 27; [The Diplomat](#), August 28, 2024).

The two-decade-long Baloch insurgency has increased the risks associated with both Pakistani and Chinese projects in the region. The Majeed Brigade, an elite suicide squad within the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), has revived its operations and specifically targeted Chinese engineers and Pakistani security forces in both Balochistan and Sindh (see [China Brief](#), February 15, 2019). The BLA's tactics have included destroying railway tracks, offloading bus passengers suspected to be personnel of the Pakistan Army and killing them, and blockading major highways that connect Balochistan with other provinces. This not only disrupts internal movement in Balochistan but also affects international traffic with neighboring Afghanistan and Iran ([Dawn](#), August 27, 2024).

The pace of the BLA's suicide attacks has increased. From 2018 until recently, the BLA has carried out at least one suicide attack every year. In 2024, however, the group carried out at least five sophisticated suicide attacks in different parts of Balochistan and Sindh Province. In the first half of 2025, the BLA also carried out at least three other suicide attacks. In addition, the group has attacked security bases and economic hubs, which shows the group's intention of damaging both Chinese and Pakistani interests. The shift toward a sustained campaign of suicide attacks is now directly linked to Majeed Brigade head Bashir Zaib—and more particularly his second-in-command, Captain Rahman Gul ([Radio Liberty](#), April 23, 2024).

Rahman Gul's Family's Baloch Nationalist Activism

Rahman Gul, also known as Mureed Baloch, was born on August 14, 1984, in the house of Mir Afzal Khan Mengal. Mengal was a well-known local politician and tribal elder of the Mengal caste. Mengal also once submitted nomination papers for the Provincial Assembly's PB34 Nushki District constituency as an independent candidate ([Daily Jang](#), December 24, 2023). This was not the family's only foray into politics; Rahman Gul's father is also serving as the

counselor of Kali Mengal in the local council elections ([Daily Jang](#), May 20, 2023).

Rahman Gul himself belongs to a prominent family of the Mengal Zagar sub-caste whose elders are at the forefront of tribal, social, and political issues in the town ([Daily Azadi](#), April 12, 2019). His mother was also the niece of Lawang Khan Mengal, a prominent guerrilla commander who fought against the Pakistani state in the 1970s after the dismissal of the first elected government of the National Awami Party (NAP) in Balochistan. Additionally, Gul Khan Naseer, a well-known poet and progressive politician who served for a time as the education minister of Balochistan, was Rahman Gul's mother's paternal uncle ([The Balochistan Post](#), November 21, 2023). Likewise, Meeran Baloch, a brother of Rahman Gul, is believed to currently be fighting alongside the BLA ([The Balochistan Post](#), April 16, 2024).

Recruitment and Rebellion Against the Pakistani Army

Rahman Gul graduated from Govt. Boys Model High School, Nushki, and then moved to the provincial capital, Quetta, for intermediate studies. He also acquired his Bachelor of Arts at the University of Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. [1] Rahman Gul then enlisted in the Pakistan Army in 2002 and served for eight years with the 19th Battalion of the Frontier Force Regiment ([X/@gulbukhari](#), April 28, 2022). In addition, he completed two years of training at the Pakistan Military Academy at Kakul.

Throughout Rahman Gul's army tenure, he was stationed in challenging locales, such as South Waziristan's Ladha, Karama, and Karwan Munza regions and North Waziristan's Miran Shah region. After that, he was deployed in the Kutli District of Kashmir's Khairatta sector along the Line of Control with Indian-administered Kashmir. His experience in these areas honed his skills and deepened his understanding of military operations in diverse and demanding environments,

which he later used against the Pakistani state after joining the BLA in 2010.

In the initial stage of joining the BLA, Rahman Gul was stationed in the mountainous region of Bolan and fought under the command of Aslam Baloch. His poetry suggests that after observing state repression against his fellow Baloch and witnessing the security forces' operations in North Waziristan, Rahman Gul experienced a profound sense of guilt for having been part of the Pakistani security apparatus. This, it is believed, compelled him to join the BLA ranks ([YouTube/Santul Baloch](#), November 3, 2021).

Anti-China Campaign

Rahman Gul's transformation from fighting against militants to becoming one himself represented a drastic shift in his thinking. He became a vocal critic of state policies and expressed his dissent through poetry. For example, Rahman Gul wrote two poetry books and many articles in which he hailed the war against the state and praised his comrades ([Humgaam](#), June 23, 2015; [The Balochistan Post](#), November 28, 2017). Despite this, it would appear that he was still serving in some capacity with state-aligned forces in Balochistan as late as 2020 ([Internet Archive](#), April 23, 2020).

After joining the BLA, Rahman Gul was responsible for providing basic military training to new recruits, commanding ambushes, and leading fighters in the mountainous Kharan and Kalat districts. On October 6, 2024, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) driven by a business student, 28-year-old Shah Fahad Baloch, struck a convoy carrying Chinese nationals in Pakistan's southern economic hub and port city of Karachi. The attack killed at least three people, including two Chinese engineers of the Port Qasim Electric Power Company. In this suicide attack, at least eleven others suffered injuries, and fifteen vehicles were destroyed ([BBC Urdu](#), October 9, 2024).

The attack took place in advance of Pakistan hosting the leaders' summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) ([BBC](#), October 7, 2024). After the attack, the Chinese embassy and consulate general instructed their citizens to avoid traveling in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa ([South China Morning Post](#), October 8, 2024). This resulted in Rahman Gul being listed in First Information Reports (FIR; the first step in an investigation within South Asian legal systems) for planning and executing the attack ([Dawn](#), October 8, 2024).

Similarly, there had been an attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in 2018, as well as the first suicide attack by a female BLA member on Karachi University's Confucius Institute in 2022. Further, in April 2024, the BLA also blocked National Highway N-40 connecting Pakistan and Iran and then killed of at least nine people after they were identified as Pakistani security personnel ([Hindustan Times](#), December 27, 2020; [Independent Urdu](#), July 5, 2022; [Global Times](#), July 5, 2022; [Urdu News](#), April 15, 2024).

Rahman Gul's long track record of anti-state activity led to Balochistan's provincial government announcing a one-million-rupee bounty (approximately \$3,500 today) for him as far back as 2016, which has been maintained to the present ([Daily Azadi](#), March 17, 2016). In a similar move, the Balochistan Police also issued a "red list" in which it mentioned Rahman Gul's biographic details in 2018 ([Balochistan Police](#), 2018). Further, Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) also placed Rahman Gul on its "red list" in 2023 ([Federal Investigation Agency](#), 2023).

Conclusion

Rahman Gul has crafted a narrative intended to ignite enthusiasm for future Baloch militancy. With themes of revolution and resistance, his poetry has woven a tapestry of ideals that inspires Baloch youth toward fighting the Pakistani state. Moreover, his training and experience on

the battlefield during his service in the Pakistani Army equips him with military skills, which he is now teaching effectively to Baloch militants in their pursuit of independence and/or autonomy.

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Notes:

[1] Padnadri, a collection of poetry by Captain Rahman Gul/Mureed Baloch, The Balochistan, Post, 2021, <https://tbpbrahui.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/PadhRand-TBP.pdf>.

Corneille Nangaa Lobeluo: The Rebel Leader Left Out of President Trump's Congo-Rwanda Peace Agreement

Andrew McGregor

Executive Summary

- Corneille Nangaa Lobeluo leads the political-military Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). While Nangaa has not been involved in the June 27 peace agreement between Rwanda and the DRC brokered by the United States and Qatar, he has historically proven himself adept at taking advantage of international rivalries in eastern Africa for his own ends.
- Nangaa is opposed to American involvement in the peace process in the eastern Congo, likely the reason he was excluded from peace talks. An agreement will have to be reached in a separate set of peace talks that do involve the AFC, however, before part of the U.S.-backed peace accords can be implemented.
- Nangaa worked as an electoral specialist with the government before a scandal led him to turn toward politics and militancy. Nangaa worked with Rwandan-backed M23 rebels to form the AFC, and the former group has recently seen numerous victories. He lacks much independent power, making his position largely dependent on M23's willingness to continue backing him.

The foreign ministers of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

signed a peace agreement brokered by the United States and Qatar on June 27 to resolve their long-standing conflict over the mineral-rich Congo provinces of Nord and Sud Kivu ([Eastleighvoice](#) [Nairobi], June 28). One man, however, was missing from the table: Corneille Nangaa Lobeluo. He is the leader of the rebel *Alliance Fleuve Congo* (AFC, or Congo River Alliance) that actually controls the two province and their riches.

A former electoral specialist turned rebel, Nangaa leads a coalition that lays claim to 34,000 square kilometers (roughly 13,000 square miles) of the DRC. This area, known for its strategically important critical minerals and rare earths, has been consumed by political and ethnic violence dating back to the Rwandan genocide in 1994. U.S. President Donald Trump believes that Nangaa's participation in the peace agreement is unnecessary to enable American access to these critical minerals: "We're getting, for the United States, a lot of the mineral rights from the Congo as part of it" ([Eastleighvoice](#) [Nairobi], July 1). The events of recent years, however, have shown that, greater than Nangaa's own political or military significance, is his ability to insert himself into the middle of international rivalries in eastern Africa.

Background on the Eastern Congo Rebellion

The eastern provinces of the DRC, Ituri, Nord Kivu, and Sud Kivu, are plagued by violence created by a host of actors. These include the Congo's own national army, the FARDC (*Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo*), the AFC, the M23 Movement, Islamists of the Ugandan Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), Islamic State in Central African Province (ISCAP), Hutu militants, and a variety of pro- and anti-government militias and armed bandits. Incursions by Rwandan and Ugandan troops contribute to the violence. The M23 rebel movement, part of the AFC, is the most dangerous of the armed opposition groups active in the eastern Congo, inflicting serious defeats on the Congolese

military in 2012 and even taking the eastern city of Goma before being driven out in 2013. After taking refuge in Rwanda and Uganda, they rebuilt and returned to the DRC with backing from the Rwandan Defense Force (RDF).

M23's political leader, Bertrand Bisimwa, and its military leader, General Sultan Makenga, [1] resumed M23's armed revolt against Kinshasa in March 2022. They cited corruption and ethnic discrimination on the part of the government of President Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo as their main grievances. Their campaign to control the east and eventually seize Kinshasa has been marked by looting, rape, human rights abuses, and the displacement of some 1.5 million people.

Tshisekedi was re-elected on December 31, 2023, in a contested election. On May 19, 2024, he survived an armed coup attempt by Christian Malanga Musumari, a former U.S. resident (1998–2006) and leader of the self-proclaimed and Brussels-based "New Zaire Government in Exile." Malanga was killed in the attempt, while his son and three American mercenaries in his service were captured. The latter were among 37 coup suspects sentenced to death on September 13, 2024 ([France 24](#), September 13, 2024).

Nangaa's Early Career

Corneille Nangaa was born in 1970 in the DRC's Orientale Province. After receiving a bachelor's degree in economics at the University of Kinshasa, he began his career as a specialist in electoral procedures by taking a position with the DRC's *Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante* (CENI, or Independent National Electoral Commission). His growing expertise in this field led to engagements providing electoral technical assistance in ten sub-Saharan African nations. By 2015, he was president of CENI ([Radio Okapi](#), October 22, 2015).

Nangaa's professional reputation was tarnished in March 2019, when he, his son,

and a number of other CENI officials were accused of embezzlement during the 2018 presidential campaign. Nangaa was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department for "his participation in actions or policies undermining democratic processes or institutions in the DRC" ([U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), March 21, 2019). Nangaa would later challenge the sanctions unsuccessfully in a Washington, D.C. court ([Jeune Afrique](#), August 8, 2022).

Nangaa remained CENI president until October 2021, when he turned to politics, founding his own party, *Action pour la Dignité du Congo et de son Peuple* (ADCP), in February 2023. After proclaiming his candidacy in the December 2024 presidential elections, Nangaa decided his life was in danger in the Congo and fled the country for Kenya ([Africa Report](#), December 18, 2023).

Formation of the River Congo Alliance

In mid-December 2023, Nangaa joined M23 political leader Bertrand Bisimwa and the leaders of several other Congolese armed opposition groups in a Nairobi hotel to announce the creation of a new political-military alliance—the AFC. Under Nangaa's leadership, the movement is dedicated to expanding the current conflict beyond Nord Kivu into the rest of the DRC. The ultimate goal of the movement is to overthrow the Tshisekedi regime in Kinshasa.

Issues creating resentment of President Tshisekedi's government include allegations of institutional corruption, tribalism, fraudulent taxation, and the use of foreign military forces (both legitimate and mercenary) to provide national security. Nangaa accused Tshisekedi of all these transgressions and more when he proclaimed the AFC. Personal grievances may also have played a factor; there were reports that Tshisekedi's administration planned to kill Nangaa in late 2023 ([Africa Intelligence](#), April 25, 2024).

Accusing the Congolese president of having carried out an "electoral coup d'état" in the

2023 election, Nangaa justified the AFC's rebellion by citing article 64 of the DRC's constitution. The article states: "all Congolese have the duty to oppose any individual or group of individuals who take power by force or who exercise it in violation of the provisions of the present Constitution" ([Africa Report](#), December 18, 2023). Diplomatic reaction to the announcement was immediate, with the DRC recalling its representatives from Kenya and Tanzania and announcing a ban on East African Community (EAC) election observers. [2] Tshisekedi warned Kenya of consequences for its unwelcome accommodation of Congolese rebels.

The East African Role in the Congo

An EAC military force (the East African Community Regional Force, or EACRF) consisting of troops from Kenya, Burundi, Uganda, and South Sudan was deployed to Nord Kivu in November 2022. Failing to restore order, the task force lasted only 11 months before Tshisekedi ordered its withdrawal for lack of effectiveness and a perceived failure to engage in direct combat against rebel forces ([East African \[Nairobi\]](#), December 21, 2023; see [Terrorism Monitor](#), July 9, 2024). The move created friction between the governments of the DRC and Kenya, which provided the leadership for the EACRF.

Kenya continues to refuse to arrest Nangaa or other AFC leaders residing in Nord Kivu (many of whom have also been sentenced to death) on the grounds that it would be "undemocratic." Kenyan president William Ruto responded to Tshisekedi's warning of "consequences" for hosting Nangaa and other opposition leaders by declaring: "Kenya is a democracy. We cannot arrest anybody who has issued a statement. We do not arrest people for making statements, we arrest criminals" ([BBC](#), December 19, 2023).

Unlike his predecessor, Uhuru Kenyatta, President Ruto of Kenya does not have warm relations with Tshisekedi. Though no longer in power, Kenyatta continues to

condemn Kenya's hosting of DRC rebel leaders who use violence to achieve their ends ([BBC](#), December 19, 2023).

A Creature of Rwanda?

According to FARDC Major General Sylvain Ekenge, Nangaa merely provides cover for Rwandan president Paul Kagame: "It is Rwanda that is attacking us. We are doing everything possible to bring the war back to where it came from" ([Radio Okapi](#), August 2, 2024). The Rwandan government vigorously denied allegations that it had provided military support to M23 or the AFC until it later admitted having done so at the D.C. peace agreement.

The military governor of the eastern province of Ituri, Lieutenant General Luboya N'kashama Johnny, followed the DRC government's line of portraying Nangaa as a traitor in the service of Rwanda: "[Nangaa] said: 'my Iturian brothers, wait for me, I'm coming to you.' Nangaa, you have no brothers here... You come with foreigners and you say: 'my brothers.' You have no brothers here..." ([Bunia Actualité](#), September 6, 2024).

In May 2024, President Ruto was interviewed on the question of M23's alleged ties to Rwanda and the appropriateness of Kenya hosting Congolese dissidents: "As heads of state, during a meeting, we asked: 'The M23, are the members of this group Rwandans or Congolese?' And the DRC told us: 'They are Congolese.' End of debate. If they are Congolese, how does this become a Rwandan problem? How does this become a Kagame problem?" ([Jeune Afrique](#), May 22, 2024).

Bisimwa rejected consistent accusations from Kinshasa that his M23 movement is supported by Rwanda and Uganda. He suggested that, if this was the case, M23 would be able to take the DRC capital of Kinshasa in just two months ([The Independent](#) [Kampala], November 22, 2023). A loosely observed July 2024 ceasefire agreement helped to temporarily

draw the wind from the rebels' sails. President Tshisekedi remained puzzled as to why the international community did not discipline Rwanda with sanctions for its military interference in the DRC, due in part to the fact that the struggle lost the battle to attract international attention long ago.

A Death Sentence

For his efforts to overthrow Tshisekedi, Nangaa found himself being tried *in absentia* along with 25 others at N'dolo prison by the Kinshasa/Gombe Military Court in July 2024. After an expeditious trial of 15 days, the defendants were found guilty of war crimes, insurrection, and treason. A guilty verdict on August 8 was followed by immediate sentencing—all defendants were sentenced to death ([Le Quotidien](#) [Kinshasa], August 10, 2024). The DRC's then-minister of justice, Constant Mutamba, expressed "pride and joy" in the military justice system for being able to bring judgment down on so many defendants "in record time" ([Radio Okapi](#), August 8, 2024; [Congo-press](#), August 8, 2024). The DRC's moratorium on the death penalty was lifted in March 2024—a matter of more distress for the five of the condemned who were actually present for the trial than for Nangaa, who remained safely in Nairobi.

Before his conviction, Nangaa described the charges as "a big joke," blaming his prosecution on "the ignorance, populism, and thoughtlessness of a regime at bay" ([Congo-press](#), July 26, 2024). After the sentence was imposed, Nangaa called it the product of "a sick justice system at the service of Mr. Tshisekedi in a rotten democracy" ([Media Congo](#), August 8, 2024).

Concurrent with the trial, Nangaa (again) and the AFC (for the first time) became the subject of U.S. sanctions on July 25, 2024, for "driving political instability, violent conflict, and civilian displacement" ([U.S. Treasury Department](#), July 25, 2024). Days after the sanctions were imposed, prominent Congolese human rights

advocate Christopher Ngoyi Mutamba described Nangaa as “a criminal, a puppet recruited by Paul Kagame, president of Rwanda...” ([Tempête des Tropiques](#) [Kinshasa], July 31, 2024).

Nangaa described the sanctions as “unfair” and denounced “the use of unilateral foreign policy tools decried by the entire Global South, which represents the world majority...” ([Congo-press](#), July 26, 2024).
[3]

The AFC/M23 Offensive and Peace Agreement

Nangaa’s M23 military allies launched an offensive in Nord Kivu in late 2024. By late January 2025, General Sultani Makenga’s troops, with the alleged support of several thousand Rwandan regulars, broke through Goma’s defenses. As they took control of the Nord Kivu capital on January 30, other AFC/M23 fighters began to spread into mineral-rich areas of neighboring Sud Kivu. By February 18, they had taken that province’s capital, Bukavu ([Al Jazeera](#), February 16). As the AFC and M23 consolidated military and administrative control of the region and its resources, the DRC government offered a five-million-dollar bounty in March for aid in the arrest of Nangaa, Sultani Makenga, and Bertrand Bisimwa.

In an interview with the Associated Press, Nangaa rejected American involvement (and its interest in the Congo’s mineral riches) in resolving the crisis in the eastern Congo: “This problem can be better resolved by the concerned Congolese, not foreigners with different geopolitical agendas... Trying to bribe the United States with mines can undermine U.S. credibility.” Negotiations without the participation of the AFC would also fail: “Anything regarding us which is done without us, it’s against us” ([AP](#), March 25). The peace agreement calls for the withdrawal of Rwandan troops from Kivu in 90 days and the disarmament of “non-state armed groups,” despite the exclusion of the latter

from the peace process ([Eastleighvoice](#) [Nairobi], June 28).

Parallel peace talks in Doha that do involve the AFC/M23 have stalled, though a successful outcome is necessary before the economic part of the D.C. accord can be implemented. Tshisekedi continues to be inclined to work through the international community while ignoring the AFC and M23. In a speech in Goma on the 65th anniversary of the Congo’s independence, Nangaa insisted: “To lie to both the national and international public that there is no crisis in the DRC and that it is merely a conflict between Kigali and Kinshasa is an unacceptable deception” ([Nile Post](#) [Kampala], June 30).

Conclusion

Like many rebel leaders in the past, Corneille Nangaa finds himself subject to the political whims of the external forces that support his rebellion. Any improvement in relations between the DRC and Kenya or Rwanda has the potential to render Nangaa irrelevant and subject to abandonment by his hosts. To make matters worse, Nangaa has no military experience and no armed men under his direct control, making it difficult to assert the independence needed to carry on by himself. M23 is the strongest element in his AFC coalition; by that measure, its support or lack thereof can determine the future of Nangaa, who, after being left out of the American-sponsored peace talks, could easily find himself squeezed out of the Congolese political equation entirely.

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Notes:

[1] For background on Makenga, see the AIS Special Report titled “General Sultani Makenga, Donald Trump and the Battle for Tantalum in the Congo” ([Aberfoyle International Security](#), June 2).

[2] The “Global South” is, in its broadest sense, a reference to the developing world, but also a replacement term for “Third World,” which has come to be regarded in certain quarters as a pejorative (see [Carnegie Endowment](#), August 15, 2023).

[3] The EAC was founded in 1967 and consists of eight states: the DRC, Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Sudan. Its headquarters is located in Tanzania.