



Global development

Supermarket guards, truck drivers and ‘very big mistakes’: the failed role of western mercenaries in the fall of Goma

An investigation into the DRC’s use of hundreds of hired Romanian fighters reveals how a disorganised operation with untrained recruits became a deadly ‘circus’

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In January, after the two-year siege of the Congolese city of Goma ended with victory for the M23 rebels and Rwandan troops, an ill-assorted group of nearly 300 white mercenaries were lined up to have their humiliating defeat televised.

“You must not joke with us,” barked Willy Ngoma, the M23’s military spokesperson, at one man he’d ordered to sit on the ground with his hands clasped behind his head.

The day before, on 28 January, the M23 militia and Rwandan soldiers had together captured the largest city in the eastern DRC. It was a spectacular defeat, not just for Congolese forces, but also for the Europeans whom the government had hoped would protect Goma.

Congolese leaders have a history of employing white mercenaries. They led infamous campaigns against rebels in the turbulent years after independence from Belgium in 1960. Former Congolese dictator Mobutu Sese Seko also hired ex-Yugoslav mercenaries as his regime collapsed in the 1990s.



📷 The DRC’s commander in chief, Maj Gen Louis Bobozo (left) with the French mercenary Col Bob Denard in Kisangani in October 1966. Photograph: Bettmann/Getty Images

In late 2022, with the M23 surrounding Goma, the DRC government hired two private-military firms. One, named Agemira, was made up of about 40 former French security personnel who provided intelligence and logistical support to the Congolese army.

The bulk of the mercenaries came from a second firm headed by Horațiu Potra, a Transylvanian and former French legionnaire, known for handling security for politicians and mining sites in [Africa](#). At their height, Potra's men in DRC, who were predominantly Romanian, numbered about 1,000. In security circles, they were known as “the Romeos”.

The operation was sloppy, marred by pay disputes and equipment shortages. It deployed ex-members of the security forces but also untrained recruits, such as supermarket guards, according to a one-year joint investigation from the Guardian, Romania's Public Record and Belgium's Le Soir. The Romeos also worked closely with local militias and participated in combat.

As Congolese and allied military forces around Goma crumbled between 27 and 28 January, the Romeos made a run for the main UN base in the city centre, abandoning equipment, rifles and jeeps. “They were imminently going to be killed,” says a senior UN official, who asked to remain anonymous. M23 fighters then arrived at the UN base and gave the Romeos two hours to surrender. Some scaled the walls of the adjacent Serena Hotel to look down into the compound, creating panic inside.



📷 Members of the M23 rebel group in Goma supervise the exit of mercenaries on 29 January, a day after M23 and Rwandan forces captured the city. Photograph: Arlette Bashizi/Reuters

“It was a real, real crisis,” says the senior UN official, who added that high-stakes negotiations involving world presidents led to an extraction deal, an account confirmed by two other UN sources.

After the M23 military spokesperson had finished scolding them, the Romeos boarded UN buses with caged windows. More than 280 mercenaries from the original 1,000 - many left before Goma’s fall - were driven to the Rwandan border and flown home. At least four had been killed during their two-year deployment in North Kivu province. “It was a circus,” says one Romanian ex-special forces member, who stayed in the DRC for only six weeks because conditions were so dire.

In 2022, word had spread quickly in Romanian security circles that Potra was recruiting. Underpaid men with mortgages and families jumped at the opportunity. Some, like Potra, were ex-French foreign legionnaires. Some were just his mates. Others were security guards, or former (and serving) army or police, who sometimes took unpaid leave to sign up.

On arrival in Goma, contractors signed a three-page contract. The salary was between \$5,000-\$6,000 (3,900-£4,600) a month, depending on seniority, according to four different contracts signed between 2022 and 2024 and seen by the Guardian.



📷 Horatiu Potra, whose firm recruited as many as 1,000 Romanians to work with the Congolese army.
Photograph: Octav Ganea/Inquam Photos

Initially, they signed with a UK-registered company called GPH La Role Ltd, owned by Potra's brother, before contracts were transferred to a Congolese-registered company, Amani Sarl. The contract was three months on, one month off, with no medical insurance. Potra's company provided a bulletproof vest and an AK-47. Any other equipment, the contractors had to buy for themselves.

For Victor Railean, a Moldovan private security officer who first met Potra in 2019, this nonetheless represented a significant opportunity. He went to DRC to build a nest egg for his son, whom he loved "madly", according to his sister Victoria Goņ. Railean was shot in February 2024 during an ambush in the volcanic hills about 15 miles (25km) from Goma. He died from his wounds. Vasile Badea, a former Romanian policeman, was also killed that day. Their group had requested extraction beforehand, according to WhatsApp voice recordings reviewed by the Guardian.

■ ■ *They were lying about our numbers. Instead of having 100 people in the field, they had 70. In the end, the company's goal was profit*
Contractor

One contractor told Potra during the battle: "We can't move because they're hunting us with snipers. If we leave here they'll blow your head off."

A survivor of the ambush told the Guardian: "Very big mistakes were made, they were

pointed out, they weren't rectified. As a result, boys died."

Five contractors described a disorganised operation, with untrained and unsuitable recruits. Two western officials in Goma estimated that only about 30% of the contractors had served in the French Foreign Legion.

"When you bring in truck drivers, security guards and people over 60 ... I realised this wasn't well organised, so I asked to go home," says the recruit who described Potra's private military firm as "a circus".



📷 Romanian contractors in Sake, North Kivu, after an M23 rebel offensive in the region in April 2023. Photograph: De Viguerie Veronique/Paris Match/Getty

The contractors were deployed to fortified positions near frontlines in hills north of Goma and around a contested satellite town to the north-west. Officially, their contracts stated they would conduct “training, qualification and certification of local security staff”.

Felix Tshisekedi, the president of the DRC, has **denied** they were mercenaries, saying they provided “coaching” on the battlefield. However, video footage and testimony points to a military operation.

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There was a “quick reaction force” to extract men under attack, teams flying surveillance drones and others coordinating artillery strikes. Romeos dressed in

military fatigues fired heavy machine guns and operated mortars, according to footage. In some cases, they said they fired artillery themselves.

One, with combat experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, says mortar teams fired at M23 positions during two weeks in spring 2024. He stopped participating in attacks because they were beyond his contract or pay grade. “I [was] participating in military operations on the house [for free],” he says.



📷 A Romanian military contractor undergoes a security check at the Grande Barrier border crossing with Rwanda, as he is evacuated from Goma on 29 January. Photograph: Thomas Mukoya/Reuters

Pay disputes were frequent among the Romeos. There were also tensions within the Congolese troops - paid about \$100 a month - over the mercenaries’ salaries.

The DRC is among the five poorest countries in the world, according to the World Bank, and more than 70% of the population survives on less than \$2.15 a day. According to four contractors, Potra’s firm overcounted the manpower numbers.

“They were lying about our numbers. Instead of having 100 people in the field, they had 70,” said one contractor, explaining that he’d pretended to live in four different housing units to fool inspectors. Contractors also perceived equipment shortages as cost-cutting measures. “In the end, the company’s goal was profit,” said one.

Neither Potra nor the Congolese presidency responded to requests for comment. The Congolese army spokesperson said he had “no comment to make”.

The M23 captured large territories in eastern DRC after launching an offensive in late 2021. In response, the DRC’s weak army began relying on pro-government militias, collectively known in Swahili as *Wazalendo* - patriots. The Wazalendo range from unstructured groups to organised militias with thousands of fighters, such as the Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS) or the Coalition of Movements for Change (CMC), whose leaders face sanctions for crimes including the recruitment of child soldiers.



📷 Men believed to be Romanian military contractors are escorted to their transport after crossing the border into Rwanda on 29 January. Photograph: Tony Karumba/AFP/Getty Images

The Romeos cooperated with local militias, providing money and ammunition, according to audio recordings and interviews. Some of the militias have been accused of war crimes, which could make the Romeos complicit, according to legal experts the Guardian spoke to.

However, it is not clear which militia groups they cooperated with, as none of the fighters interviewed specified. One contractor says the relationship was strained “until we started giving them money”.

Security officials say the Romeos were aware of legal limits to their engagements. Contractors interviewed insist they weren’t mercenaries. “If you’re from the west, you’re a military contractor. If you’re from the east, you’re a mercenary,” scoffs one.

Whether a military contractor is legally a mercenary is complex, but it can have consequences in jurisdictions such as France, which bans mercenary activity. Many Romanian instructors, as former legionnaires, have French nationality.



📷 Some of the men who worked in DRC say they are now struggling to find work after being labelled as mercenaries. Photograph: Thomas Mukoya/Reuters

“These actors are multiplying and it’s crucial to consider creating an independent investigative body that could support accountability efforts,” says Jelena Aparac, former president of the UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries.

Last year, Potra hosted a journalist from Romania’s public broadcaster to observe his men training Congolese troops. However, one contractor says that was set up: “We only pretended to train people when the press came.” Another says he is struggling to find work after being labelled a mercenary. “It’s a problem we all have. Barely any of us can get hired now.”

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