

Rubaya Coltan Nexus: M23 Resource Extraction and the Rwandan Supply Chain

Rubaya, Masisi Territory, North Kivu, DRC

1°32'46.5"S, 28°52'24.7"E

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Incident Date: 30 April 2024 - Present

Fatalities: 600+

Injured: Hundreds

Victim(s) Profile: Artisanal miners, including children as young as 10; Congolese civilians subject to M23 taxation and reported forced-labour condition

Aggressor(s): March 23 Movement (M23) / Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC), with Rwandan Defence Force (RDF) military, logistical, and financial support per United Nations Group of Experts reporting

Rubaya, a mining town in Masisi Territory roughly 60–70 km northwest of Goma, sits atop one of the world's richest coltan (columbite-tantalite) deposits, accounting for an estimated 15–30% of global tantalum supply. M23 tightened its grip on the transport routes around Rubaya in late 2023 and seized the mines themselves on 30 April 2024, with Rwandan military support the UN says was decisive to the operation. Since then, M23 has run a parallel administration taxing the coltan trade at an estimated \$4 per

kilogram, generating roughly \$800,000 a month, and UN experts estimate that more than 120 tonnes of coltan a month (over 1,400 tonnes within the first year of the takeover) have been smuggled into Rwanda, re-exported as Rwandan production, and sold into the supply chains of major global electronics and automotive brands. Since M23's capture of Goma in January 2025, much of this trade now passes openly through the city's Grande Barrière border crossing. Compounding the human cost of this extraction, unregulated and unmaintained mine tunnels at Rubaya have collapsed repeatedly, with landslides in June 2025, January 2026, and March 2026 killing well over 600 people combined.

M23, a predominantly Congolese Tutsi rebel movement that the UN and Western governments say is backed by Rwanda, resumed operations in North Kivu in late 2021. By late 2023 it had seized the main transport routes into and out of Rubaya, and on 30 April 2024 it captured the mines directly, announcing the seizure on 2 May. Rubaya had previously been controlled by Pareco-FF, an armed group that the US Treasury later described as having held the site from 2022 until M23's takeover and that has since opposed M23. UN Group of Experts reporting released in 2025 concluded that the capture of Rubaya would not have been possible without Rwandan military assistance, citing an estimated 3,000-4,000 Rwandan soldiers fighting alongside M23 and describing Rwandan provision of advanced equipment including jamming systems, short-range air defence, and armed drones. The same reporting found M23's area of operations expanded by roughly 30% between April and November 2024. Rwanda has consistently denied backing M23 or profiting from Congolese minerals.

Taxation

Since taking Rubaya, M23 has operated a parallel administration that taxes coltan at the mine gate. UN experts cite a rate of roughly \$4 per kilogram for M23 itself, with a further levy reported around \$3 per kilogram collected on the Rwandan side of the border and controls which traders are permitted to operate. UN estimates place M23's take at approximately \$800,000 per month since May 2024. Between May and October 2024 alone, UN experts estimated more than 120 tonnes of coltan moved from Rubaya into

Rwanda each month; within the first year of the takeover, at least 1,400 tonnes had crossed the border, which UN experts characterized as the “largest contamination of mineral supply chains” recorded in the African Great Lakes region in a decade. Rwanda's official coltan exports rose roughly 2.5 times between 2021 and 2025, and coltan is now Rwanda's second-largest export earner after gold; the Rwanda Development Board has stated annual domestic production figures of 8,000–9,000 tonnes of tantalum-related minerals that UN investigators say are used to lend a plausible domestic origin to the smuggled ore.

Supply Chain

Smuggling routes historically relied on indirect night-time crossings through lightly monitored stretches of the DRC–Rwanda border. Since M23's capture of Goma in January 2025, Global Witness reports that loads increasingly cross openly through the city's Grande Barrière border post, at times in view of Rwandan border officials. Once inside Rwanda, the ore is reportedly mixed with domestic production in Kigali before being assembled into export cargoes. A June 2026 Global Witness investigation found that at least five of the seven companies responsible for roughly 85% of Rwanda's coltan exports routinely purchase conflict ore originating from Rubaya, naming Rwandan exporter African Panther — whose export volumes in 2024 reportedly exceeded its combined total for the previous four years — and Rwandan buyer Boss Mining Solution Limited among named purchasers. A separate April 2025 Global Witness investigation implicated the EU-based trading house Traxys. From Rwanda, the ore is reported to move to smelters including several Chinese facilities and Kazakhstan's Ulba Metallurgical Plant, which refine it into tantalum for use in capacitors. Global Witness names Microsoft, Apple, Sony, Amazon, Nvidia, Toyota, Vodafone, LG Display, Ericsson, and Honda among global brands whose supply chains it says may unknowingly contain tantalum traceable to Rubaya — the report does not allege these companies knowingly purchased conflict minerals, but argues it demonstrates the limits of current supply-chain due diligence.

Sanctions

In August 2025, the US Treasury sanctioned Pareco-FF (the armed group that controlled Rubaya before M23) along with the Congolese mining company CDMC, which the Treasury said sold minerals sourced and smuggled from mines near Rubaya, and two Hong Kong-based export companies, East Rise and Star Dragon, accused of buying from the armed group. M23/AFC itself remains under existing US sanctions. Global Witness and allied organisations have called on the international community to suspend military exports to Rwanda, condition assistance on the withdrawal of Rwandan troops and an end to support for M23, and sanction implicated companies and officials; the European Union has faced calls to freeze development assistance to Rwanda on similar grounds. UN Group of Experts reporting to the Security Council in July 2025 warned of an increasing risk of cross-border fraud enabling continued smuggling of North Kivu coltan into Rwanda.

Labor Conditions

Rubaya's coltan is extracted almost entirely by hand in narrow, unregulated tunnels, with reports of miners working under threat of violence for defying M23 directives and of children, some as young as 10, drawn into artisanal digging under dangerous conditions. Tunnels at the site are frequently over-mined and left without structural maintenance. A landslide on 20 June 2025 collapsed tunnels at the site; initial wire reporting placed the toll at roughly 16 dead, though at least one subsequent account puts total deaths from that incident significantly higher, a discrepancy this report has not been able to resolve. A far larger disaster struck on 28 January 2026, when heavy rain triggered landslides at the Luwowo mining site, within Rubaya's Matanda grouping; an initial toll of roughly 200 dead, given by the spokesperson for the M23- installed provincial governor, was revised upward to more than 400 confirmed dead by 2 February as recovery work continued, with some bodies never recovered due to mud and continued insecurity. A second landslide struck the same site on 4 March 2026, killing more than 200 further people. Combined, the two 2026 collapses are estimated to have killed over 600 people. The Congolese government has blamed M23 for permitting unsafe, unregulated mining without adequate safety oversight; an AFC/M23 official told Reuters that continued operation had been “discouraged” pending security and safety measures, attributing the immediate cause to

heavy rainfall. Mine collapses are not unique to M23 control of the site — a landslide at Rubaya in 2013, under different control, killed an estimated 100 miners — indicating the underlying risk is structural to the site's unregulated artisanal mining rather than attributable solely to any single controlling authority, even as M23's continued operation of the site without safety investment has drawn direct criticism.

Recent Activity

As of early 2026, Rubaya remains under M23/AFC control amid a broader, ongoing DRC government offensive against the group on multiple fronts. Congolese government forces conducted a drone strike targeting the Rubaya mining site in late February 2026, part of a wider campaign against M23-held territory that has continued alongside international mediation efforts. The mine's continued strategic and financial importance to M23, even after the catastrophic 2026 collapses, has kept it a focal point of both the military conflict and the international sanctions and due-diligence response.

- **Financing and tonnage figures throughout are UN Group of Experts and Global Witness estimates rather than audited data; multiple sources broadly converge on the \$800,000/month and ~120 tonnes/month figures for 2024, but should be treated as informed estimate**
- **Brand names listed in the Supply Chain section are reported by Global Witness as appearing in downstream supply chains that may carry Rubaya-origin tantalum; this is not an allegation that any named company knowingly purchased conflict minerals, and none of the companies' own responses to these findings were independently reviewed for this report.**

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