“You rely on the aid from those who steal from us and kill”

Tracking Aid Narratives on Social Media: Recent Observations from the DRC

30 January 2026

This briefing by Insecurity Insight analyses public social media activity from **12 - 24 January 2026** in the DRC.

Understanding how aid actors are portrayed online is increasingly critical. Social media narratives shape community perceptions of humanitarian organisations and can influence operational access and staff safety. As online discourse becomes more central to how aid is understood and contested, monitoring these narratives is an important component for aid acceptance, security management, programming and communication with affected populations. By tracking both emerging and entrenched narratives on social media, this briefing provides insight into how public sentiment towards aid actors is developing. It aims to support policymakers and humanitarian practitioners in strengthening community acceptance in a rapidly shifting aid environment.

This briefing is the first edition of a longer-term initiative for the DRC to examine how aid agency acceptance or rejection is expressed on social media. The content is selected based on predefined lists of UN agencies, international NGOs, local NGOs and civil society organisations and general key words related to humanitarian and development assistance in the DRC. Comments associated with posts that attracted the highest number of comments were analysed qualitatively to identify dominant narratives. **This edition covers examples of**

- **how donor funding announcements and security-related posts trigger distinct narratives**, with humanitarian aid frequently interpreted through political and security lenses, particularly when donors or international actors are perceived as aligned with conflict dynamics or external interests.
- **how international organisations are judged on security outcomes rather than aid mandates**, with UN actors, MONUSCO, and human rights organisations assessed online in terms of their perceived ability to stop violence, protect civilians, and enforce accountability, rather than through principled aid approaches -

The selection does not represent the full scope of online discussions on aid in the DRC but highlights the most visible public narratives during a 14 day period. To respect privacy, the analysis draws only on **public posts with identifiable DRC-based IP addresses**, excluding any content that users did not consciously make public such as discussions that took place in private groups, closed networks, encrypted messaging platforms, and from users who choose to mask their location. Public sentiment towards the aid sector develops over time, shaped by personal experience, exposure to selective narratives, and evolving conflict dynamics. To build and sustain acceptance in digital spaces, policymakers and practitioners need communication strategies that are responsive to these constraints and sensitivities as part of broader acceptance, access, and security approaches.

Key Takeaways

Donor funding announcements trigger hostile narratives

Three posts on facebook reaching an estimated 60K social media users, announcing French and European Union humanitarian funding for eastern DRC generated **211 comments**, of which an estimated **86% expressed negative sentiment** toward aid, donors, or both. Engagement was dominated by responses

framing humanitarian assistance as unnecessary, deceptive, or actively harmful. Commenters repeatedly asserted that **peace, security, and an end to external involvement** are the only priorities.

> **"We need peace, not humanitarian aid."** ("Nous avons besoin de la paix et non aide humanitaire")

A dominant narrative portrayed donor funding as **complicit in violence**, rather than neutral humanitarian support. France was repeatedly accused of aligning with Rwanda and the M23.

> **"It is to supply his Tutsi puppets in the M23, not for the benefit of the Congolese people.."** ("C'est pour ravitailler ses pantins tutsis du M23, ce n'est pas au bénéfice des congolais..")

Humanitarian assistance was commonly described as **"poison"**, or a mechanism for indebting the country after contributing to conflict dynamics.

> **"Still in debt 😭. We'll end up selling this country."** ("Toujours des dettes 😭. On finira par vendre ce pays.")

Responses to a post on the European Union's €2 million allocation for South Kivu combined rejection with criticism of **scale and credibility**.

> **"The EU gave us 2 million, but some politicians are embezzling more than 50 million."** ("Nde tobengi kindoki l' UE nous 2 millions mais certains politiciens détournent plus de 50 millions")
>
> **"How much are you going to embezzle?"** ("Vous allez détournement combien ?")

What this tells us

- The response to donor funding announcements in this dataset shows that humanitarian aid is being interpreted primarily through **political, historical, and security lenses**, rather than through assessments of humanitarian need or delivery. Donor identity, perceived alignment, and assumed intent dominate how assistance is understood.
- In this context, public donor announcements risk reinforcing suspicion when they are not accompanied by credible signals addressing peace, security, and detailed information on the donation parameters. The comments suggest that, for a visible and vocal online audience, humanitarian funding alone does not translate into acceptance and may instead activate entrenched rejection narratives.

Social media actor snapshot: Iran Embassy narratives on NGOs and "regime change"

The X account of the Iran Embassy in the DRC published a post framing Western media and US-funded NGOs as drivers of *regime-change narratives*, drawing on image with the National Endowment for Democracy logo. Although this post reached only 88 social media users and generated no comments, its significance lies in who is speaking rather than scale: a foreign diplomatic mission operating inside the DRC information space, advancing narratives that blur humanitarian action with geopolitical interference.

Image manipulation:

- The headline shown (*"Western media whitewashes deadly riots in Iran…"*) is **not published by the** National

Endowment for Democracy. The piece exists as an opinion article on third-party sites; the **logo appears to be used out of context**.

- The photo frame carries a **Media Bisimchi** watermark. Bisimchi is described as a **state-aligned outlet** within Iran's information ecosystem and is commonly linked to messaging supportive of the **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)**.

Why this matters

- Even at low reach, embassy-level messaging can seed delegitimising frames about NGOs that may later be amplified by local actors during crises, contributing to suspicion of aid organisations as political instruments rather than neutral responders.

- Social media narratives are created, carried and reinterpreted simultaneously at a local and global level with complex connections between actors, contexts and values.

Reactions to security-related posts: accountability demands dominate, aid-sector criticism remains limited

Three facebook posts referencing forced displacement from Goma to Rwanda and human insecurity in Uvira following the AFC/M23 withdrawal, express expectations that **MONUSCO**, the **United Nations**, the **African Union**, and **Human Rights Watch** should intervene to protect civilians, or to ensure accountability. Together, the posts generated 311 comments. An estimated **5% of comments expressed negative sentiment toward the international multilateral system**. Most engagement focused on security dynamics, particularly who bears responsibility for violence, which actors have legitimacy to speak or act, and whether international involvement is viewed as protective, complicit, or inappropriate. Some comments even allege that international organisations were actively working and protecting M23:

> **"[...] and the so-called community he refers to is not really in a position to make such statements, given that when M23 arrived in Uvira, a large number of supporters from this community sheltered M23 soldiers.[...]"** ("[...] et le soi-disant communauté qu'il évoque ne sont pas vraiment mieux placé pour donner ses genre des propos, quant M23 est arrivée à Uvira une grande partie des partisans de cette communauté ont ébergé les militaires de M23[...] ")

Facebook posts referencing **Human Rights Watch** statements on forced displacement from Goma to Rwanda, reports of sexual violence used as a weapon of war in eastern DRC, and a government rebuttal of an HRW report on Uvira accusing the organisation of distortion and partiality generating 39 negative comments. Commenters question the utility of reports and denunciations in the absence of visible consequences, protection for civilians, or progress toward justice.

> **"Human Rights Watch speaks out and has spoken out before, but what are they doing to help and put an end to this war?????"** ("Human Rights watch parle et avait déjà parlé , ils font quoi pour l'assistance et mettre fin à cette guerre ??????")

Some comments go further by **contesting HRW's neutrality and legitimacy**. In some comments, HRW is grouped with the UN, the EU, and "the international community" as part of a system seen as ineffective.

> **"Its human rights NGOs funded by the EU, which have always supported rebellions in Africa, particularly in the DRC."** ("Ce sont des ONG des droits de l'homme à la solde de l'UE qui a toujours soutenu les rébellions en Afrique et particulièrement, en RDC.")

In a small number of comments responding specifically to statements by **a HRW director**, the criticism became personalised with gendered and ethnic slurs, reflecting how accountability messaging on sexual violence can trigger highly hostile and identity-based reactions.

> **"Stupid witch of a woman, your face looks like that of Tutsis"** ("Ndoki zoba ya mwasi tala elongi lokola ya ba tutsi")

What this tells us

- The content of the HRW report - that human rights abuses took place - is not contested in the social media conversations. In the identified posts, the negative sentiment is expressed in relation to the inability to act, prevent and ensure justice.
- In these comments, "international organisations" are primarily discussed through a security lens: intervention, protection, mandate, and legitimacy. The comment space is used less to debate help and support for survivors but focuses on responsibility and credibility.
- The low share of aid-sector criticism suggests that, for these posts, online engagement is driven by security grievances and accountability demands, with international actors judged mainly on whether they can stop violence, prevent forced displacement, and enforce consequences, not on how they seek to help.

MONUSCO: security expectations, and reduced negative engagement

Fourteen posts referencing **MONUSCO**, 13 on Facebook and one post on X, reached an estimated **300,000 social media users** and generated **153 comments**, of which approximately **15% expressed negative sentiment** toward MONUSCO or the UN system. Criticism focused on the mission's inability to prevent territorial losses, civilian harm, or repeated cycles of violence, often framed in historical terms. For many social media users, any civilian death in areas where peacekeepers are present is interpreted as a failure to provide protection, which casts peacekeepers as combat troops. This mismatch between expectations and what peacekeepers are mandated to deliver feeds the anger and mistrust that dominate online discourse around MONUSCO.

> **"The profiles of all UN personnel must be audited."** ("Il faut auditer le profil de tous les personnels de l'ONU.")

> **"The UN is made up of traitors to the DRC and to Africa as a whole, using our own African brothers."** ("L'ONU est composée des traîtres pour la RDC et pour l'Afrique entière en utilisant nos propres frères Africains.")

The **15% negative comments collected** is substantially lower than levels documented in earlier monitoring. Between **August and September 2025**, analysis of posts mentioning MONUSCO found that **approximately 65% of comments expressed negative sentiment**.

At the same time, positive engagement clustered around **localised, non-security activities**, such as training, prison reform, and support to civil society and women's organisations.

> **"A very commendable initiative. It would be highly desirable to establish therapeutic groups in order to create community mechanisms in terms of champion communities. See experiences Rheeg Rdc Positive Masculinity"** (**"**Très très bel initiative. Il serait vraiment souhaitable de faire des groupes thérapeutiques afin de

créer des mécanismes communautaires en termes des communautés championnes. Voir expériences Rheeg Rdc Masculinité Positive")

"Thank you very much for this training, which I have already completed with MONUSCO Bunia, and I am now raising awareness and training other young people in my community." ("Merci beaucoup pour cette formation que j'ai déjà suivie avec la monusco bunia et moi je sensibilise et forme d'autres jeunes de ma communauté.")

What this tells us

- Engagement around MONUSCO continues to be shaped primarily by security expectations, rather than by the mission's mandate. When MONUSCO is mentioned in connection with ceasefires, territorial control, or violence against civilians, commenters largely judge the mission as if it were a combat force responsible for stopping armed groups or preventing attacks outright.
- At the same time, the comments show a **clear distinction in how MONUSCO is perceived across issue areas**. Localised, civilian-facing activities (training, prison reform, support to women's organisations and civil society) generate more constructive and affirming engagement. This suggests that MONUSCO's legitimacy in online discourse is **context-dependent**: sharply contested in relation to protection and conflict outcomes, but more positively received when framed around tangible, community-level support rather than battlefield outcomes.
- **Context matters:** topics that can be controversial can also be discussed constructively on social media. When people stay silent about their values, they leave space for others to define them.

Masisi hospital fire: Empathy and solidarity dominate

Three facebook posts generating 144 comments reporting on the **fire at the General Referral Hospital of Masisi**, involving facilities supported by **Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)**, reached an estimated **980,000 social media users**. Engagement was overwhelmingly empathetic: among the comments analysed, **only one expressed negative sentiment**. Reactions focused on **condolences** for the families of the four patients who died as well as for MSF staff and hospital personnel.

MSF was framed as a **trusted, community-embedded medical actor**, not as an external or political organisation. Questions about the cause of the fire or the investigation remained **technical and non-accusatory**, centred on prevention rather than blame.

What this tells us:

- When humanitarian actors have created a space on social media where they are associated with **life-saving medical care and shared loss**, social media discourse can shift away from suspicion or rejection toward **solidarity and trust.**
- Causality cannot be proven, but these responses followed a well-received online campaign in the DRC introducing staff and values - suggesting that reputation-building efforts can meaningfully reduce harmful interpretations of tragedy.

Key numbers

Social media is a fast-moving space, requiring analysis to be focused on clearly identified subjects and questions. The figures below describe how a much larger online communication was reduced to a manageable sample of comments by focusing on posts with the highest engagement around topics that contribute to shaping public perceptions of aid actors. Because social media connects local experiences with external audiences, comment language is a key indicator of how local and external narratives interact. The distribution of comments by organisation type reflects the complex structure of the aid sector, in which UN agencies, international organisations, and local civil society operate with different mandates and levels of visibility, and are therefore perceived in distinct ways. Negative sentiment is highlighted separately because, even when limited in volume, it can play an outsized role in generating harmful narratives, including misinformation, delegitimisation, and disinformation, with implications for acceptance, access, and staff safety.

Scale of analysis

- **Posts analysed: 39**
- **Estimated total reach: 4.7 million social media users**
- **Total comments analysed: 1,112**

Comment language

- **French:** 978 comments (87%)
- **Lingala:** 54 comments (4.8%)
- **Swahili:** 15 comments (1%)
- **English:** 15 comments (1%)
- **Emojis / no text:** 48 comments (4%)

Comment distribution by organisation type

- **UN system:** 32.8%
- **Donor:** 19.0%
- **International humanitarian organisations:** 18.5%
- **MONUSCO:** 14.1%
- **International development organisations:** 12.5%
- **UN agency:** 2.6%
- **Local NGO / Civil society organisation:** 0.4%

Negative sentiment

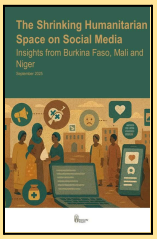
- **Negative comments: 25% of all comments**

Disclaimer: *This is the first edition of a long-term initiative to monitor social media perceptions of the aid sector in the DRC. As a foundational release, the methodology, scope, and presentation will continue to evolve. Feedback on format or content is welcomed at info@insecurityinsight.org*

Other resources

Humanitarian action in the DRC is increasingly shaped by public digital narratives that the aid sector cannot afford to ignore. The distorted nature of some online discussions about aid can at times feel shocking or uncomfortable. While they may be dismissed as expressing the views of marginal voices, their growing reach and impact make it essential to understand the motivation behind them. *The Humanitarian Space on Social Media: Learning from Social Media Narratives in the DRC* shares findings from social media sentiment monitoring in the DRC, with the intention of helping aid organisations to better understand and track emerging narratives and shifts in sentiment. By monitoring online discourse on the humanitarian space that go beyond the brand name of individual aid agencies, aid actors can anticipate local attitudes, build community acceptance and adapt to a rapidly evolving operational environment. In **English** and **French**.

Public online narratives are reshaping the operating environment of the aid sector in the Sahel. *The Shrinking Humanitarian Space on Social Media in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger* focuses on the risks and harms posed by harmful public narratives that frame aid as illegitimate, politicised or foreign controlled. These narratives are steadily shrinking the humanitarian space. As online and offline threats increasingly converge, the report argues that safeguarding digital legitimacy is no longer optional - it is essential to the continuation of principled, neutral, and effective humanitarian action. In **English** and **French**.



Public digital narratives about humanitarian operations shape access, safety, and legitimacy for aid agencies and their partners in Myanmar. *Learning from Social Media Narratives in Myanmar* **explores** the implications of online narratives for communication strategies, policy decisions, and accountability to aid beneficiaries in one of the world's most restrictive and polarised digital environments. Drawing on seven months of public social media monitoring, the report highlights how narratives around aid delivery, health care, displacement, and access blockades intersect with conflict dynamics. The findings are designed to offer contextualised, actionable insights for humanitarian actors seeking to safeguard the principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality while navigating Myanmar's contested information space.

Data Use and Privacy Disclaimer

This report includes analysis of publicly available social media content collected from open platforms. All data has been anonymised to remove or obscure identifying details, and no content from closed groups was used. The analysis was conducted in the public interest and in line with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), under a legitimate interest basis. The purpose of this analysis is to support humanitarian dialogue, inform policy, protect aid workers and those they help, and contribute to public interest research. This document is published by Insecurity Insight - a Humanitarian to Humanitarian (H2H) organisation committed to the Humanitarian Principles.

We welcome questions and feedback. Share what you're observing both on the ground and online. Your insights help us keep the analysis accurate and up-to-date. Email: **info@insecurityinsight.org**. Join our efforts to protect humanitarian space. Subscribe to our **Social Media Monitoring** mailing list. Find more resources at the **Social Media Monitoring** website. **Help support our work by sharing this resource. Please copy and paste this link: https://bit.ly/12-24Jan2026DRCSMMBrief**

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