

## **The European Union must appoint an EU Special Representative for the Great Lakes Region to correct the inconsistencies in its foreign policy**

***Mr High Representative / Vice-President of the EU,  
Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the EU Member States,***

While the European Union (EU) and its Member States affirm in their renewed strategy for the Great Lakes that "the security, stability and prosperity of the countries of the Great Lakes region remains a strategic priority for the EU", 17 European civil society organisations and platforms are expressing their deep concern at the escalation of violence and the worsening humanitarian situation in the East of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). They question the inadequate and uncoordinated response of the EU and its Member States in the region.

The announcement a few weeks ago of the signing of a [memorandum of understanding](#) between the EU and Rwanda on strategic minerals, while the Rwandan-backed March 23 Movement (M23) advances towards Goma, raises concerns. The [revelation](#) in the same month by the Polish head of state, who was visiting Kigali at the time, of an agreement to supply arms to Rwanda in case of an external attack has illustrated the policy of double standards undermining the credibility of international institutions, and more particularly that of the EU and its Member States. The lack of coherence in the response to these crises also raises questions about the sincerity of the EU's commitment to peace in the Great Lakes region.

### **Humanitarian consequences and protection of civilians**

Armed conflicts in the Eastern DRC have resulted in disastrous consequences for the populations, who are the primary victims of the violence. Although obtaining exact figures is challenging due to the volatility of the situation on the ground, as of December 31, 2023, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)) estimated that more than 9,6 million internally displaced persons, including 527,000 refugees, 6.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 2.6 million displaced returnees, making the displacement crisis in the DRC one of the worst in the world, and the second worst in Africa after Sudan. The province of North Kivu alone accounts for [1.6 million](#) displaced people.

The recent upsurge in tensions and the intensification of armed conflict in the East have exponentially increased the number of refugees and displaced persons. Against this backdrop, the population is at risk of serious human rights violations, as evidenced by the [latest report](#) from the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) in the DRC. In 2023, 3,349 human rights violations committed by armed groups were documented, with 77% occurring in conflict zones. Overall, the UNJHRO highlights a deterioration in the human rights situation in the Eastern provinces, due to an escalation of armed clashes.

On the health front, the country is facing severe flooding and a resurgence of epidemics including measles, cholera, malaria and monkeypox. The 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan launched on 20 February by [OCHA](#) amounts to US\$2.6 billion to respond to this alarming humanitarian crisis and assist 8.7 million people whose survival depends largely on emergency aid.

While the primary responsibility for the protection of civilians lies with the Congolese state, it is clear that the various military support initiatives have failed to achieve this objective. The multi-dimensional crisis that has plagued the East of the country for many years fuels chronic instability, thereby hindering the overall development of the region and further weakening the process of state-building in the DRC.

### **Risk of destabilisation in the Great Lakes region**

Several initiatives to bring peace to the East of the DRC have been implemented, although the conflict between the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) and their allied militias, and the M23 is intensifying, as shown by the introduction of a state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri (which is gradually being lifted) and the so-called Nairobi and Luanda diplomatic processes.

In addition to the continuing hostilities between the FARDC and its auxiliaries, and the M23, the involvement of armies from neighbouring countries has raised fears of a wider regional crisis. The Eastern provinces of the DRC, including North Kivu, remain heavily militarised. There are more than [100](#) armed groups still active there, as well as foreign armies, including Ugandan army (in Ituri and North Kivu) and Burundian army (in South Kivu), private military companies, and armed contingents from multinational organisations (those of MONUSCO, which is gradually withdrawing, and those of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), newly deployed to replace the regional force of the East African Community (EAC).

The multiplication of armed actors in the region raises concerns about coordination and responsibility (chain of command) in the conduct of operations, at a time when previous military initiatives appear to have failed.

### **The response of the EU and its Member States**

In the face of this escalation of violence, the inconsistent response of the EU and its Member States raises doubts about the intention and the capacity of the international community to bring peace to the DRC. When economic and political interests take precedence over the moral duty to protect human rights, the impact of such choices on the people, who have been the primary victims of this 30-year conflict, is catastrophic.

On the one hand, the EU signs a memorandum of understanding on strategic minerals to facilitate a green transition in Europe with the DRC (in December 2023) and recently with Rwanda (in February 2024), despite the numerous [human rights violations](#) associated with their extraction, which have already been widely denounced. On the other hand, Poland has also declared its intention to arm Rwanda in the event of an external threat. It is also worth mentioning other EU Member States that finance the Rwandan army in Mozambique via the European Peace Facility (EPF) mechanism. This same mechanism also finances the FARDC unit (31st RR Brigade) deployed notably in the East to combat armed groups, despite the [EU](#) and certain Member States, including [France](#), denouncing the support of the Rwandan army to the M23.

The people of the region are in their full right to question what the real strategy of the EU and its Member States is in their region, and whether it genuinely contributes to establishing a climate of peace. The successive announcements of these decisions by the EU have profoundly disturbed Congolese public opinion and our Congolese civil society partners. These actions risk compromising the efforts already made for the stability, security, and development of the region. They also seriously tarnish the image of the EU and European organisations working for justice and peace in the DRC.

### **Recommendations**

The EU and its Member States must intensify their diplomatic engagement in the region to prevent a deterioration of the situation. The EU and its Member States must also:

- **Urgently appoint an EU Special Representative (EUSR) in the region** and allocate sufficient budgetary provisions for the effective execution of his/her mandate to facilitate dialogue processes among stakeholders and reaffirm the EU's commitment to actively engage in peace efforts in the region. The EUSR's mandate should strongly focus on peace and security, mediation, good governance, the rule of law and human rights.
- **Continue to publicly and firmly condemn any collusion or cooperation with armed groups active in Eastern DRC**, particularly Rwanda's support to the M23, and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR)'s support to the FARDC. In this respect, the pressure and suspension of aid to Rwanda by several foreign powers in 2012 contributed to the de-escalation of the conflict.
- **Condition military aid support to the Rwandan army (under the European Peace Facility)** through requesting an immediate commitment from Rwanda to withdraw its military support to the M23.
- **Encourage the Congolese authorities**, to work with international partners and in close consultation with Congolese civil society, to find necessary measures to avoid a security vacuum in the context of MONUSCO's departure.

- **Support the strengthening of the Congolese state presence**, particularly the police, in provinces affected by the gradual withdrawal of MONUSCO contingents, while ensuring law enforcement in compliance with human rights standards.
- **Increase funding for development assistance and humanitarian aid for the DRC**, addressing the root causes of conflicts, including support for combating impunity and ensuring access to and enjoyment of economic and social rights. In a fragile context of protracted crises such as that of the DRC, the EU's commitment to Nexus programming in eastern DRC remains of the utmost importance.

### **Signatory organisations**

- ACAT (Belgium)
- ACAT (DRC)
- ACAT (Liberia)
- ACAT (France)
- ACAT (Germany)
- Associació Catalana per la Pau (Spain)
- Broederlijk Delen
- Cordaid DRC
- Denis Hurley Peace Institute
- ECPM (Ensemble contre la peine de Mort - Together against the death penalty)
- EurAc (Europe - Central Africa Network)
- FIACAT (International Federation of ACATs)
- FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights)
- The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
- IRCT (International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims)
- ÖNZ (Ökumenisches Netz Zentralafrika)
- SOLSOC