

Urgent action is needed to protect Congolese civil society: EurAc issues a call for international solidarity

To the attention of:

*The High Representative/Vice-President of the EU,
The Commissioner for International Partnerships (DG INTPA),
Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the EU Member States.*

Brussels, April 16 2025 – On June 24, 2024, the Europe-Central Africa Network (EurAc) issued a statement to raise awareness over the shrinking civic space in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and to urgently call on the international community—particularly the European Union (EU)—to strengthen its support to Congolese civil society¹.

Nearly a year later, the DRC faces a new cycle of violence with the rapid progression of the M23, supported by Rwanda. After the fall of Goma, followed by Bukavu, on January 26 and February 14, 2025, respectively, EurAc deemed it essential to voice the concerns of Congolese civil society, now more than ever confronted with existential threats. During an event held on March 20, human rights defenders (HRDs) revealed the extent of the risks they face. They initiated discussions around the strategies that need to be adopted to help them continue defending human rights and fundamental freedoms, despite the many challenges they face.

From the beginning of the 2023 electoral cycle, civil society actors have persistently denounced the hardening of a regime described as 'police-like,' which, in its quest for legitimacy, systematically targets and represses those who speak out against human rights violations. In this context, the decades-long conflict has been used as a justification to further restrict civic space. The establishment of a state of emergency in the eastern provinces, including North Kivu since May 2021, which has been repeatedly extended, stands as the most prominent example. Numerous organizations² have condemned widespread human rights violations, including the ban on peaceful demonstrations, the arbitrary detention of HRDs, journalists, and political opponents, as well as the forced recruitment of youth and acts of intimidation by armed individuals, illustrating this climate of criminalization of civil society work.

Since the end of January 2025, the advance of the M23 in the eastern part of the country has marked a decisive turning point for civic space in the DRC, pushing an already fragile situation to its breaking point. For several weeks, numerous United Nations (UN) reports have documented cases of forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, and acts of torture in North and South Kivu³. In its latest report⁴, the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) recorded no fewer than 309 human rights violations in January, with 60% of these occurring in the North Kivu province alone.

¹ [La société civile congolaise sous pression : les membres du réseau EurAc alertent sur l'érosion de l'espace civique en RDC](#), EurAc, 24 juin 2024

² [Violations de l'espace civique dans les provinces de l'Ituri et du Nord-Kivu sous état de siège](#), CIVICUS

³ [Une experte des Nations Unies exprime son extrême préoccupation pour la sécurité des DDH dans l'Est de la RDC](#), OHCHR, 5 mars 2025

⁴ [Principales tendances des violations des droits de l'homme en RDC janvier 2025](#), 20 mars 2025, BCNUDH

A climate of fear and impunity has been installed⁵. The hostility of the rebels towards civil society's work is openly manifested through threats and harassment, arbitrary detentions, acts of torture, and targeted killings⁶. Citizen movements, such as La Lucha, are particularly at risk, as testifies the assassination of the activist Pierre Byamungu Katema on February 13⁷. Faced with this repression, countless activists and advocates, targeted for their dedication to human rights, are either forced into exile or silenced. Many are relentlessly hunted, forced to abandon their families and hide. Being a journalist, activist, or HRD is now considered a crime and punished as such. This worrisome trend has been confirmed by several of our partners who even qualify these actions as 'manhunt'⁸. The situation is further exacerbated by media censorship and the restriction of communication channels, as demonstrated by the shutdown of several independent radio stations⁹. It is important to highlight that these violations are not solely perpetrated by the rebels: in some instances, the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) and their allied fighters, the Wazalendo, also bear responsibility for these acts¹⁰.

The situation for women is particularly dire. Even before the M23's arrival, in the displacement camps around Goma, our partners were recording up to 50 cases of sexual violence per day, affecting women of all ages. Between January 27 and February 2, UNICEF reported a fivefold increase in the number of rape victims, with 30% of them being children¹¹. The mass prison escapes in Goma, Kalehe, Bukavu, Kabare, and Uvira, which resulted in the release of several war criminals, have created an additional threat to women and particularly to survivors of sexual violence who had reported these crimes, as well as to the HRDs who had supported them¹².

The lack of a sufficiently protective legal framework for HRDs in the DRC intensifies the challenges they face. The law of June 15, 2023, supposedly adopted to enhance their security, includes provisions that heighten their vulnerability, facilitate their criminalization, and severely limit the scope of its application. In this fragile context, immediate protection needs rely heavily on the actions of the international community. The programs implemented by the EU in recent years have been a crucial lever for the protection of these actors¹³. However, these initiatives often offer temporary fixes, providing short-term relief instead of sustainable solutions that would enable HRDs to continue their work effectively on the ground. Additionally, the reduction in funds allocated to international development assistance, both globally and within EU Member States, increases the likelihood of further cuts to resources for HRD protection, thus increasing their vulnerability.

As the threats to Congolese civil society intensify, **it is crucial for the EU and its Member States to reinforce their commitment to human rights in the DRC**, while supporting the Congolese authorities. This support should focus on documenting violations, securing evidence, and ensuring the effective protection of national actors. Additionally, **strengthening relationships**

⁵ [The risk of escalation throughout the sub-region has never been higher](#), OHCHR, 7 février 2025

⁶ [Plus de 200 acteurs de la société civile ont déposé des demandes de protection à Goma et Bukavu en six semaines](#), Radio Okapi, 13 mars 2025

⁷ [Assassinat de notre camarade par le M23 la Lucha n'abdiquera pas.](#), Lucha, 13 février 2025

⁸ [La paix à l'Est de la RDC est une urgence](#), ASADHO, AETA, CONAFED et NSCC, 30 janvier 2025

⁹ [Nord-Kivu : Radios bâillonnées par le M23, l'alerte des journalistes](#), Congo quotidien, 15 février 2025

¹⁰ [RDC : le M23 accusé d'exécutions sommaires et l'armée congolaise de violences sexuelles](#), UN, 31 janvier 2025

¹¹ [Dans l'est de la RDC, les enfants sont de plus en plus exposés à la violence sexuelle](#), UNICEF, 13 février 2025

¹² [Évasions de prison en RDC : des victimes cohabitent avec leurs bourreaux](#), UN, 20 février 2025

¹³ Voir notamment Protect Defenders et Instrument Européen pour la Démocratie et les Droits de l'Homme (IEDDH)

with civil society is vital, as it plays a key role in the pursuit of stability and peace in the Great Lakes region.

More specifically, EurAc urges the High Representative of the EU and the member states to:

- **Strengthen its engagement with the Congolese authorities in a critical and at the same time constructive manner on all issues related to human rights protection.** The EU should actively support reforms that aim at expanding the civic space and ensuring the implementation of the recommendations from the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review.
- **Demand the respect of the DRC's territorial integrity.** The EU must consistently and unequivocally condemn any form of foreign incursions and complicity with armed groups on Congolese territory. By adopting a firm position, the EU will be able to sustain a constructive dialogue with the Congolese authorities.
- **Continue to apply and intensify its policy of targeted sanctions against perpetrators of human rights violations, in line with the EU sanctions regime.** Particular attention must be given to sexual violence against women and girls used as a weapon of war.

The European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the EU Member States to:

- **Strengthen existing protection mechanisms at all levels to ensure the safety of civil society actors in territories occupied by the M23 and surrounding areas, in line with the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.** These mechanisms must be updated and adapted to reflect the evolving local context, including measures that enable faster, safer, and more effective access to protection, such as facilitating the delivery of European visas and expanding relocation programs.
- **Increase financial and technical support to local civil society prioritizing efforts to build resilience, strengthen community-based protection programs, and preserve independent media and especially community radio stations.** This includes, among other measures, support for the development of contingency plans and income-generating activities, enabling these actors to continue their work within the country despite the challenges posed by the conflict.
- **Reactivate and strengthen existing solidarity mechanisms between the EU and Congolese civil society.** Initiatives such as the Human Rights Defenders sponsorship program by Members of the European Parliament, launched in 2017, provide crucial support to these actors while sending a strong message in favor of human rights protection.
- **Strengthen the fight against impunity, particularly in areas under rebel control, by supporting both international mechanisms and local, community-based initiatives.** The EU and its Member States need to increase resources allocated to evidence protection programs, which are currently underfunded, in order to ensure justice for victims