

EurAc Statement

If humanitarian urgency must be a priority, it should be part of a broader European response to the crisis in the Great Lakes region

While members of the EurAc network and their partners in the Great Lakes region welcomed the inclusion of the crisis in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) on the European political agenda, we believe it is necessary to highlight several concerns regarding the diplomatic approach taken by the EU and its member states.

More than a year after the fall of Goma and Bukavu and the coordinated European response it triggered, the EU now appears to be aligning around a common objective: advocating for unhindered humanitarian access and unlocking sufficient funds to meet the needs of affected communities. Nonetheless, while emergency assistance for displaced civilians and the most vulnerable is vital, it alone cannot ensure a sufficient or lasting solution.

The crisis affecting eastern DRC is deeply structural and rooted in decades of instability and armed conflict. It is fueled by recurrent violence, persistent impunity, and interference from external actors, particularly Rwanda, whose active support for the AFC/M23 constitutes a serious violation of the DRC's territorial integrity. The crisis is also closely linked to a war economy based on the illegal exploitation and smuggling of strategic natural resources by armed groups and certain state actors in the region. Such a complex situation cannot be resolved through short-term responses.

In response to the recent military escalation, which has notably resulted in the deaths of several people in Goma, **our partners on the ground are calling for a clear and firm political stance in favor of the protection of all civilians.** They are pressing for this commitment to be translated into concrete measures aimed at ending impunity and preventing future war crimes. They also expect the EU to take a stronger position in support of the DRC's territorial integrity, a prerequisite for any prospect of a lasting resolution to the conflict. All of these principles, which form the foundation of European values, now appear largely absent from the response to the crisis in the Great Lakes region.

At the same time, **the EU must tackle the root causes of insecurity and instability, as outlined in its renewed Great Lakes strategy of February 2023,** intended to guide European action in the region. It should strengthen and deepen its partnerships with regional countries to support the rule of law and address governance challenges. This includes closer cooperation on anti-corruption measures, ensuring the integrity of electoral processes, reforming the security and justice sectors, and promoting greater economic integration among countries in the region.

While the EU's humanitarian objectives are crucial to quickly alleviate the suffering of affected communities, **they must be accompanied by increased diplomatic and political pressure on**

the warring parties in favor of a ceasefire, as well as a resolute commitment to justice and human rights.

The normalization of conflict and violence

Despite recent peace agreements, communities in eastern DRC continue to endure ongoing clashes, displacements, and chronic insecurity. Some recent events have offered cautious signs of progress, notably the reopening of the border between Bujumbura and Uvira and the resumption of negotiations over access to Goma airport. These developments, which followed European Commissioner Lahbib's mission to the region, show that the EU continues to be perceived as a credible partner. Nonetheless, **by focusing solely on humanitarian assistance without addressing the broader dimensions of the conflict, the EU risks, albeit unintentionally, contributing to the normalization of an order maintained through violence.**

Indeed, these developments cannot mask the reality on the ground. The new ceasefire announced for February 18 by the President of Angola João Lourenço and accepted by the Congolese government has not put an end to the fighting in North and South Kivu. On the contrary, clashes between the M23 and FARDC, supported by the Wazalendos, have sharply intensified over the past several weeks. Multiple operations have been carried out, particularly in the Masisi territory near the mining town of Rubaya¹, where several landslides have caused more than 500 deaths in just a few months². The increasing use of drones is escalating the conflict and raises the risk of it spreading to other regions of the DRC³. In this context, the death of Willy Ngoma, military spokesperson and prominent media figure of the AFC/M23⁴, has heightened fears of renewed escalation and possible reprisals against civilians. Both parties continue to accuse each other of ceasefire violations, once again calling into question the real impact of negotiations on the protection of civilians.

In M23-occupied territories, the situation remains alarming and living conditions continue to deteriorate. For months, the absence of humanitarian corridors and the suspension of banking activities have restricted access to financial resources, causing severe shortages of essential goods and services and resulting in a serious food crisis⁵. This is compounded by rising crime and daily violations of fundamental rights, including the forced recruitment of youth⁶, acts of torture⁷, unlawful detentions, and sexual slavery⁸. Even more concerning, a troubling form of normalization has now taken root in these territories. The M23 has established its own administrative structures, controls entry and exit points, and is imposing new rules, particularly regarding land management.

The plight of communities living in the Hauts Plateaux of South Kivu remains deeply alarming. Civilians are repeatedly subjected to violence linked to the presence of and clashes between armed groups, including the FARDC, FDNB, Wazalendo militias, and Twirwaneho fighters. Facing

¹ [RDC : Kinshasa relance l'offensive contre le M23 sur plusieurs fronts](#), 25 février 2026, Jeune Afrique

² [Est de la RDC: plus de 50 morts dans un éboulement sur un site minier de Rubaya](#), Anadolu Ajansi, 7 mars 2026

³ [L'aéroport de Bangboka à Kisangani de nouveau ciblé par des drones kamikazes](#), Radio Okapi, 2 mars 2026

⁴ [RDC : mort de Willy Ngoma, le porte-parole du M23, dans une frappe de drone](#), 24 février 2026, Le Monde

⁵ [La faim frappe tous les ménages du village de Rugarama à Rutshuru, alerte l'OCHA](#), 11 mars, Radio Okapi

⁶ [Plus de 100 personnes portées disparues après un bouclage des rebelles à Rutshuru](#), 22 février 2026, Radio Okapi

⁷ [RDC. Le M23 tue, torture et retient des civils en otage dans des lieux de détention](#), 27 mai 2025, Amnesty International

⁸ [L'ONU alerte sur l'explosion des violences sexuelles liées au conflit et le sort tragique des enfants nés du viol en RDC](#), 9 mars 2026, Radio Okapi

near-total isolation, they are exposed daily to targeted attacks on their villages, forced displacement, and the looting and destruction of their livelihoods.

A response to the symptoms rather than the causes of the crisis

The persistence of impunity remains a central driver of the instability and insecurity affecting the Great Lakes region. A recent report by the Congolese government, prepared jointly with several local civil society organizations⁹, documented at least 17,015 cases of violations of the right to life and physical integrity over the course of a single year in territories under rebel occupation. These violations include torture, abductions, sexual violence, arbitrary arrests and detentions, looting, and the destruction of public and private infrastructure, including schools and health facilities. The discovery of several mass graves containing 172 unidentified bodies¹⁰ near the city of Uvira underscores the scale and severity of the violence taking place in these areas. These findings are further corroborated by international experts¹¹ and civil society actors who monitor and report these abuses on a daily basis, often at great personal risk. The arrest and torture of two women human rights defenders (HRDs) in the Uvira territory, currently reported missing¹², illustrates the dangers faced by those working to document and expose these violations.

While the recent announcement of U.S. sanctions against the Rwandan army and several senior Rwandan military officials sends a strong signal in support of human rights and international law, these measures are likely to have only limited impact without broader alignment from other international actors, starting with the EU. Moreover, resolving this conflict cannot be reduced to political statements or economic and security agreements. It requires the establishment of a genuine transitional justice process grounded in truth, recognition of victims' suffering, reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence, essential steps to finally break the cycle of violence.

In this context, **the EU must explicitly recognize the responsibility of the belligerents for the crimes committed and assert, at the highest levels of European decision-making, a clear and consistent stance in support of justice, human rights, and the broader framework of international law.**

The conflict is also closely linked to the control of strategic natural resources in eastern DRC, particularly critical minerals essential to global supply chains and the energy transition. The illegal exploitation and smuggling of these resources fuel a war economy benefiting armed groups and certain state actors in the region. In the absence of effective traceability mechanisms and sanctions, these flows directly contribute to the prolongation of the conflict and regional destabilization.

⁹ [Plus de 17 000 cas d'atteinte à la vie et à l'intégrité physique recensés en une année dans l'Est de la RDC](#), 21 février 2026, Radio Okapi

¹⁰ [Uvira : des fosses communes découvertes après le retrait de l'AFC/M23, des équipes spécialisées déployées](#), 1 mars 2026, Actualité.CD

¹¹ Communiqué de presse : le BCNUDH publie les principales tendances des violations des droits humains en République démocratique du Congo du 1er janvier au 31 décembre 2025, 13 mars 2026

¹² [RDC : des experts de l'ONU mettent en garde contre les violences extrêmes commises par le M23 à l'encontre des défenseurs des droits humains](#), 26 février 2026, OHCHR

Supporting civil society for lasting peace

In this context, close collaboration with civil society is essential. Since hostilities resumed, civil society actors have faced significant obstacles that undermine their capacity to act and restrict their participation in dialogue forums. HRDs are specifically targeted as a result of their efforts to document human rights violations. On 26 February 2026, several United Nations (UN) experts issued a statement warning of “*the severity and brutality of the abuses committed against HRDs and their families in the East*¹³.” Yet, **without a pluralistic, independent, and vibrant civil society, the Washington peace agreements and the Doha Framework risk remaining mere formal commitments, with little prospect of effective implementation at the local level.**

For this reason, the EurAc network and its members call for a truly credible strategy to promote regional peace. This approach must place civilian protection and justice at its core, combining diplomatic and political pressure with active support for regional peace mechanisms, efforts to end impunity, promotion of good governance, and, most importantly, strengthening civil society, whose role is crucial to making peace efforts sustainable. Specifically, we urge the EU and its Member States to:

- **Play a more active role in the negotiation process by supporting the strengthening of civil society and promoting inclusivity.** The EU should encourage the participation of women, youth, and marginalized groups in negotiation and monitoring processes, as sustainable peace is a prerequisite for humanitarian, diplomatic, and development efforts. It should also help create the conditions for a truly inclusive inter-Congolese dialogue.
- **Place human rights, the fight against impunity, and justice at the center of its political and diplomatic action in the region.** In this context, it is essential to strengthen technical and financial support for international investigative mechanisms and the UN Commission of Inquiry, while demanding full and unhindered access for investigators to areas controlled by armed groups.
- **Continue and intensify its targeted sanctions policy under its sanctions regime,** against the leaders of the M23, any state or non-state actor involved in supporting the movement, any entity facilitating the illegal exploitation of natural resources in the occupied areas, as well as any other actor or entity directly responsible for human rights violations or contributing to them.
- **Enhance the protection of activists, journalists, and human rights defenders (HRDs)** in affected areas under the control of the ADF/M23. This includes supporting rapid protection mechanisms, such as humanitarian and emergency visas, evacuations for the most at-risk individuals, and increased financial support for local and international protection networks.

¹³ RDC : des experts de l'ONU mettent en garde contre les violences extrêmes commises par le M23 à l'encontre des défenseurs des droits humains, 26 février 2026, OHCHR

- **Strengthen regional partnerships to support the rule of law and good governance**, particularly through anti-corruption measures, ensuring the integrity of future elections, and reforming the security and justice sectors. At the same time, it is crucial to promote greater economic integration among countries in the region, a key factor for long-term stability and prosperity, with particular attention to traceability and transparency in the mining sector.
- **Continue to demand that the European Commission cancel the memorandum of understanding on critical raw materials** concluded between the EU and Rwanda under the Global Gateway initiative.

About EurAc

The Europe-Central Africa Network (EurAc), created in 2003, brings together 32 non-governmental organizations active in Central Africa, with a particular focus on the Great Lakes region. EurAc carries out advocacy work to promote strong, coherent, and sustainable engagement from the European Union and its Member States to help the region build a better future.