

JOINT SUBMISSION TO LEADERS OF THE AFRICAN UNION, THE EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY BY CIVIL SOCIETY IN EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA ON THE URGENT NEED TO PROTECT CIVILIANS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC), AND DE-ESCALATE REGIONAL TENSIONS.

February 6, 2025

The worsening crisis in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), marked by the capture of Goma and advancing to the North and South Kivu, has plunged the region into a severe humanitarian and security emergency. The violence has led to mass displacement, indiscriminate attacks on civilians, famine, and a surge in sexual and gender-based violence, disproportionately affecting women and children. The growing hostilities between neighbouring States have heightened the risk of a broader regional conflict that threatens not only peace and stability in East and Southern Africa but also economic integration and cooperation.

We recognize the swift response of African leaders through the African Union (AU), East African Community (EAC), and Southern African Development Community (SADC) in addressing the crisis. The upcoming EAC-SADC Joint Summit in Dar es Salaam is an encouraging demonstration of regional commitment. However, given the scale of the crisis, diplomatic efforts must move beyond commitments to urgent, coordinated, and enforceable actions that will de-escalate the violence and lay the foundation for a sustainable resolution.

As civil society organizations representing East and Southern Africa stand in full solidarity with the people of DRC and the region. We call on EAC and SADC leaders to take decisive, coordinated, and responsible measures to halt the violence, enhance diplomatic engagement, and provide humanitarian relief while addressing the root causes of instability.

The situation in Eastern DRC requires immediate intervention and strong leadership at the regional and international levels. We call on African leaders, regional organizations, and the international community to take the following actions:

1. End Hate Speech and Inflammatory Rhetoric: Political leaders, government officials, and media actors must refrain from statements that fuel ethnic divisions and escalate violence. Hate speech and inflammatory rhetoric have exacerbated tensions, deepened mistrust, and heightened the risk of mass atrocities. We urge EAC and SADC leaders to publicly denounce and discourage divisive rhetoric in line with the AU Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (2007) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966).

2. Strengthen Diplomatic Engagement and Mediation: The Luanda Roadmap (2022) and the Nairobi Process (2022) remain vital frameworks for conflict resolution. However, their implementation has been inconsistent, and continued delays will only worsen the crisis. The DRC government must engage in structured, transparent, and inclusive dialogue, ensuring that all actors - including non-state armed groups - are part of the peace process. EAC Heads of State must ensure that all parties fully commit to peace agreements and impose measurable consequences for violations. Regional peace and security frameworks under the EAC Treaty (1999) and relevant AU Protocols must be fully enforced.

3. Implement and Monitor a Ceasefire: We acknowledge the January 3, 2025 ceasefire announcement as a critical step, but its success hinges on immediate and sustained enforcement. Without proper monitoring, past ceasefires have collapsed, leading to further civilian suffering. EAC and SADC must urgently establish an independent regional monitoring mechanism to track compliance, prevent violations, and ensure accountability. The UN Sanctions Regime for DRC (Resolution 1533, 2004) must be enforced against actors who violate ceasefire agreements.

4. Ensure Unhindered Humanitarian Access and Restore Essential Services: The humanitarian situation in Goma is catastrophic, with reports of hunger, lack of medical care, and thousands stranded without shelter. Access to electricity, water, and healthcare, as required under the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons, (Kampala Convention, 2009) must immediately be restored. Humanitarian organizations must be granted safe and unrestricted access to deliver aid in accordance with Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998). The United Nations and international donors must scale up humanitarian assistance under the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit's Grand Bargain Agreement.

5. Protect Civilians, Human Rights Defenders, and Independent Voices: Civilians - particularly women, children, and displaced populations - must be guaranteed protection in compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace, and Security. Humanitarian workers, journalists, and civil society actors must not be targeted or silenced. Attacks against civilians and aid workers are war crimes under the Rome Statute of the ICC (1998, Article 8) and must be investigated. We call upon regional leaders and multilateral organizations to uphold protections for civil society actors and independent media, in line with the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2019) and Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948).

6. Establish a High-Level Mediation Committee: A neutral and independent High-Level Mediation Committee must be established under Article 33 of the UN Charter, bringing together Eminent African Leaders, respected conflict resolution experts, and former Heads of State. This Committee should lead direct negotiations between conflicting parties, aligning efforts with the Addis Ababa Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework (2013) to ensure a coherent and sustainable peace process.

7. Address the Root Causes of Instability: Sentiments of marginalisation, discrimination or abandonment by some of the communities, and also the illicit extraction and trade of minerals are amongst the primary drivers of conflict. Armed groups continue to exploit natural resources, using illegal revenues to sustain violence. Regional leaders must strengthen governance mechanisms that increase transparency in mineral supply chains and tighten border security to curb the illicit flow of arms and resources. Sustainable peace in the DRC will not be achieved unless the economic and governance dimensions of the conflict are comprehensively addressed.

8. Strengthen Local Conflict Resolution and National Dialogue: While high-level diplomatic engagements remain essential, local conflict resolution processes must not be ignored. Community-based peacebuilding initiatives have been instrumental in preventing violence at the grassroots level. We support civil society-led efforts calling for an all-inclusive national dialogue in the DRC, ensuring that local communities, women, and youth are actively involved in shaping peace efforts.

9. Enforce Accountability and End Impunity: The EAC and SADC must take decisive action to hold state and non-state actors accountable for perpetuating violence. Both the DRC and Rwanda must be held accountable for their roles in fueling instability. We call for governance mechanisms to regulate the extraction and trade of minerals, ensuring that conflict resources do not continue to fund armed groups. Targeted sanctions and legal measures must be enforced to deter external interference and prevent impunity for war crimes.

A CALL FOR DECISIVE LEADERSHIP

The crisis in Eastern DRC is not just a national emergency; it is a regional test of Africa's collective responsibility to prevent conflict, uphold human and peoples' rights, and protect civilians. The suffering of innocent people and the rising tensions demand urgent, decisive, and sustained action from all stakeholders.

We call upon EAC, SADC, and AU leaders to take bold and coordinated measures that go beyond rhetoric and deliver concrete results for peace and stability. We urge the international community to provide diplomatic, technical, and humanitarian support to de-escalate the crisis. We commit, as civil society, to continuing advocacy and holding all actors accountable for their role in the conflict.

History will judge us not by our words, but by our actions. Now is the time for courageous leadership, regional unity, and an unwavering commitment to peace.

SIGNATORIES (*alphabetical order*):

1. Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR)
2. East Africa Civil Society Organisations' Forum (EACSOFF)
3. East African Community Think Tank Association (EACTTA)
4. East African Law Society (EALS)
5. Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR)
6. Pan African Lawyers Union (PALU)
7. Notre Société Civile du Congo Nscisco Asbl
8. Southern African Council of NGOs
9. Southern African Development Community Lawyers Association (SADC LA)
10. Women's International Peace Centre (WIPC)

