

EU should suspend military aid to Rwanda over its support to M23 rebels in eastern DRC

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

As the European Union (EU) and its Member States draft their new strategy for the Great Lakes region, 7 European civil society organisations and platforms express their deep concern about the escalating violence and the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). We strongly condemn the abuses against civilians in North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri provinces, and call on the EU and its Member States to act in a firm, united, and coherent manner in order to support the peace process initiated in the Great Lakes. The Ukrainian crisis should not divert the EU's attention from other conflicts in the world. The EU must respect the human rights values it promotes and put the interests of the people affected by the conflicts in the Great Lakes region above any European interest on the continent.

The signatory organisations are deeply concerned by the recent adoption by the Council of the European Union of an [assistance measure worth 20 million euros](#) to support the deployment of the Rwandan army to combat an Islamist insurgency in Mozambique, in the framework of the European Peace Facility (EPF). The support to the Rwandan army for operations in Mozambique cannot be dissociated from the current context in the eastern DRC and the support of that same army to the rebels of the March 23 Movement (M23). The EU's decision to grant this envelope to the Rwandan army has shocked Congolese public opinion and our Congolese civil society partners, casting doubt on the sincerity of the EU's commitment to peace in the Great Lakes region. In particular, analyses pointing to the defence of the interests of French company TotalEnergies in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, as an important factor in making this decision are disturbing. This measure risks undermining the efforts already made for stability, security and development in the region and seriously tarnishes the image of the EU and European organisations working for justice and peace in the DRC. Dr Denis Mukwege – laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize and the European Sakharov Prize for his fight for women's rights and peace expressed his outrage at this measure. It is thus crucial for the EU to change course.

Tensions Rise in the Great Lakes Region

The resurgence of the M23 armed group in North Kivu since November 2021 is increasing tensions in the sub-region, particularly between Rwanda and the DRC. According to the United Nations Group of Experts, Human Rights Watch and US diplomats, the M23 is supported by Rwanda. Kigali disputes this and accuses Kinshasa of collusion with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). Indeed, this year, units of the Congolese army have [backed abusive armed groups](#), including the FDLR, in operations against the M23. This collusion leads to complicity by the Congolese army in the abuses of these armed groups, and the Congolese government should immediately put an end to it. However, this in no way justifies the support of Rwanda or any other country in the region to the M23.

The M23 insurgency should not overshadow the presence of other armed groups that continue to operate on Congolese soil. Over the past three months alone, the Kivu Security Tracker has recorded nearly 400 killings of civilians by armed groups in eastern DRC, not counting abuses committed by the M23.

Despite the call for a cease-fire following the Luanda mini-summit on November 23, 2022, as part of regional mediation efforts, serious abuses were committed on November 29 and 30 in Kishishe and Bambo, two villages in North Kivu occupied by the M23. A preliminary investigation conducted by the UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) and MONUSCO, whose conclusions were published on December 7, mentions summary executions by bullets or knives by the rebels. The provisional death toll is 131 civilians – 102 men, 17 women and 12 children – killed in acts of reprisal. The investigation also reported more than 20 rapes of women and girls.

Multi-dimensional crisis and destabilisation of the region

The security situation in North Kivu province is exacerbating the humanitarian needs, which are now considerable. More than 450,000 civilians were displaced due to the violence occurring in the province. In addition, there has been an escalation of inter-community hate speech. There is also a growing distrust of certain foreign partners including the EU, as well as of MONUSCO.

The multi-dimensional crisis that has gripped eastern DRC for many years has fueled chronic instability, hindering the development of the region as a whole and weakening the state-building process in the DRC. With one year to go before the elections in the DRC, the resurgence of regional tensions, combined with the many internal challenges posed by the organisation of the elections, constitute a significant risk to the stability of the region in the longer term.

Recommendations

The EU and its Member States should take a clear and firm stance in response to the escalating conflict in eastern DRC and condemn any violations of territorial sovereignty, which threaten regional stability. The EU and its Member States should :

- **Publicly and firmly condemn any collusion or cooperation with armed groups active in eastern DRC, and in particular Rwanda's support to the M23.** In this regard, the pressure and suspension of aid to Rwanda by several foreign powers in 2012 contributed to the de-escalation of the conflict.
- **Immediately suspend military aid to the Rwandan army under the European Peace Facility** and make its support conditional on a prior commitment to withdraw Rwandan army support to the M23.
- **Impose new sanctions on human rights abusers in eastern DRC** and their supporters abroad. The EU should expand targeted sanctions to include those found responsible for serious abuses, as well as senior officials throughout the region involved in abuses committed by armed groups.
- **Appoint an EU Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region** to facilitate dialogue processes between stakeholders and demonstrate the EU's willingness to actively engage in promoting peace in the region. The appointment of a special envoy for the region could help strengthen the dialogue between the various EU embassies and delegations in the region, thus contributing to a more coherent EU policy.
- **Increase its humanitarian aid and development funding** to the DRC. In a fragile context of protracted crises, the EU's commitment to Nexus programming in eastern DRC remains of the utmost importance.

Signatory organisations

- FIACAT (International Federation of ACATs)
- FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights)

- MISEREOR
- Open Society Foundations-Europe and Central Asia
- PAX
- SOLSOC
- TLP (Tournons La Page)