

**Letter from H.E. Adama Dieng and Hon. Gareth Evans on the situation
in the Democratic Republic of the Congo**

April marks Genocide Prevention and Awareness Month, a time to reflect on the history, causes, and victims of past genocidal massacres going back many decades – including in Rwanda, Srebrenica, Cambodia, Armenia and elsewhere – and to also mobilize the resolve necessary to confront risks facing populations today to prevent mass atrocity crimes in the future. It is in this spirit of prevention that we would like to draw your attention to the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

For nearly 30 years, we have observed with grave concern cyclical and indiscriminate violence as internationalized conflicts have ravaged populations across the DRC, particularly those in the eastern regions bordering Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and Tanzania. Congolese and foreign armed forces, as well as countless abusive armed groups, have regularly perpetrated widespread violations and abuses – some of which may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Impunity for atrocities, endemic corruption, poor governance and hate speech and incitement have all contributed to further widespread abuses against civilians, heightened ethnic tensions and political turmoil, and a record number of Congolese displaced.

The recent visit by the UN Security Council to eastern DRC and Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’ reports of “alarming” violence have shed some light on the crisis, but more needs to be done to confront the gravity of the situation, particularly the escalating risk of atrocities targeting vulnerable segments of the population.

Since the government declared martial law in North Kivu and Ituri provinces under a so-called “state of siege” in May 2021 atrocities and violence have escalated amidst widespread attacks by abusive armed groups like the [Cooperative for the Development of Congo \(CODECO\)](#) and the notoriously brutal [Allied Democratic Forces \(ADF\)](#). Since October 2022 [more than 1,300 people](#) have been killed in Ituri and North Kivu alone.

Under the state of siege, a climate of intolerance has grown, as authorities in North Kivu and Ituri have used sweeping powers to intensify their crackdown on dissenting voices. The military and police have [restricted the rights](#) to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly; [arbitrarily detained and prosecuted](#) human rights defenders, [journalists](#), political opposition members or [others](#) considered to be critical of the government; and banned and violently suppressed peaceful demonstrations.

Furthermore, millions of Congolese are living on the frontlines of intense fighting as the March 23 Movement (M23) armed group has extended its control across North Kivu and advanced near the provincial capital, Goma. Since launching their renewed offensive, M23 has committed widespread abuses against civilians, including deliberate killings, forced recruitment and indiscriminate shelling, among other possible war crimes. Meanwhile, in attempts to confront M23’s offensive, the Congolese army (FARDC) [utilized and supported as proxies armed groups](#) who have

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themselves previously been implicated in widespread abuses and atrocities, including, among others, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (Les Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda, FDLR). The FDLR is a predominately Rwandan Hutu armed group, some of whose leaders had participated in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Active in eastern DRC for years, FDLR fighters have a long history of killing, maiming and sexual violence against civilians in North and South Kivu.

Since the DRC government implicated [Rwanda in backing](#) M23, there has been a dramatic escalation in disinformation, xenophobia, hate speech and incitement to discrimination and violence, particularly targeting Tutsis/Banyarwanda individuals and others of or presumed to be of Rwandan descent. There is a history in eastern DRC of dangerous anti-Tutsi sentiment and rhetoric targeting people who speak Kinyarwanda that have long been perceived as [“foreigners” or “invaders”](#) in the DRC. While such populations have frequently faced threats and been attacked, in recent years the risks faced by these communities has increased as dangerous rhetoric has been spread by political party figures, community leaders, civil society actors and members of the Congolese diaspora.

Warring parties have increasingly appealed to ethnic loyalties and are sowing discord between communities. In Kitchanga and other villages, hundreds of Tutsi civilians – who are regularly perceived by members of other communities as supporters of M23 – have fled out of fear of reprisals from armed groups spreading hostile and threatening rhetoric against their community. The [UN Panel of Experts documented](#) incidents of targeted violence or public lynching of Rwandophone individuals.

[Several UN officials](#) and [bodies](#) have expressed alarm at the escalation of inflammatory rhetoric in the country. In one such [statement](#), then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, and the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, warned, “hate speech...focuses on aspects that have previously mattered less, incites a discourse of ‘us vs. them,’ and corrodes social cohesion... Hateful messages heighten the risk of violence, including atrocity crimes targeting specific groups of people.”

Mass atrocity crimes are often preceded by an incitement to violence through hate speech. Hateful rhetoric has a unique capacity to incite or inspire violence against the targeted group by spreading fear or hatred among its audience. The demonization of specific groups of people as “dangerous” or “inferior” has resulted in catastrophic tragedies in the past, including the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda. The Nazi party utilized anti-Semitic tabloids, such as Der Stürmer, and government radio to foster an environment where the German people would persecute and demonize the Jews solely based on their identity. In Rwanda, the Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTL) station was instrumental in inciting the genocide through its broadcasting of hate speech about Tutsi “cockroaches” and urging Hutu to turn on

their neighbors. Media outlets also helped recruit and coordinate mass killing operations.

The resurgence of M23 has not only aggravated the already dire human rights and humanitarian crisis in eastern DRC, but also reignited tensions between the DRC and Rwanda, which pose a grave risk to national and regional cohesion and stability. It is imperative that the governments of Rwanda and DRC engage in dialogue and a rights-driven mediation process to prevent any further escalation.

Recognizing that states bear the primary responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, there is a particular responsibility on the DRC government to take concrete steps to protect all people without discrimination, as well as hold all perpetrators of atrocities to account:

- In keeping with the recommendation of the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, the DRC parliament should adopt a law on racism, xenophobia and tribalism to strengthen the legal framework on hate speech and counter the recurrence of incitement to violence.
- The government should also hold individuals accountable for propagating hate speech and/or incitement to violence, discrimination or hostility in line with the [UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech](#), regardless of rank or political affiliation.

Responding to abuses perpetrated by armed groups and government agents and preventing further tensions between communities is all the more essential as DRC approaches general elections scheduled for December. Elections often exacerbate existing tensions between communities – particularly if politicians and candidates inciting and mobilize ethnic divisions while campaigning – and can be a trigger for atrocities. Moreover, steps taken to restrict the rights of the electorate during an election cycle not only risk undermining the democratic process, but also increase threats to vulnerable populations. Already a group of Congolese Tutsis [described to reporters](#) a hostile campaign, including threats and violence, to prevent them from registering to vote in South Kivu during February.

The UN continues to have a crucial role in de-escalating tensions and avoiding a catastrophic further descent into violence:

- The UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide should continue to mobilize local, provincial and national authorities, as well as journalists and civil society, to condemn hate speech and the stigmatization and racial profiling of communities.
- MONUSCO, with the support of OHCHR, must further develop and implement its early warning and response mechanisms on electoral violence to ensure that the elections are peaceful, transparent, credible and inclusive.

Despite the grave risks facing populations in the DRC, the situation remains [one of the world's most neglected crises](#). As we observe Genocide Awareness and Prevention Month it is critical that we learn from the past and take effective action to address both the immediate and underlying causes of mass violence to break the cycle of abuse and impunity. We owe it to the victims of the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda. We owe it to ourselves.



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