

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

February 6, 2025

The worsening crisis in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), marked by the capture of Goma and the advance towards North and South Kivu, has plunged the region into a serious humanitarian and security emergency. The violence has led to mass displacement, indiscriminate attacks on civilians, famine and an upsurge in sexual and gender-based violence, disproportionately affecting women and children. Growing hostilities between neighboring states have increased the risk of a wider regional conflict that threatens not only peace and stability in East and Southern Africa, but also economic integration and cooperation.

We welcome the swift response of African leaders, through the African Union (AU), the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), to address the crisis. The upcoming joint EAC-SADC summit in Dar es Salaam is an encouraging demonstration of regional commitment. However, given the scale of the crisis, diplomatic efforts must go beyond commitments and translate into urgent, coordinated and enforceable action, in order to defuse the violence and lay the foundations for a lasting resolution.

As civil society organizations representing Eastern and Southern Africa, we stand in full solidarity with the people of the DRC and the region. We call on the leaders of the EAC and SADC to take decisive, coordinated and responsible action to end the violence, strengthen diplomatic engagement and provide humanitarian aid, while addressing the root causes of instability.

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

1. Stop hate speech and inflammatory rhetoric: Political leaders, government officials and media actors must refrain from making statements that fuel ethnic divisions and escalating violence. Hate speech and inflammatory rhetoric have exacerbated tensions, reinforced mistrust and increased the risk of mass atrocities. We urge EAC and SADC leaders to publicly denounce and discourage divisive rhetoric, in line with the African 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 essential frameworks for conflict resolution. However, their implementation has been uneven, and persistent delays will only exacerbate the crisis. The DRC government must engage in a 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 are fully committed to respecting peace agreements, and impose measurable consequences for violations. The regional peace and security frameworks provided by the EAC Treaty (1999) and the relevant AU protocols must be fully implemented.

3. Implement and monitor a ceasefire: We recognize that the announcement of the ceasefire on January 3, 2025 is a crucial step, but its success depends on its immediate and sustained implementation. In the absence of adequate monitoring, previous ceasefires have failed, leading to further civilian suffering. The EAC and SADC must urgently set up an independent regional monitoring mechanism to monitor ceasefire compliance, prevent violations and ensure accountability. The UN sanctions regime for the DRC (resolution 1533, 2004) must be applied to actors who violate ceasefire agreements.

4. Guarantee unhindered humanitarian access and restore essential services: The situation The humanitarian situation in Goma is catastrophic, with reports of starvation, lack of medical care and thousands of people stranded without shelter. Access to electricity, water and healthcare, as required by the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention, 2009), must be restored immediately. Humanitarian organizations must have safe and unrestricted access to deliver aid, in line with Article 3 common to the Geneva Conventions and the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998). The UN and international donors must increase humanitarian aid as part of the Grand Bargain agreement of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit.

5. Protect civilians, human rights defenders and independent voices: The protection of civilians - in particular women, children and displaced populations - must be guaranteed in accordance 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 on civilians and humanitarian workers constitute war crimes under the Rome Statute of the ICC (1998, article 8) and must be investigated. We call on regional leaders and multilateral organizations to guarantee the protection of 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 high-level, neutral and independent mediation committee is to be set up under Article 33 of the UN Charter, bringing together eminent African leaders, recognized experts in conflict resolution and former heads of state. This committee should conduct direct negotiations between the conflicting parties, aligning its efforts with the Addis Ababa Framework Agreement for Peace, Security and Cooperation (2013) to ensure a coherent and sustainable peace process.

7. Addressing the root causes of instability: Feelings of marginalization, discrimination or abandonment felt by certain communities, as well as illicit mineral extraction and trade, are among the main drivers of conflict. Armed groups continue to exploit natural resources and use these illegal revenues to fuel violence. Regional leaders must strengthen governance mechanisms to increase transparency in mineral supply chains, and reinforce border security to stem the illicit flow of arms and resources. Lasting peace in the DRC cannot be achieved unless the economic and governance dimensions of the conflict are comprehensively addressed.

8. Strengthening local conflict resolution and national dialogue: While high-level diplomatic engagements remain essential, local conflict resolution processes should not be ignored. Community-based peace-building initiatives have been instrumental in preventing violence at local level. We support the efforts of civil society calling for an inclusive national dialogue in the DRC, ensuring that local communities, women and young people are actively involved in shaping peace efforts.

9. Ensuring accountability and ending impunity: The EAC and SADC must take decisive action to hold state and non-state actors accountable for perpetuating the violence. The DRC and Rwanda must be held accountable for the role they have played in fuelling instability. We call for governance mechanisms to regulate mineral extraction and trade, to ensure that conflict resources do not continue to fund armed groups. Targeted sanctions and legal measures must be applied to deter outside 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 rising tensions demand urgent, decisive and sustained action from all stakeholders.

We call on the leaders of the EAC, SADC and AU to take courageous and coordinated action that goes beyond rhetoric and delivers concrete results for peace and stability. We urge the international community to provide diplomatic, technical and humanitarian support to defuse the crisis. As a civil society, we pledge to continue our advocacy and to hold all actors accountable for their role in the conflict.

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

SIGNATAIRES (*ordre alphabétique*) :

- 1. Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV)**
- 2. East Africa Civil Society Organisations' Forum (EACSO)**
- 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)**