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***To the attn. of:***

**Ms Kaja Kallas**

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President European Commission

**Foreign Affairs Ministers of European Union (EU) member states**

20 February 2025

Dear High Representative Kallas,

Dear Ministers of Foreign Affairs,

## **URGENT EU ACTION NEEDED IN RESPONSE TO HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN EASTERN DRC**

Ahead of the forthcoming Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) meeting on 24 February, Amnesty International is writing to urge you to act on the escalating human rights crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The human rights situation in eastern DRC has deteriorated since Rwandan-backed M23 fighters entered the country in November 2021 and went on to capture large areas of North Kivu and South Kivu provinces. The United Nations (UN) Group of Experts and Human Rights Watch have documented Rwanda's support of the M23, the latest in a series of armed groups operating in DRC that Rwanda has backed since the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

In late January 2025, M23 clashed with the Congolese army (FARDC) and its allied militia groups, capturing towns and territory as it moved toward Goma, the DRC's third-largest city and home to nearly two million people, including more than 600,000 persons displaced by fighting and wholly dependent on aid. Amid this fighting, there have been reports of [extrajudicial executions](#) and summary killings, indiscriminate attacks that led to deaths, [conflict-related sexual violence](#), including rape and other forms of [sexual violence against children](#), by different parties to the conflict. At the same time, the region has [witnessed](#) the "largest contamination of mineral supply chains in the Great Lakes region recorded to date", as massive amounts of minerals (including at least 150 tons of coltan) have been transported to Rwanda, even as the country has flagrantly flouted international law and disregarded calls by African and European leaders to withdraw support for M23 and its troops from DRC.

On 27 January, M23 declared that it had captured Goma after swathes of residents and displaced people fled to safety in other parts of DRC or neighboring countries. According to the UN, at least 3,000 people were killed in Goma. Attacks against civilians, including killings and injuries to civilians by parties to this conflict, are violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

M23 has targeted civil society since the takeover of Goma, with M23 representatives visiting the office of at least one prominent human rights defender. In another incident, M23 representatives warned Goma residents that they did not want civil society organizations such as *Lutte pour le Changement* (LUCHA) to work in Goma, telling them to consult M23 rather

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, "DR Congo: Atrocities by Rwanda-Backed M23 Rebels", 6 February 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/06/dr-congo-atrocities-rwanda-backed-m23-rebels>; Rwanda has supported armed groups including The Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL), Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), and the March 23 Movement (M23).

than civil society, for any concerns.<sup>2</sup> On 9 February, M23 [told](#) displaced persons in camps near Goma that they had 72 hours to return to their villages, risking forced displacement of thousands in violation of international humanitarian law.

On 16 February, M23 seized Bukavu, a key trading hub and capital of South Kivu province. The UN confirmed cases of summary killings and had [received reports](#) of “arbitrary arrests and detentions, degrading treatment and alleged forced returns of Congolese young men fleeing violence in neighbouring countries.” One hospital in Bukavu had [received 42 civilian patients](#) with gunshot or shrapnel wounds as of 17 February. As FARDC soldiers retreated from Bukavu, they reportedly participated in [looting](#) the city.

To date, European Union (EU) leaders have failed to respond robustly to these grave violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in eastern DRC, with the last high-level EU public statement in late January expressing [deep concerns](#) at the escalation of the conflict before the most recent capture of Goma and Bukavu.

At the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) on 7 February, the EU lent critical support to the [creation](#) of a fact-finding mission and commission of inquiry into atrocities being committed by all parties in DRC, in line with [calls](#) from international and Congolese civil society groups. In this context, the EU [pointed](#) to deaths, wounded, forced displacement and grave human rights violations including summary executions and sexual violence and condemned the M23 offensive, calling for Rwanda to immediately withdraw all troops from DRC territory and end all forms of support for M23 and other non-state armed groups, and for DRC to cease cooperation with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and other armed groups and take a decisive stance against hate speech. Critically, the EU called at the UN HRC for all accusations of violations to be thoroughly investigated, and for all perpetrators to be held accountable for their crimes.

A [European Parliament resolution](#) on 13 February outlined the many serious human rights and humanitarian concerns in eastern DRC, calling for the EU and its member states to take urgent and coherent action in response.

With spiraling violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, and hundreds of thousands of lives at stake, EU leaders should foreground human rights in their response to this crisis and take robust action to prevent further escalation at this month’s Foreign Affairs Council:

- Urgently engage with both DRC and Rwandan authorities up to highest level, strongly urging all warring parties in the east of the country – including M23 fighters, the Rwandan and Congolese armies, and their allies – to prioritize the [protection of civilians](#).
- Call on the DRC authorities to direct the FARDC to immediately cease collaborating with abusive militia groups, including the [FDLR](#).
- In parallel, call on the Rwandan government to immediately end support to M23 and act to repress all international law violations by Rwandan and Rwandan-supported forces.
- Review the EU’s [memorandum of understanding](#) with Rwanda within the context of the Global Gateway, ensure the partnership is not contributing to human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law, including in DRC. The EU should also ensure that Rwanda and M23 do not financially benefit from minerals illegally obtained in DRC that continue to support their military operations, sustaining the ongoing human rights and humanitarian crisis.
- Immediately review military assistance to the Rwandan Defense Force, including the European Peace Facility’s [recent decision](#) to top-up its support for their deployment in the Cabo Delgado province, Mozambique, exercising due diligence and acting to ensure that this EU support does not contribute directly or indirectly to abusive military operations in eastern DRC.
- Follow up on the EU’s commendable role in the creation of the UN Human Rights Council’s fact-finding mission and commission of inquiry, providing robust political support to its work and ensuring it has all resources necessary

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<sup>2</sup> Videos on file with Amnesty International.

to carry out its crucial mandate; and lend full EU support to efforts by the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate crimes under international law in DRC.

- Press Rwanda and the M23 to facilitate safe and unrestricted access for humanitarian assistance, immediately reopen the airports in Bukavu and Goma to allow desperately needed humanitarian aid into eastern DRC, and in view of the current cuts in United States foreign aid, increase assistance to the humanitarian response in the DRC and in the region for refugees and asylum seekers.
- Take action for Congolese human rights defenders in eastern DRC and those displaced by the conflict, providing protection (including visas on humanitarian grounds and relocation), financial support and pro-active diplomacy on their behalf toward regional governments and armed groups.

We urge you to seize the opportunity of this Foreign Affairs Council to respond to this crisis and to act decisively for human rights in eastern DRC.

Yours sincerely,



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