

**A Plea from Local Organizations and Civil Society in
North Kivu, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo,
to the United Nations Security Council
and Other International Leaders**

Goma, November 18, 2008

Dear Excellencies,

As the representatives of Congolese non-governmental organizations in North Kivu, we come before your authority to request an immediate reinforcement of peacekeeping forces for the Democratic Republic of Congo, reinforcements that would be capable of protecting us. This would help to prevent the atrocities that continue to be committed against civilians on an ever greater scale here in North Kivu, on the border of Rwanda and Uganda.

This letter presents a sad, cynical, tragic and very frustrating situation, which reveals the misery in which the population of North Kivu are immersed. We are anxious, afraid and utterly traumatised by the constant insecurity in which we live. We don't know which saint to pray to; we are condemned to death by all this violence and displacement. We have been abandoned. Who will protect us? Who will help us? The United Nations says that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, but our dignity and our rights are violated every day with hardly a cry of protest. Do we not deserve protection? Are we not equal to others?

Since August 28, fighting has intensified in many areas, causing deaths, rapes, lootings, forced recruitment and further displacements of civilian populations. The population has thus been immersed in unspeakable suffering. In the last few days, fighting has drawn closer to large populated areas, such as the town of Goma. Fighting has also invaded and torn apart the region of Rutshuru, particularly in the town of Kiwanja, where hundreds of civilian deaths have now been recorded.

The suffering has gone on too long for the population of North Kivu. It is time for the government and the international community to protect the civilians who have fallen victim to the atrocities of the conflict.

We are aware that during several high-level visits to eastern Congo this year, you and your representatives heard many firsthand testimonies which could not have left you indifferent to the tragedy facing the population of our region of the DRC.

The various diplomatic and political meetings held over the last few weeks have demonstrated your commitment to finding an immediate and sustainable solution that would establish peace in North Kivu and thus bring stability to the Great Lakes region. Among the most remarkable developments, we note Rwanda's direct involvement in the search for a sustainable solution to the crisis.

While we wish to thank you for these supportive visits and for your concerns about the tragedy here in eastern Congo, we also urge you to move from theory to practice, by transforming your kind speeches and messages into action. Diplomacy always takes time, and we understand this, but unfortunately we do not have time. The population of North Kivu is at risk now; with each day that passes, more and more people die.

For more than three decades, eastern Congo has been at war, and those who suffer most are civilians, especially women and children. There have been many attempts to resolve the crisis in the east, but none have succeeded. The most recent initiative to date was the Goma Peace Agreement (the Act of Engagement), signed by all belligerents in January 2008. But today this is no longer respected. Instead of peace, we are witnessing the continuation and exacerbation of the conflict.

In the past several days, the region of Rutshuru has been in the grip of hostilities. The town of Kiwanja has been taken and re-taken by the CNDP, and the population is paying the price. We are witnessing tragedies on a scale never experienced before in history, in which civilian populations are being summarily executed by bullets or blows from machetes, knives, hoes and spears. Corpses line the streets of the city and the odour of decomposing bodies greets passers-by. Indeed, the number of corpses already found is not conclusive, as searches continue, and, according to the latest reports, even more dead bodies are locked inside houses or thrown down latrines.

As the conquering army of Laurent Nkunda gradually takes new areas, the Congolese army takes flight. As they flee, they end up killing, pillaging, raping and stealing, leaving chaos and total disorder in their wake. This is the case in Goma, where more than 20 civilians were killed, several women were raped, and valuable goods were stolen on October 29. Since last week, the towns of Kanyabayonga, Kirumba and Kayna have been invaded in almost the same way as Goma by FARDC soldiers fleeing the fighting.

Forced recruitment has also intensified. In several areas of Rutshuru and Masisi, armed groups, the CNDP in particular, go from door to door to force young boys and adults – aged between 14 and 40 – to go to the front, without any prior military training. Last week, reports documented the recruitment by force of hundreds of civilians by the CNDP, especially in Kitchanga, Kiwanja, Rutshuru and Rubare.

In all of these cases, we, the civilian population, have been held hostage and caught between many lines of fire.

Women are among the first victims. Sexual violence has become dramatically worse since the end of August, as military forces and armed groups have reduced women to a battlefield.

Faced with a sense of abandonment, the people's reaction has become one of self-defence. We do not know the limits of this. This has been the case of Mai Mai in Kiwanja and in the Kanyabayonga area.

MONUC has fallen short of fulfilling its mandate to protect civilians, openly and publicly, but no concrete action has been taken. Powerless, MONUC witnesses all the atrocities committed by the armed forces and groups. At times, its interventions are delayed, if not ineffective. We can therefore no longer continue to rely on MONUC to protect us. The case of Kiwanja, where civilians are massacred daily near the MONUC base, is a striking example.

We ask you urgently to assist us at this most difficult time. It is absolutely clear to everyone that we need reinforcements of troops capable of protecting civilians effectively and efficiently, with the means to deal with any kind of attacks. This must be done quickly.

We therefore urge you to:

- Immediately send EU troops which can deploy quickly to provide protection and security for civilians as you did for our brothers and sisters in Bunia, Ituri, in June 2003.
- Increase the number of troops for MONUC and provide them with a mandate that allows them to sufficiently protect civilians and to do so as their top priority.

Your Excellencies, you must save our lives now; otherwise it will be too late.

Yours sincerely,

The representatives of 44 Congolese NGOs in North Kivu:

1. Action de Promotion et d'Assistance pour l'Amélioration du Niveau des Vies des Populations (APANIVIP)
2. Action Paysanne pour la Reconstruction et le Développement Communautaire Intégral (APREDECI)
3. Action pour la Promotion de la Participation Citoyenne – Nord Kivu (APPC/NK)
4. Action pour la Promotion et la Défense des Droits des Personnes Défavorisées (APRODEPED)
5. Action Sociale pour la Paix et le Développement (ASPD)
6. Africa Justice Peace and Development (AJPD)
7. Blessed Aid
8. Bureau d'Information, Formation, Etude et Recherche en Développement (BIFERD)
9. CADRE
10. Campagne Pour la Paix (CPP)
11. Centre d'Observation des Droits de l'Homme et d'Assistance Sociale (CODHAS)
12. Centre de Recherche sur l'Environnement, la Démocratie et les Droits de l'Homme (CADERCO)
13. Centre de Recherche sur l'Environnement, la Démocratie et les Droits de l'Homme (CREDDHO)
14. Centre pour la Paix et les Droits de l'Homme – Peace and Human Rights Center (CPDH-PHRC)
15. CEREBA/RDC
16. Change Agents Peace Program (CAPP)
17. Coalition pour mettre fin à l'utilisation d'enfants soldats en RDC /Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in DRC
18. CODHOP

19. Collectif des Associations des Femmes Pour le Développement (CAFED)
20. Collectif des ONG de Droits de l'Homme (CODHO)
21. Collectif des Organisations des Jeunes Solidaires du Congo (COJESKI)/ Nord Kivu
22. Conseil Régional des Organisations Non Gouvernementales de Développement (CRONGD)
23. COPADI
24. Encadrement des Femmes Indigènes et des Ménages Vulnérables (EFIM)
25. GAMAC
26. Group d'Etudes et d'Actions Pour un Développement Bien Défini (GEAD)
27. Human Dignity in the World (HDW)
28. Platform des Femmes du Nord Kivu pour un Développement Endogène (PFNDE)
29. Programme de Lutte Contre l'Extrême Pauvreté et la Misère (PAMI)
30. Promotion de la Démocratie et Protection des Droits Humains (PDH)
31. Promotion et Appui aux Initiatives Féminines (PAIF)
32. Réseau Congolais d'Action sur les Armes Légères et le Petit Calibre (RECAAL)
33. Réseau d'Organisations des Droits Humains, d'Education Civique et de Paix (RODHECIP)
34. Réseau Femme et Développement (REFED)
35. Réseau Provincial des ONG de Droits de l'Homme (REPRODHOC)/Nord Kivu
36. SAMS
37. Société civile Territoire de Rutshuru
38. Solidarité pour la Promotion sociale et la Paix (SOPROP)
39. SOS/Grands-Lacs
40. Syndicat des Associations Féminines pour un Développement Intégral (SAFEDI)
41. Synergie des femmes pour les victimes des violences sexuelles (SFVS)
42. Synergie des ONG locales pour les Urgences Humanitaires dans le territoire de Rutshuru
43. UPADERI
44. Villages Cobaye (VICO)