

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

### Statement by Ms. Thérèse Nzale-Kove UN Security Council Briefing on the Democratic Republic of the Congo 30 September 2024

President, Excellencies,

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share with you the situation of women and girls in our country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and particularly in the East.

I am Thérèse Nzale-Kove, a women's rights activist and Program Officer at [Fonds pour les Femmes Congolaises](#) (FFC), which provides financial and technical support to local organizations promoting women's rights.

My statement will focus on three main issues:

1. The impact of the current humanitarian crisis in the DRC on women, girls and children in particular;
2. Women's participation in political and peace processes; and
3. The importance of protecting civilians and safeguarding women's rights during and after the withdrawal of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO).

#### **The impact of the current humanitarian crisis in the DRC, on women, girls and children in particular**

The humanitarian situation in the DRC is disastrous. It is characterized by high rates of internal displacement,<sup>1</sup> food insecurity<sup>2</sup> and sexual and gender-based violence,<sup>3</sup> which dehumanizes women and girls. More than 7.3 million people are internally displaced, the majority (94%) of whom are concentrated in the four eastern provinces: Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu and Tanganyika.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the humanitarian response plan is only 37% funded.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of recurring armed conflicts and multifaceted crises in eastern DRC on civilians in general and women and girls in particular, is detrimental to peace and development. Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence is widespread and disproportionately impacts women and girls. This includes sexual assault, sexual slavery, torture, abduction, forced marriage and psychological violence.<sup>6</sup>

The lack of access to food, firewood and other basic necessities further exposes displaced women, girls and children to the risk of sexual violence,<sup>7</sup> forcing them to travel to unsafe areas or to resort to transactional or, as it is abusively called, “survival” sex, in order to access basic resources.<sup>8</sup>

With more than 90,000 cases of sexual violence documented last year alone,<sup>9</sup> it is clear that women and girls are at risk. Even outside of conflict zones, including when fleeing insecurity, and in and around camps for internally displaced people (IDPs),<sup>10</sup> they are vulnerable to predators.

The recent case of gang rape of 268 women and girls in Makala prison<sup>11</sup> in Kinshasa is a telling example. Unfortunately, due to social stigma and the limited capacity of the healthcare system, many of these survivors do not have access to essential services.<sup>12</sup>

On top of all this, thousands of displaced children have no access to education,<sup>13</sup> a fundamental right enshrined in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Last year, the United Nations recorded more than 3,700 serious violations committed against children, including murder, mutilation, sexual violence, abduction and recruitment into armed groups.<sup>14</sup> Their schools have been forced to close due to violence linked to recurring and bloody conflicts.<sup>15</sup> Since education is a way of protecting children from all these evils, the time to act is now, to deactivate this ticking time bomb.

## **Women's participation in political and peace processes**

Congolese women and girls are working tirelessly to contribute to peace efforts and respond to the humanitarian crisis. While their impact is visible, they receive little support. Their effective participation in the various peacekeeping, peacebuilding and peace negotiations remains very low, despite the commitment of the international community to implement Security Council resolution 1325 (2000). As part of an initiative of FFC, women have formed a think tank and action group called “Synergy of Women for Peace and Security” to galvanize these efforts. It is essential that women in civil society are able to participate fully and meaningfully in all aspects of current peace processes, including Nairobi 4 and the Luanda process as well as other regional spaces.

The Luanda Agreement, mediated by Angolan President João Lourenço, marks a positive step toward a lasting solution to the conflict in eastern DRC, provided that it is respected.

## **The importance of protecting civilians and safeguarding women's rights during MONUSCO's transition**

The international community should heed the cries of distress from the population living in eastern DRC. MONUSCO's impending departure must take into account protection of human rights. Hence, it is important to objectively assess and learn the lessons of the impact of MONUSCO's withdrawal from provinces such as Tanganyika and South Kivu.

It is also important to bear in mind the complexity of the specific context in each of the remaining provinces, particularly North Kivu and Ituri. Fear of a protection vacuum and concerns regarding the protection of civilians mean that tasks such as the monitoring of human rights violations, including conflict-related sexual violence, continued support for women's political participation and empowerment, and for human rights defenders at risk are critical. These essential responsibilities must be transferred sustainably to the competent authorities and to other entities having the capacity to carry them out, including civil society organizations, particularly women's organizations.<sup>16</sup> Involving them in assessments of MONUSCO's disengagement and its impact on the protection of civilians will strengthen communication with community members.

I would like to conclude by making the following recommendations to the Security Council:

- Call on all parties to the conflict to work towards restoring peace in the region and to respect international humanitarian and human rights law;
- Call for the accelerated implementation of the Luanda Roadmap;
- Call on the government of the DRC to take concrete steps to counter the scourge of sexual and gender-based violence;
- Call on MONUSCO and the government of the DRC to consult regularly and meaningfully with women civil society organizations at all stages of the transition, and to integrate their recommendations into all drawdown plans, including civilian protection strategies.

Women must take their rightful place in contributing to peace in DRC and the region, and respect for the fundamental rights of women and children must be non-negotiable.

Thank you for your attention.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, “Global Trends – Forced Displacement in 2023”, p. 9, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2023>.

<sup>2</sup> 23.4 million people in the DRC are experiencing crisis and emergency levels of food insecurity. WFP, “Democratic Republic of the Congo,” accessed September 27, 2024, <https://www.wfp.org/countries/democratic-republic-congo>.

<sup>3</sup> The United Nations recorded 123,000 cases of gender-based violence in 2023, a 300% increase from 2022. Briefing by Joyce Msuya, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, to the Security Council on the situation in the Great Lakes region, 24 April 2024, <https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.9615>.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Report of the Secretary-General, ¶30, 20 June 2024, S/2024/482, [undocs.org/s/2024/482](https://undocs.org/s/2024/482); OCHA, “Democratic Republic of the Congo: Internally Displaced Persons and Repatriates, April 2024,” 15 May 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/democratic-republic-congo/democratic-republic-congo-internally-displaced-persons-and-returnees-april-2024>.

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- <sup>5</sup> OCHA, “Democratic Republic of the Congo Humanitarian Response Plan 2024,” accessed September 23, 2024, <https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1187#page-title>.
- <sup>6</sup> CARE International, “DRC: Women and girls face escalating sexual and gender-based violence,” July 15, 2024, <https://www.care-international.org/news/drc-women-and-girls-face-escalating-sexual-and-gender-based-violence>; Refugees International, “Ensuring Women's Protection Amid Rising Conflict in Eastern DRC”, pp. 12-17, April 5, 2024, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/ensuring-womens-protection-amid-rising-conflict-in-eastern-drc/>.
- <sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch, “DR Congo: Rwandan Forces, M23 Rebels Shell Civilians,” September 26, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/26/dr-congo-rwandan-forces-m23-rebels-shell-civilians>.
- <sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch, “DR Congo: Rwandan Forces, M23 Rebels Shell Civilians,” 26 September 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/26/dr-congo-rwandan-forces-m23-rebels-shell-civilians>; Refugees International, “Ensuring Women's Protection Amid Rising Conflict in Eastern DRC”, pp. 12-17, 5 April 2024, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/ensuring-womens-protection-amid-rising-conflict-in-eastern-drc/>.
- <sup>9</sup> Physicians for Human Rights, “Visual Diary: Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo,” June 19, 2024, <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/visual-diary-caring-for-child-survivors-of-sexual-violence-in-eastern-drc/>.
- <sup>10</sup> MSF, “MSF survey shows scale and continuing cycle of violence against displaced women in eastern DRC,” August 5, 2024, <https://www.msf.org/msf-survey-shows-scale-violence-against-displaced-women-eastern-drc>.
- <sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Protect Women and Girls in DR Congo’s Prisons,” September 20, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/20/protect-women-and-girls-dr-congos-prisons>.
- <sup>12</sup> Physicians for Human Rights, “Submission for Universal Periodic Review of the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” ¶15, April 8, 2024, <https://phr.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/DRC-UPR-Submission-April-8-2024.pdf>.
- <sup>13</sup> UNHCR, “Democratic Republic of the Congo: Education Dashboard (30 June 2024),” 20 September 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111328>; Norwegian Refugee Council, “West and Central Africa: Alarming rise in school closures,” 9 September 2024, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2024/september/central-and-west-africa-education/>.
- <sup>14</sup> Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, ¶56-63, 3 June 2024, S/2024/384, [undocs.org/s/2024/384](https://undocs.org/s/2024/384).
- <sup>15</sup> Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, “Education under Attack 2024 : Democratic Republic of the Congo Country Profile,” May 2024, [https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/eua\\_2024\\_drc.pdf](https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/eua_2024_drc.pdf); Save the Children, “DRC: Violence in North Kivu Forces Over 500 Schools to Close, with Teachers Kidnapped and Students Terrified,” March 28, 2024, <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/drc-violence-north-kivu-forces-over-500-schools-close-teachers-kidnapped-and-students-terrified>.
- <sup>16</sup> See also “UN Security Council Briefing on DRC by Sandrine Lusamba,” December 11, 2023, <https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/resource/un-security-council-briefing-drc-sandrine-lusamba/>.