

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Violations	International Data 2022	Outcomes of the research (2022 - first months - of 2023)
Killings and maiming	699	More than 600 cases (2022) 32% increase killings (2023)
Recruitment	1.545 117 children, ranging in age from 9 to 17, were detained on the grounds of alleged association with armed groups 284 children, predominantly girls, experienced sexual abuse	More than 1.500 (2022) 1.100 (45% increase - first months 2023)
Sexual violence	284	280 cases (2022) 40 %increase in the number of verified cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence compared to the previous year with more than 130 verified case (2023)
Abduction	730	700

Attacks against school	1000 schools closed 350 schools used to shelter displaced populations	1344 schools closed as May 2023 – More than 150 in North Kivu
Denial of humanitarian access	11 incidents	Around 1.2 million children under 5 in the east facing the risk of acute malnutrition (2023)

Challenges met during the research

Typology	Challenges	Comment
Quantitative	Data collection	Obtaining local statistics on violations against children in armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) presents a significant challenge, highlighting deep-seated cultural barriers and individuals' reluctance to openly discuss such crimes. The cultural backdrop, entrenched in traditions and norms, often hampers community members' willingness to report sensitive issues. Concerns about social stigma, potential reprisals, and disrupting community harmony contribute to a prevailing silence, hindering access to reliable local statistics. Addressing these obstacles requires culturally sensitive approaches and community engagement strategies to foster an environment where reporting and addressing these crimes are deemed essential for the well-being of children and the community.

		The complexities associated with conflict, including security risks, displacement, and a pervasive culture of fear, further complicate the task of obtaining accurate and current statistics.
Qualitative	Cross reference and verification of data	Addressing the challenges surrounding data verification necessitates a multidimensional approach that entails collaboration among local communities, humanitarian organizations, and international entities. This collaborative effort aims to safeguard and promote the well-being of affected populations, with a particular focus on children.
Quantitative/ Qualitative	Lack of a comparison between statistics given by international organization and local institutions	Developing a database that integrates both international and local data would indeed be invaluable for comprehensively understanding local situations, particularly in contexts of conflict or crisis. Such a database could serve as a centralized repository of information, enabling stakeholders to access and analyse data more effectively.
		Investing in this project is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it would facilitate evidence-based decision-making and policy formulation at both local and international levels. Additionally, it could enhance coordination among humanitarian organizations, governments, and other stakeholders by providing a shared platform for data exchange and collaboration.

		Furthermore, a centralized database could help identify trends, gaps, and emerging issues, thereby enabling more targeted and efficient interventions to address the needs of affected populations, especially children. Ultimately, by investing in the development of a comprehensive database of international and local data, the international community can significantly enhance its capacity to respond to humanitarian crises and promote the well-being of vulnerable populations worldwide.
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1. Country analysis

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), approximately the size of Western Europe, stands as the largest country in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁷ Rich in natural resources, including minerals such as cobalt and copper, hydropower potential, vast arable land, immense biodiversity, and the world's second-largest rainforest, the DRC's wealth has not translated into widespread prosperity.

⁷ For this section, see also: Young, M. Crawford; Turner, Thomas Edwin (2013). *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State* (illustrated, reprint ed.). University of Wisconsin Press; Callaghy, T. (1984) *The State-Society Struggle: Zaire in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press; Deibert, M. (2013) *The Democratic Republic of Congo: Between Hope and Despair*, Zed Books; Devlin, L. (2007). *Chief of Station, Congo: A Memoir of 1960–67*. New York: PublicAffairs.

1.1. Conflict

DRC gained its independence from Belgium in 1960, but its early years were marred by political and social instability. Joseph Mobutu seized power and declared himself president in a November 1965 coup. He subsequently changed his name - to Mobutu Sese Seko - as well as that of the country - to Zaire. Mobutu retained his position for 32 years through several sham elections, as well as through brutal force. Ethnic strife and civil war touched off by a massive inflow of refugees in 1994 from conflict in Rwanda and Burundi. The influx of Rwandan Hutu refugees into the country led to the formation of militias, escalating tensions. The Rwandan government, under President Kagame, initiated an invasion, leading to the First Congo War. In May 1997 the Mobutu regime collapsed following a rebellion backed by Rwanda and Uganda and fronted by Laurent Kabila. (Global Conflict Tracker, 2023); (Deibert and Honwana, 2013).

Kabila renamed the country the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but in August 1998 his regime was itself challenged by a second insurrection again backed by Rwanda and Uganda (Second Congo War). Troops from Angola, Chad, Namibia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe intervened to support Kabila's regime. In January 2001, Kabila was assassinated and his son, Joseph Kabila, was named head of state. In October 2002, the new president negotiated the withdrawal of Rwandan forces occupying eastern DRC. Two months later, the Pretoria Accord was signed by all remaining warring parties to end the fighting and establish a government of national unity. Presidential, National Assembly, and provincial elections took place in 2006, with Joseph Kabila elected to office. National elections were held in November 2011 and disputed results allowed Joseph Kabila to be re-elected to the presidency. While the DRC constitution barred President Kabila from running

for a third term, the DRC Government delayed national elections originally scheduled for November 2016, to 30 December 2018. This failure to hold elections as planned fuelled significant civil and political unrest, with sporadic street protests by Kabila's opponents and exacerbation of tensions in the eastern DRC regions. Presidential, legislative, and provincial elections were held in late December 2018 and early 2019 across most of the country. The DRC Government cancelled presidential elections in the cities of Beni and Butembo (citing concerns over an ongoing Ebola outbreak in the region) as well as Yumbi (which had experienced heavy violence). Opposition candidate Tshisekedi was announced the election winner on 10 January 2019 and inaugurated two weeks later. This was the first transfer of power to an opposition candidate without significant violence or a coup since the independence.

The DRC, particularly in the East, continued to experience violence perpetrated by more than 100 armed groups active in the region, including the March 23 rebel group, the ISIS-affiliated Allied Democratic Forces, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, and assorted local militias known as Mai Mai. The UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) has operated in the region since 1999 and is the largest and most expensive UN peacekeeping mission in the world.

In 2022, M23 rebels re-emerged, gaining control of parts of North Kivu province by July 2023. Accusations of Rwandan support for M23 heightened tensions between Congo and Rwanda. China's economic and military involvement in the region, with Chinese nationals becoming casualties of militant attacks in mining areas, added complexity to the situation. In 2023, DRC has witnessed a surge in violence coinciding with the anticipation of national elections scheduled for December 2023. In late November 2023, an agreement facilitated by the United States was reached between

DRC and Rwanda to reduce military presence on their shared border and address hate speech. However, political animosity rose with clashes among militant groups competing for territory and control over natural resources.

As the country approached the December 2023 elections, tensions escalated, leading to a ceasefire brokered by the US. However, rebel groups have displayed reluctance to comply. The drawdown of international and regional contingents, including the largely unpopular MONUSCO peacekeeping mission, raised concerns about a potential security vacuum, particularly in Ituri and North Kivu. The withdrawal coincided with the highly contested presidential election.

In addition to the M23 threat, the DRC grapples with attacks by the Islamic State-affiliated Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and other groups. Relations with neighbouring countries, including Burundi and Uganda, remain strained.

The conflict has resulted in a significant loss of life and a record high of 6.9 million internally displaced people, as large portions of the country became increasingly unsafe for civilians.

1.2. Post-conflict situation

Ongoing conflict, political instability, and authoritarian rule have created a severe humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by forced displacement—a situation largely unchanged since the conclusion of the Congo Wars in 2003. The security situation in the eastern DRC remains worrying and has further deteriorated because of escalated conflicts involving various armed groups, inter-community clashes, and widespread human rights violations. The M23 armed group has intensified its fighting against the Congolese armed forces, contributing to a complex and enduring humanitarian crisis. Other armed groups, including CODECO and Zaire in

the Ituri province, as well as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and the Mai-Mai in the North Kivu province maintain their activism, exacerbating the overall security situation. These conflicts contribute to a challenging environment for civilians, further increasing the humanitarian and protection risks.

The ongoing crisis has resulted in mass displacement, with 6.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) recorded in the eastern provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, and Tanganyika. The Displacement Tracking Matrix's (DTM) eighth crisis analysis evaluation, published on 11 October 2023, highlighted a significant increase in the number of IDPs, reaching over 824,381 individuals. Among them, 58% are women, and 13% are children under five years old. The escalation of the M23 crisis in late 2022 and early 2023 has triggered large-scale population displacement. The Displacement Tracking Matrix's analysis revealed a stark increase in the number of IDPs, emphasizing the dynamic and evolving nature of the crisis. Over 6 million internally displaced people and one million refugees highlight the urgent need for security, medical aid, and humanitarian assistance. International monitoring groups have raised alarms about the electoral commission's corrupt practices, anticipating potential political violence during and after the elections, exacerbating the conflict in eastern provinces and increasing displacement, coinciding with the withdrawal of foreign troops from the DRC.

The intensification of conflicts has led to critical needs in life-saving services. Approximately 10 million people are targeted for humanitarian assistance in 2023 out of the 26.4 million in need. The growing humanitarian needs underscore the urgency of addressing the crisis to prevent further suffering and loss of life.

The protracted crisis has been marked by severe human rights violations and protection risks. These include discrimination, gender-based violence, violations of property rights, theft, looting,

extortion of property, forced family separation, and direct attacks against civilians. The civilian population continues to bear the brunt of these violations.

According to the World Bank (2023), DRC is one of the five poorest nations globally with nearly 62% of the Congolese population, around 60 million people, living on less than \$2.15 a day in 2022. While positive indicators suggest the emergence of a new social contract through initiatives such as free primary education, increased transparency, public sector reforms, and efforts towards universal health coverage, challenges persist, especially in conflict-ridden eastern regions. In terms of the economy, the DRC experienced a peak in real GDP growth at 8.9% in 2022, projected to reach 6.8% in 2023. The mining sector remains a primary growth driver, albeit with a projected slowdown in output growth. Inflation is rising, expected to reach 20.7% in 2023, driven by elevated import costs and a depreciating currency. While external financing is anticipated to bolster international reserves, fiscal deficits widen due to exceptional spending on security and elections. The social context in the DRC reflects challenges in human capital development, as evidenced by a low Human Capital Index ranking (164 out of 174 countries in 2020). A Congolese child born today can expect to achieve only 37% of their potential, primarily due to low child survival rates, high child stunting, and subpar education quality. Stunting rates, at 42% among children under five, remain high, and malnutrition is a leading cause of child mortality. Indigenous peoples face displacement, discrimination, and limited access to essential services, but contribute significantly to cultural diversity and sustainable resource management. Access to education has improved, especially for girls, yet challenges persist, including poor quality and a high rate of learning poverty. Gender disparities persist, with women facing barriers to economic

opportunities, high rates of gender-based violence, and limited education. Healthcare systems, already strained by conflict and humanitarian crises, have been further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to disruptions in routine vaccinations, reduced access to healthcare services, and increased instances of gender-based violence. Addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring sustainable growth, stability, and the well-being of the Congolese population.

On the reconciliation side, in March 2022, with the support of the UN Joint Human Rights Office, the Minister for Human Rights officially launched popular consultations on transitional justice in Tanganyika, Kasai, North Kivu, and Kongo Central provinces, with the aim of collecting the views of the Congolese people on transitional justice mechanisms to be implemented in the country. Between July and December 2022, the Government launched national consultations on transitional justice in Haut-Katanga, Haut-Lomami, Haut-Uele, Kongo Central, Lualaba and Tshopo provinces. In addition to the consultations previously organized in Kasai Central and Tanganyika provinces, during the reporting period a total of 21,695 people, including 7,284 women, including direct and indirect victims, witnesses, and other local community members, were polled on their needs and expectations in terms of the rights to truth, justice, reparations and guarantees of non-repetition. At the provincial level, significant progress has been made in implementing transitional justice in Kasai Central, where the commissioners of the provincial Commission on Truth, Justice and Reconciliation were appointed on 18 August 2022. In January 2023, a scientific committee of 15 experts presented a draft national transitional justice policy to the Ministry of Human Rights (Human Rights Council, 2023).

1.3. Implementation of human rights

While the DRC legal framework pertaining to gender equality and social inclusion is commendable, it is primarily confined to laws and policies, lacking effective implementation and enforcement. As indicated supra, the country has demonstrated its commitment to equity and inclusion by accessing and ratifying several UN Conventions. However, the DRC has not signed the Optional Protocol of CEDAW, which allows for the submission of claims by individual or groups of women to the relevant UN Committee or enables an inquiry into situations involving grave or systematic violations of women's rights within the country. Moreover, national law in the DRC does not recognize domestic violence. Despite ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor, child labour remains prevalent, particularly in mining and mineral extraction areas.

The DRC is actively working to incorporate its commitments to international law into its constitutional framework. According to the 2006 Constitution, citizenship in the DRC can be acquired through birth within the country or if either parent belongs to an ethnic group documented as being present in the country in 1960 (Article 10). Although the lack of registration does not significantly hinder access to social services, it can be exploited for personal gain, leading to potential manipulation of individuals.

However, a substantial challenge arises from the fact that 75% of children in the DRC lack birth certificates. This poses significant multidimensional risks and vulnerabilities (UN Women, 2023). For instance, the absence of proof of age for girl children increases the likelihood of child marriage. Moreover, the absence of proper documentation can adversely affect various aspects, including voting rights, access to financial services, freedom of movement between territories and across borders, and active civic engage-

ment. Addressing these gaps is crucial not only for individual rights but also for the overall societal well-being and inclusivity. Law No. 06/019, modifying and completing the Congolese Penal Procedure Code (2006), expanded the definition of rape aligning it with international protection standards. The primary objective of the law is to safeguard the physical and psychological well-being of victims of female genital mutilation (FGM), sexual assault, rape, and gender-based violence in general. While the legislation criminalizes assault and rape, not all instances of such offenses are reported by victims. Moreover, under Law No. 06/019, female genital mutilation (FGM) is considered a form of sexual violence and is punishable by two to five years in prison, along with substantial fines. In cases where FGM results in death, the law prescribes a life sentence upon conviction. Despite legal provisions, there is a need for continued efforts to ensure effective enforcement, reporting mechanisms, and support systems for victims of sexual violence throughout the country (UN Women 2020).

Moreover, the enforcement of the law and the provision of appropriate response and referral support are not always effectively carried out.

In South Kivu, only four courts have the capacity to adjudicate a crime of rape, reflecting a broader issue of inadequate infrastructure for handling sexual crimes across the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Despite challenges, there have been instances of successful legal action. For example, on 15 January 2020, the military court in Bukavu, South Kivu Province, convicted a soldier from the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) and an officer from the National Congolese Police (PNC) on charges of rape, sentencing them to 20 years in prison each (UN Women 2020). On 15 May 2023, the military tribunal of Uvira sentenced a former leader of a faction of the Raia Mutomboki armed group to life imprisonment for crimes against

humanity. Among the charges confirmed by the court is the crime of forced pregnancy, a world first before a national court.

DRC is positioned at 151 out of 179 countries in the 2021 Gender Inequality Index (GII). A mere 14.3% of parliamentary seats are occupied by women. Disturbingly, one in two women in the country reported having experienced physical or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime, based on data from the 2014 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS). Furthermore, a concerning trend is evident, with 3 in 4 women and nearly 3 in 5 men believing that wife beating is justified for at least one specified reason. Notably, the acceptability of intimate partner violence (IPV) appears to be more prevalent in younger age groups for both men and women, indicating a critical need for targeted interventions to address these concerning attitudes and behaviours (Albert 2022). Violence against women and girls is not only conflict-related. Research indicates that conflict-related sexual violence reflects pre-existing discriminatory and violent societal views toward women rather than a new phenomenon triggered by war. This is exemplified by the fact that the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) is higher in the relatively stable former province of Kasai Occidental (71%) compared to the conflict-affected North Kivu province (34%) (Albert 2022).

This data underscores the fact that gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive societal issue deeply rooted in entrenched norms that normalize male power over women and, more broadly, perpetuate gender inequality. Consequently, to effectively address GBV and reduce violence against women and girls, the DRC needs to allocate resources towards prevention programs focussing on changing harmful social norms and behaviours that underpin violence and contribute to broader gender inequality. Additionally, there should be investments in programs that empower women, amplify their voices, and raise awareness about impunity. These efforts

need to be complemented by the establishment of high-quality response services to ensure that survivors, encouraged to come forward, have access to survivor-centred care of the highest quality. This comprehensive approach is essential to create lasting change and build a society where violence against women and girls is not tolerated (Alexandre and Moke Mutondo 2022).

Additionally, the DRC supports the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security. Through its participation in MONUSCO, the country has pledged to enhance women's political participation and security during election periods, promote gender-sensitive and non-sexist communications in the media, and increase women's engagement in social cohesion, non-violence, and peace mediation. The DRC regularly updates its commitment to Resolution 1325 as part of these efforts.

2. Level of adequacy to international law

Article 215 of the Constitution provides for the primacy of international treaty law over domestic law. As a result, a legal framework comprising international and domestic law informs the legal and judicial response to serious crimes. The DRC, as a member of the UN, has ratified numerous Human Rights Conventions, thus undertaking binding international commitments to uphold the standards outlined in these instruments. This signifies the country's dedication to the protection and promotion of fundamental human rights.

The DRC is party to the following main international instruments:

- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT);

- Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture (CAT-OP);
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR);
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW);
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD);
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR);
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC);
- Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (CRC-OP-AC);
- Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children child prostitution and child pornography (CRC-OP-SC);
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD);
- African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights;
- Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa as well as the Rights and Welfare of the Child

(U.N. Treaty Body Database, 2023).

As a co-sponsor and signatory of the 2008 Southern African Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development, the DRC is committed to upholding obligations related to UN Conventions concerning the rights of the child and the prevention of violence against women and children, with an emphasis on mainstreaming gender across all community building programs in the region.

The DRC is also party to numerous treaties that provide for the

prosecution of serious crimes. It ratified the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the two Additional Protocols of 1977, the Hague Convention of 1954, and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948.

In April 2002, the DRC ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and in April 2004, referred the situation in its territory since 1 July 2002 to the ICC. The ICC therefore may exercise its jurisdiction over crimes listed in the Rome Statute committed on the territory of the DRC or by its nationals from 1 July 2002 onwards. In 2004, the ICC Prosecutor opened an investigation focussing on alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed mainly in eastern DRC, in the Ituri region and the North and South Kivu Provinces, since 1 July 2002. The investigation led to several cases involving charges of

- *war crimes*: enlisting and conscripting child soldiers under the age of fifteen years and using them to participate actively in hostilities; murder and attempted murder; wilful killing; attacking civilians; rape; sexual slavery of civilians; pillaging; displacing civilians; attacking protected objects; destroying property; rape; sexual slavery; mutilation; cruel treatment; torture; destruction of property; pillaging and outrages against personal dignity; and
- *crimes against humanity*: murder and attempted murder; torture; rape; sexual slavery; inhuman acts; persecution; forcible transfer of population, attacking a civilian population; destroying property; and pillaging.

The investigation led to three convictions, in the *Lubanga* case, the *Katanga* case and the *Bosco Ntaganda* case. The *Lubanga* case was the first before the ICC and concerned crimes against children, namely recruitment and use in hostilities (ICC website, 2023).

At the beginning of 2022, the Congolese government formally requested the ICC Prosecutor to investigate serious crimes allegedly committed in North Kivu since 1 January 2022 in relation to widespread killings and rapes by the M23 rebels in North Kivu as well as abuses by other armed groups.

3. National legislation

While the Democratic Republic of the Congo has ratified important international human rights conventions, the challenges in translating these legal commitments into tangible improvements persistent, especially for women and children in the eastern regions, underscore the need for concerted and comprehensive efforts. Addressing the root causes of violence, enhancing security, and promoting awareness and education are critical components of a holistic strategy to improve the human rights situation in the country. Ongoing collaboration between the government, civil society, and the international community is essential to bring about meaningful change and ensure the effective protection of human rights in the DRC.

Among the national tools aimed at making effective the international commitments, on 10 January 2009, the DRC adopted the *Law on the Protection of the Child (Loi no 09/001 du 10 janvier 2009 portant protection de l'enfant)*. The law defines a "child in an exceptional situation" as any individual below 18 years of age in circumstances such as armed conflict, tensions, civil unrest, natural catastrophes, or a situation of significant and prolonged degradation of socio-economic conditions (Article 2 (5)). This inclusive definition reflects a recognition of the diverse challenges that children may face in various adverse situations.

The law also establishes measures for "exceptional protection,"

explicitly prohibiting the recruitment or use of children in the armed forces or armed groups. Additionally, it mandates the state to ensure the reintegration of children who have been enlisted or used by forces or armed groups into their family or community (Article 71). Furthermore, the state is obligated to guarantee protection and education for children affected by armed conflict, ensuring their re-adaptation into society (Article 73).

In terms of penal repression, the law stipulates that the enrolment or use of children below 18 years of age in the armed forces or armed groups is a crime, carrying a penalty of imprisonment ranging from 10 to 20 years (Article 187). This strict legal framework underscores the commitment to prevent the involvement of children in armed conflicts and highlights the gravity of such crimes, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding the well-being and rights of children in all situations.

Despite this legislative framework and the country's adherence to international conventions, the effective implementation of laws protecting children faces considerable challenges, including:

- Weak Institutional Framework which is inadequate for enforcing child protection laws. Government agencies tasked with ensuring child welfare lack the necessary resources, training, and capacity to carry out their mandates effectively. This deficiency hampers the enforcement of legal protections for children.
- Inadequate Law Enforcement Services. Law enforcement services play a crucial role in safeguarding the rights of children. However, these services are confronted with corruption, insufficient training, and lack of resources. This undermines their ability to respond promptly and effectively to cases of child abuse and exploitation.
- Judicial Deficiencies. The judicial system in the DRC suffers from inefficiencies, delays, and a lack of capacity. This pos-

es obstacles to the timely and fair resolution of cases related to children. Additionally, the absence of specialized courts or judges dealing with children's rights contributes to a broader failure in providing adequate legal recourse.

- **Social and Economic Vulnerabilities.** The social and economic environment exacerbates the vulnerability of women and children. Poverty, conflict, and instability create conditions where children are exposed to abuse, exploitation, and life-threatening situations. The lack of basic services, such as education and healthcare, further compounds the challenges faced by children.
- **Abuse and Deprivation.** Women and children are particularly vulnerable to various forms of abuse and deprivation. This includes but is not limited to physical abuse, sexual exploitation, forced labour, and denial of access to education. The combination of weak institutions and adverse socio-economic conditions heightens the risk of children facing severe violations of their rights.

On 15 June 2023, the National Assembly took a significant step in the protection of human rights defenders by adopting a new law titled *Loi relative à la protection et la responsabilité du défenseur des droits de l'Homme en République Démocratique du Congo* (Loi 23/027).⁸ The adoption of this law is a commendable step

⁸ See LOI N°23/027 Relative à la protection et à la responsabilité du défenseur des droits de l'homme en République démocratique du Congo; LOI N°23/028 déterminant les principes fondamentaux relatifs au régime pénitentiaire| AWA (awa-afrika.com). The adoption of this law follows the organization of a consultation on 22 March 2023 in Kinshasa, involving civil society and senators. This collaborative effort between International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) and SOS Infor-

towards recognizing and safeguarding the crucial work of human rights advocates. However, concerns regarding the registration requirement, redundant reporting obligations, and the lack of clarity on the protection mechanism underscore the need for continued scrutiny and potential amendments to ensure the law's alignment with international standards and its practical effectiveness in safeguarding the rights of human rights defenders. Ongoing collaboration between civil society, legislators, and international organizations will be essential in addressing these concerns and refining the legal framework to better protect human rights advocates.

The law outlines the rights and duties of human rights defenders, ensuring freedom of association, assembly, and access to information. Importantly, Article 5 grants the possibility of obtaining funding from international entities, acknowledging the crucial role of external support. Similar to Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Niger, the DRC law provides specific protection for women human rights defenders, recognizing and addressing the unique challenges they may face. Indeed, the law places obligations on the state, including the physical protection of human rights defenders and their families, acknowledging the state's responsibility in ensuring the safety of those advocating for human rights.

While the law sets out a broad definition of human rights defenders, Article 7 imposes a registration requirement for individuals not affiliated with an organization. This provision contradicts the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, potentially excluding occasional defenders from the protection afforded by the law. Moreover, the law requires both defenders and NGOs to submit annual reports on their activities, duplicating existing

mation Justice Multisectorielle (SOS-IJM) demonstrates a commitment to aligning the legislation with international standards on the protection of human rights defenders.

requirements from the 2001 law on non-profit associations. This redundancy raises concerns about bureaucratic burden and potential overlap in reporting mechanisms.

However, it must be recalled that in August 2002, the Ministry of Justice reactivated the DRC Permanent Commission on Law Reform, which had been dormant for an extended period. The commission is tasked with formulating new laws that align with the social realities of the DRC and its international commitments. Its mission extends to the harmonization and modernization of domestic legislation, ensuring alignment with both customary and international law. Examples include the 1987 Family Law Code (Law No. 87-010 of 1 August 1987) and the 2002 Labour Code (enacted by Law No. 015/2002).

The DRC has committed to the goals outlined in Agenda 2030 and provided its inaugural progress report in 2020. The *Plan National Stratégique de Développement* (PNSD) has been crafted to mirror the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the establishment of the Congolese Observatory of Sustainable Development serves as a mechanism for evaluating and measuring progress. The National Development Plan for 2020-2024 underscores the DRC's dedication to inclusive growth and human and social development, aligning it with the SDGs.

Furthermore, the DRC has reinforced its legislative framework for national education through strategic documents such as the *Education and Training Sector Strategy 2016-2025*, the *Specific Strategy for Technical Education and Vocational Training 2016-2025*, and the *National Qualifications Framework ministerial decree* N°179/MINETAT/MTEPS/01/2018, which focuses on transforming certain general education schools into technical education and vocational training centres. However, it's noteworthy that the DRC has not yet ratified key international instruments, such as the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Edu-

cation and the 1989 Convention on Technical and Vocational Education, which are designed to advance equity and inclusion in line with SDG4 (Minister du Plan, 2020).

The Constitution guarantees free basic education and encourages collaboration with religious authorities to provide relevant education (Article 44). Nevertheless, in practice, accessing education remains a challenge due to weak infrastructure, substandard teaching quality, and frequently imposed fees that many cannot afford. The DRC permits religious institutions to offer education following national guidelines established by the government, provided they adhere to standards concerning curriculum quality, class size, teacher qualifications and salaries, and assessment systems. Notably, only 12.5% of secondary school teachers are female, and the presence of female teachers in schools has been associated with increased enrolment, retention, and learning outcomes for girls.

4. Judicial system

The Constitution ensures the autonomy of the judiciary. The country's legal system comprises the Supreme Court, Courts of Appeal, and the Constitutional Court. The President leads a Higher Council of Magistrates and appoints Supreme Court judges based on recommendations from the Higher Council. Supreme Court judges enjoy security of tenure and cannot be dismissed. Military courts to judge over crimes committed by national armed forces are also active: one per province and two in the capital, Kinshasa. Courts are concentrated in urban areas; rural areas rely on customary courts. Informal justice mechanisms are common throughout the country.

The adoption of the Law on the Organization, Functioning and Jurisdiction of the Courts in April 2013 achieved an important

breakthrough. For the first time, it assigned jurisdiction over serious crimes to civilian courts, making the Courts of Appeal competent for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Previously, the 1972 Military Justice Code had provided military courts with exclusive jurisdiction over crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide. Under Article 207 of the Military Penal Code (MPC), military courts have subject-matter jurisdiction over all infractions of the said Code. Further, Article 161 provides that any crime “related” to, or “indivisible” from, a serious crime falls under the subject-matter jurisdiction of military courts, regardless of whether it is civilian in nature. According to Article 156 of the Constitution, military courts and tribunals hold personal jurisdiction over members of the army and national police. However, several provisions extend this personal jurisdiction over persons who are not linked to the army or the national police. During a war, military jurisdiction expands to include civilians involved in fighting. In peacetime, military jurisdiction also covers any civilians “who, although unrelated to the military, cause, engage in or assist one or more soldiers or similar, to commit an infraction under military law or regulation”; “who, even if not part of the army, commit infractions against the Army, National Police, National Service, their equipment, their premises or within the army, the National Police or the National Service”; and “who, without being soldiers commit crimes using weapons of war”. These jurisdictional exceptions give military courts competency over crimes that would otherwise be adjudicated by civilian courts (ICTJ, 2015).

When peace agreements were signed in 2002, the Congolese legal system suffered from invisibility at the local level, a lack of institutional capacity, a deficient legislative framework and a dearth of expertise, and a lack of independence and impartiality in the judiciary. Therefore, the prosecution of international crimes by Congolese courts had always remained rudimentary and inchoate,

at best. The judicial system falls short of meeting the minimum international standards pertaining to the administration of justice. Despite the constitutional provision for the separation of powers, the executive branch continues to exert influence over the judiciary. This interference extends to the nomination, promotion, imposition of sanctions, and dismissal of judges and prosecutors, often without consulting the Supreme Council of the Judiciary. The precarious social conditions the judicial staff face risk to make them susceptible to corruption, leading to instances of actively or passively undermining the functioning of justice. This misconduct manifests in arbitrary arrests, the exchange of favouritism, and blackmail.

Furthermore, in military courts, judges are members of the military. Their nomination is at the discretion of the President, and they are appointed by the Minister of Justice. They can be relocated without providing any reason, contributing to concerns about the independence and integrity of the military judicial system.

The judicial system remains highly dysfunctional, and impunity remains widespread for state and non-state actors alike. The remoteness of certain areas and the poor infrastructures make it particularly difficult for crimes to get reported and documented. However, some progresses are visible.

Political and ethnic tensions have resulted in years of grave international crimes including mass murder, the use of child soldiers, pillage, sexual and gender-based crimes, among others. For many years, victims and civil society have demanded accountability at the national and international levels. Following repeated calls by victims, international organizations, and civil society for DRC to address the impunity gap in the country, in January 2016 DRC’s “Law implementing the Rome Statute of the ICC” entered into force. The law amends DRC’s military and criminal codes to incorporate Rome Statute crimes and general principles of law. The

law also establishes the competence of civilian criminal courts, including in appeals, for all cases of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Several national and local courts have been undertaking prosecutions of military members in eastern DRC accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Between January 2009 and December 2014, judicial authorities opened 39 cases related to events qualified as international crimes that had occurred between 2002 and 2014 in the eastern provinces and districts of the DRC (Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu) (ICTJ, 2015).

Between June 2021 and May 2022, the UN Joint Human Rights Office documented 442 convictions related to gross human rights violations. Of these, 142 concerned FARDC, 41 the Congolese National Police and 118 members of armed groups. There were a further 140 convictions of civilians for their involvement in serious human rights violations. As of May 2023, 314 individuals (71 soldiers of the Armed Forces of the State, 20 Congolese National Police agents, 143 members of armed groups and 80 civilians) were convicted for human rights violations and abuses amounting to international crimes. (Human Rights Council, 2023) (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The justice system is facing an overwhelming number of offenses, presenting challenges in the investigation and successful prosecution of crimes. Ongoing conflict has left certain regions isolated, exacerbating the difficulties for victims and witnesses who not only lack protection from armed groups but also struggle to access justice, particularly in remote areas of the country where often crimes are committed. Infrastructures have been destroyed or pillaged. This situation erodes public trust in the authorities' capacity to deliver justice, perpetuating a culture of impunity. Addressing these challenges is critical not only for delivering justice but also

for restoring faith in the judicial system and fostering a sense of security and protection for the affected communities.

Indeed, the DRC has long grappled with a culture of impunity, allowing both national security forces and rebel armed groups to inflict harm on civilians with minimal accountability. Accusations of sexual violence and rape have been levelled against both sides, yet few perpetrators have been identified or brought to justice. Sexual violence, often employed as a war strategy to humiliate and demoralize enemies, has profound and devastating effects on communities, particularly impacting women who are often left alone with their children born of rape.

Numerous obstacles impede access to justice for survivors, including exorbitant court costs, fear of reprisals, insecurity, and low levels of awareness regarding avenues for pursuing accountability. Particularly challenging is the situation for survivors in remote locations, who often struggle to reach courts located far away. Even when survivors obtain favourable court decisions, the justice system frequently falls short in ensuring the implementation of rulings. Compensation awards, for example, often go unpaid, leaving victims frustrated and without the financial support necessary to overcome the physical and psychological impacts of SGBV.

Civil society organisations have consistently urged the government to pass a law guaranteeing free court fees and legal aid, aiming to enhance access to justice for victims and reduce instances of out-of-court settlements. In the context of ongoing conflict and acute poverty affecting many survivors, removing financial barriers is deemed crucial for improving access to justice. Victims of international crimes often face severe financial hardships, having lost everything. In many cases, mobilizing the necessary resources to meet these fees becomes an insurmountable challenge, hindering their ability to participate in the trial and seek justice for the crimes they have suffered. In a ruling issued on 12 April 2023, a Congolese

court has set a precedent by exempting victims, for the first time, from the payment of an application fee for participating in a proceedings (TRIAL International, 2023). This landmark decision followed the promulgation of a law on 26 December 2022 on the protection and reparation of victims of war crimes and crimes against humanity which has made possible to abolish the application of fees for victims of said crimes. This measure eliminates a notable obstacle to victims' access to justice. Indeed, previously, under Congolese criminal procedure rules, individuals seeking to participate in a criminal trial and pursue compensation for the crimes they have endured traditionally must pay an initial fee to the court.

Improving access to justice, especially for the most vulnerable, aligns with one of the four priority objectives outlined in the *National Justice Reform Policy* adopted by the Congolese government in 2017. In addition to the lack of information about their rights and the physical distance of jurisdictions, victims encounter financial barriers—namely, lawyers' fees and procedural costs—when seeking justice. The recent legal development serves as a commendable step towards addressing these financial hurdles and fostering a more inclusive and accessible justice system.

A critical concern also revolves around the inability of victims to access effective reparations. Those who have endured sexual violence often face heightened vulnerability, losing their livelihoods as a consequence of their traumatic experiences. To assist survivors in regaining their dignity and autonomy, there is a pressing need for financial and material reparations. The civil society strongly advocates for the creation of a national reparations fund, which would be instrumental in individually or collectively supporting victims, facilitating their restoration, and fortifying their resilience. The establishment of such a fund is considered a proactive measure to address the multifaceted challenges faced by victims of sexual violence in the DRC.

4.1. Mobile courts

Since 2008, the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative (ABA ROLI) has been collaborating with MONUSCO, HEAL Africa and Panzi hospitals, Congolese NGOs, and international NGOs, to conduct military and civilian trials in some of the most remote areas of South Kivu, North Kivu and Maniema provinces in eastern DRC. Many of these trials are conducted by mobile courts - temporary courts that are explicitly contemplated under Congolese law and which operate for a limited period of time in remote areas. Major trials in Eastern DRC, including those related to rebel leader Kokodikoko, the massacre in Mutarule of 2013, and the abduction and rape of girls in Kavumu cases between 2013 and 2016, were celebrated by mobile courts. Comprising a full team of justice sector professionals, including judges, prosecutors, defence lawyers, and bailiffs, mobile court trials often take place under a tent. By operating in the field, the mobile court not only offers justice for a broader range of cases but also serves as a vital educational tool for the public. The mobile courts were strategically designed to address and adjudicate serious conflict-related crimes, including those reaching the threshold of crimes against humanity under international law. Each court's work provides a tangible lesson about the severity of sexual violence and demonstrates the potential to hold perpetrators accountable, contributing to a greater understanding of the consequences of such crimes. Importantly, approximately 75% of the cases heard by mobile courts are related to rape, while cases involving robbery and pillaging are also commonly addressed. The unique dual jurisdiction of the mobile courts provides flexibility in the dynamic circumstances of the Eastern DRC, allowing them to prosecute both military personnel and civilians. These itinerant Congolese judges, lawyers, and investigators play a crucial role

that complements the efforts of the ICC. This emerging practice is gaining traction due to enhanced access for victims, expedited justice, and a deterrent effect. By taking the judicial process closer to the affected communities, individuals who might face challenges reaching conventional courthouses can more readily participate in legal proceedings.

The mobility of these courts allows for swift deployment to areas affected by conflict or other challenges. This agility in setting up temporary courts enables a faster response to legal needs. Expedited justice is particularly crucial in cases involving serious crimes, as delays can exacerbate the suffering of victims and hinder the overall judicial process.

Moreover, the use of mobile courts has a deterrent effect on potential perpetrators. By demonstrating a capacity for rapid and effective legal action, mobile courts send a strong message that individuals involved in criminal activities will be held accountable. This can contribute to discouraging criminal behaviour and promoting a sense of justice within communities. Holding trials in the communities affected by the crimes fosters community engagement and awareness. Residents have the opportunity to witness the legal process first-hand, promoting a better understanding of the judicial system and dispelling myths or misconceptions. This educational aspect can contribute to building trust in the justice system, promoting accountability and addressing serious crimes within the local context.

5. Crimes against and affecting children: quantitative and qualitative measures

The DRC prolonged crisis has impacted approximately 15.4 million children. Said crisis compounds chronic poverty, systemic

weaknesses, and the pre-existing vulnerability of the population (UNICEF 2023). Increased military operations in 2023, coupled with escalating tensions before the general elections in December 2023, further exacerbated the challenges. These challenges further intensify chronic poverty, systemic weaknesses, and overall vulnerability within the population.

Integrated, life-saving assistance must be provided, while simultaneously enhancing community resilience and social cohesion to pave the way for more sustained interventions. The prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as gender-based violence, must be systematically integrated into all programmatic interventions. The humanitarian needs and protection concerns are of a massive scale, with the DRC hosting the second-highest number of internally displaced people in the world in 2022.

The country has experienced a continuous rise in population displacement, with over 1.29 million people relocated between January and July 2022 alone. Notably, at least 97% of displaced individuals reside in Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu Provinces. These areas have witnessed an increasing number of targeted attacks against civilians and critical infrastructure, including internally displaced people sites, schools, and health facilities.

According to the National Multidimensional Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (N-MODA) child poverty and deprivation study, a staggering 74.6% of children under 17 years old throughout the country, comprising approximately 19.9 million girls and 20.1 million boys, experience multidimensional poverty. This implies that beyond monetary-based poverty, children struggle with deprivations encompassing poor health, lack of education, inadequate living standards, and the looming threat of violence, among other challenges. The total number of individuals to be reached is further disaggregated as follows: 5,632,700 men/boys and 5,815,877 women/girls.

According to the 2023 UN Secretary-General's report on children and armed conflict, the year 2022 witnessed over 2,400 children falling victim to 3,377 grave violations. During the first half of 2023, the DRC witnessed over 1,700 grave violations against children. This figure represents a 41 % increase compared to the same period in the previous year.

The following data were collected through on-site research, interviews, and the analysis of UN documents, as well as local and NGO reports (World Vision International, 2023); (UNICEF, 2023).

5.1. Killing and maiming

The data reveals a disturbing trend, with the number of children killed in 2022 nearly doubling compared to the previous year. Additionally, the country has the unfortunate distinction of recording the highest number of child abductions globally. This underscores the urgent need for adopting comprehensive measures to protect children from the devastating impacts of armed conflict and to address the root causes of atrocities. Since 2018, the number of children killed and maimed in conflict in the DRC has steadily increased, reaching 699 children in 2022, almost double the figure recorded in 2021, which was 363 children. Moreover, the number of reported incidents of child killings and mutilations in 2023 surged by 32% compared to the same period the previous year.

5.2. Recruitment and Use of Children

Reports indicate that 1,545 children were recruited by armed groups and used in various roles, such as militants, spies, and guards. At least 117 children, ranging in age from 9 to 17, were detained on the grounds of alleged association with armed groups. At least 284 children, predominantly girls, experienced sexu-

al abuse. These harrowing statistics underscore the urgent need for concerted efforts to protect and safeguard the well-being of children in the region. Shockingly, during the initial half of 2023, there was a notable 45% increase in the number of children recruited into armed groups. The research revealed that in 2022, more than 1,500 children were documented as having been recruited and utilized by armed groups.

5.3. Sexual Violence

The high levels of verified cases of sexual violence against children and abductions is deeply concerning. The situation reflects a grave violation of human rights and the severe impact of armed conflict on vulnerable populations, particularly children. In both 2021 and 2022, the DRC experienced the highest confirmed cases of sexual violence against children committed by armed forces and armed groups globally. Additionally, in 2022, the United Nations verified 730 cases of children being abducted, marking the highest number of abductions ever recorded in the DRC.

5.4. Abduction

730 cases of child abductions were reported in 2022, marking the highest number globally. Abductions had the primarily goal of forcing recruit and subsequently use children by armed groups. However, some instances involved extortion, sexual violence, and torture. Young girls abducted or recruited face increased vulnerability being exposed to trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced marriage. Additionally, sexual violence against boys recruited or held in detention is likely underreported due to stigma and barriers preventing access to the necessary support services. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that

considers both the immediate safety of those affected and the need to challenge societal stigmas and barriers hindering their ability to seek assistance.

5.5. *Attacks against schools and hospitals*

According to the data collected *in loco* during the research, it emerged that in 2022, 1,344 schools were closed as a direct consequence of attacks by non-identified armed groups or the prevailing climate of insecurity. Apart from causing deaths and injuries, said attacks often resulted in a significant decline in student attendance, logistical challenges in deployment, and difficulties in retaining teachers in insecure areas.

5.6. *Denial of humanitarian access*

During the initial three months of 2023, eastern DRC was confronted with the looming threats of epidemics and malnutrition. Approximately 1.2 million children under the age of five in the eastern region are at risk of acute malnutrition. The situation highlights a pressing humanitarian concern, demanding urgent attention and intervention to address the health and nutritional needs of the vulnerable population in the affected areas.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research shows that despite the ratification of international legal instruments and the implementation of promising legal frameworks, the Democratic Republic of the Congo continues to face significant human rights challenges. This is particularly evident in the Eastern part of the country, where the situa-

tion remains a cause of profound concern. While the DRC has demonstrated commitment on paper, the translation of legal provisions into tangible improvements, especially for women and children, must be improved. Indeed, while the ratification of various international legal tools reflects the country's commitment to upholding human rights standards, the disparity between legal commitments and the reality suggests that the mere existence of legal frameworks does not guarantee their effective implementation for women and children. This is particularly disconcerting, given the vulnerabilities often faced by these groups in conflict-affected areas. While legal commitments are important, their impact is measured by the extent to which they are translated into real and positive changes in people's lives. The country faces a significant challenge in bridging the gap between promising legal frameworks and the persistent human rights concerns. Addressing this challenge requires not only continued legal commitment but also comprehensive and sustained efforts to tackle the root causes of human rights violations and create an environment where the rights of all individuals, especially women and children, are respected and protected. Factors such as limited resources, institutional capacity, and ongoing conflict dynamics contribute to the implementation gap. Efforts should be deployed to ensure the safety and well-being of women and children, including effective prosecution of perpetrators. In analysing the results of this study, it appears that the DRC must prioritize the effective implementation of existing legal frameworks. This involves allocating sufficient resources, building institutional capacity, and addressing the causes of human rights violations for creating an environment conducive to the protection of children and women rights.

Recommendations

- Strengthen institutions responsible for child protection by investing in capacity building. This includes providing training, resources, and personnel to enhance the effectiveness of government agencies and law enforcement services.
- Enhance judicial capacity addressing deficiencies in the judicial system by improving efficiency, reducing case backlogs, and establishing specialized family and juvenile courts.
- Enhance community awareness and engagement through campaigns to educate communities about children's rights and available legal protections and encouraging community involvement in reporting and preventing child abuse, fostering a culture of collective responsibility.
- Implement social and economic programs to alleviate poverty; improving living conditions by providing essential services such as education and healthcare.
- Invest in education: Access to education is a critical components of any strategy aimed at improving the human rights situation. Education equips individuals with the tools to break the cycle of poverty and contribute positively to society, empowering children.

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