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# **PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT FINDINGS** SOUTH KIVU, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

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# Introduction

As the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) peacekeeping mission draws down at the request of the host state government, many questions and concerns are being raised about ongoing civilian protection needs and resources in the context of the transition. Communities, humanitarians, duty bearers, and other actors are concerned about the emerging and persistent threats that civilians face in this context, and the ways that the transition is likely to exacerbate civilian protection needs and risks.

Amid this transition and the myriad challenges it presents, what more can be done to prepare for and address the protection gaps that will emerge and be exacerbated in South Kivu and across the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)? This report highlights that despite widespread protection risks, foundations are already being laid by communities themselves—those who are most impacted by violent conflict, and who live long-term with its consequences well beyond the departure of external actors. This report is a reflection on those needs and response strategies and highlights where attention and resources need to be directed to have the most impact on the protection of civilians in the DRC, particularly in the context of the mission drawdown.

This summary of preliminary findings explores these themes and presents key conclusions from a protection assessment mission conducted in South Kivu, DRC, in March 2024 in a joint initiative of Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The summary highlights key concerns related to the safety of civilians in DRC and identifies entry points for Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) programming to address these needs. More comprehensive analysis and detail can be provided on request.

# Context

This report comes at a critical time for civilians in eastern DRC and those seeking to prevent violence and provide protection to risk-exposed populations. The DRC currently faces the world's second-largest displacement crisis (after Sudan), with persistent waves of conflict and instability impacting civilians across the country, particularly in the east. UNOCHA reports 7.2 million registered internally displaced persons (IDPs) across DRC, an all-time high. Recurrent armed conflict has frayed social fabric between people of different social and ethnic backgrounds, and levels of inter-communal violence and the involvement of civilians in armed conflict have increased. This has contributed to the deterioration of cross-border trading conditions between the DRC and neighbouring countries, particularly Rwanda. Despite a ceasefire brokered in 2023, repeated violations and violent clashes between the DRC military and the M23 rebel group have escalated in 2024 in eastern Congo. As regional dynamics deteriorate, many are concerned these clashes may lead to violent conflict between the DRC and Rwanda that could draw in neighbours and regional forces including South Africa, Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Malawi.<sup>i</sup>

The deterioration in security conditions has occurred despite the first-ever UN Security Council authorisation of an offensive combat force, the specialised 'intervention brigade' deployed as part of MONUSCO since 2013. While MONUSCO has been able to mitigate some of the violence by its presence, community perceptions of MONUSCO's protection failures led to widespread protests and damage to UN legitimacy. This was exacerbated when protesters were killed by peacekeepers and culminated in the DRC Government requesting accelerated withdrawal of the mission in late 2023. As MONUSCO prepares to withdraw its presence from the last three provinces in Eastern DRC in 2024, gaps in civilian protection are likely to be exacerbated.

i. For a more comprehensive overview of conflict dynamics in DRC, see analysis from ACLED: <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2023/drc/>

# Methodology

This report reflects the findings of a two-week rapid assessment conducted in March 2024 by NP and UNFPA staff. The qualitative assessment included 50 semi-structured interviews, 4 focus group discussions (FGDs), and direct observation. The assessment aimed to collate views related to civilian protection from a range of different stakeholders, including community leaders, humanitarian workers, representatives of UN agencies, MONUSCO officials, government authorities, religious authorities, and CSOs. As far as possible, the team aimed to elicit reflections from across different identity groups, including women, youth, and local leaders. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in interviews and FGDs, and measures were taken to safeguard confidentiality and anonymity.

The assessment team focused on South Kivu province as the primary target of the assessment. Meetings and FGDs were conducted in Bukavu, the provincial capital, as well as in Uvira town, in the Ruzizi Plain (Sange town), and in Kalehe. The assessment team also met with national and regional stakeholders in both Kinshasa and Goma (North Kivu). Meetings with civil society actors in Goma were conducted as a step towards future expansion of UCP programming into North Kivu.



# Civilian protection risks and needs

The assessment identified and confirmed several key civilian protection risks and needs as detailed below. The analysis provided here is not exhaustive, and protection needs are often interrelated. This analysis aligns with protection concerns highlighted by CSOs, humanitarian organisations, and local duty bearers, and other actors. In-depth analysis across these areas of interest is available through NP for interested partners.

**Sexual and Gender Based Violence:** Sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) was a widespread risk identified by stakeholders across South Kivu. Rape and sexual abuse are often used as a weapon of war by armed groups, resulting in psychological trauma and physical harm (including the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections), all in a context where women have limited access to medical services. One local organisation was recording at least 10 cases of rape per month, a number they estimate to be substantially lower than the actual number of cases. Rape, and other SGBV harms including domestic violence, are often unreported by survivors due to inadequate mechanisms for reporting, lack of confidentiality, and impunity for perpetrators. Institutional failure to hold perpetrators accountable perpetuates a culture of impunity and erodes trust in the justice system, leaving survivors without recourse or protection. Interviewees reflected that sexual exploitation, including survival sex in exchange for access to food, shelter, and protection, was commonplace. Community members and local organisations also highlighted that domestic violence was widespread, particularly in IDP camps where living conditions are precarious and social tensions run high.

**“With the precarious conditions of survival in IDP camps, some women are forced to indulge in sex for food to meet their basic needs of food. This situation is quite concerning for us as women. It takes away all our dignity.”  
- interviewee in Goma, DRC**

There was grave concern about the lack of documentation of domestic violence cases and the dearth of institutional support for survivors: “there are lots of cases, but there are no organisations looking at domestic violence in the context of IDPs,” reported one interviewee in Goma.

**Violence against children:** Child protection needs were commonly raised over the course of the assessment, including pervasive forced recruitment of children by armed groups; targeted SGBV against girls including forced marriage and sexual slavery; and widespread lack of access to basic needs and rights, including food, healthcare, and education because of the conflict. In certain areas, such as Minembwe and Bijembo, children and young people face severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, strategically imposed by armed groups to control, ensuring their proximity for future recruitment or exploitation.

In the context of the transition, interviewees raised major concerns about rates of child recruitment increasing. For those children who have been supported through demobilisation processes, there is a lack of essential long-term support, which increases risks that such children will return to armed groups. For example, one group of 27 children that a local organisation had supported through demobilisation had recently returned to their communities, but had little access to ongoing support or livelihood opportunities. As ex-combatants, such children are often feared and not accepted by their communities, and often do not have access to social support networks. The notion of demobilisation remains nascent in DRC, and a lack of institutional support infrastructures increases risks that such children will return to armed groups and become trapped in cycles of violence.

**Displacement and safety of IDPs:** Many stakeholders, including members of displaced communities, highlighted the increased risks of violence faced by those displaced due to the conflict in South Kivu. Though IDP camps are envisioned as zones of safety, this is not the reality for many. Women and girls face SGBV exposure whilst moving within and outside of camps to search for necessities such as wood, water, or food. With scarce resources available, violent attacks for the purposes of theft are common. In addition, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (see also below) is extensive. This is in addition to the direct targeting of IDP camps by armed groups – e.g. one recent bombing of camps in Goma resulted in the deaths of at least 35 civilians. Civilians and organisations alike reported that, perhaps counterintuitively, these dangers were particularly acute for IDPs settled near MONUSCO bases. Within IDP camps, there is an almost total lack of response from authorities for such incidents. These conditions are resulting in many IDPs choosing to return to their areas of origin, despite ongoing insecurity: "we would rather die in our own communities than here".

# Civilian protection responses

In the recent past, the MONUSCO mission has been the primary actor responding to the direct protection needs of civilians in South Kivu. In the context of the transition, this responsibility is expected to be shifted to and fulfilled by the Congo state military (FARDC) and police (PNC). This will likely be a difficult transition, with both actors under-resourced, poorly trained to fulfil their roles, and accused of human rights and other violations.

**“There is a cacophony of initiatives. No one has a clear vision of what exists and what is functioning well or not.”**

**- Humanitarian organisation  
staff member**

Civil society has played a key role in addressing some of the gaps in this protection infrastructure. One of the strengths of current protection responses is the clear effort that has been taken by a range of stakeholders to uplift local unarmed protection groups and strategies.<sup>ii</sup> Whether the Local Protection Committees and Councils (joint initiatives with MONUSCO), the Barza intercommunautaire (a local and traditional mediation structure), the Nyumba

Kumi (a traditional system of community monitoring), or the wide range of other CSOs and more informal community groups working on protection, there is a strong foundation of local safety and protection work in South Kivu. In the face of major violent threats and challenges with receiving protection from duty bearers, community members have mobilised to create safety systems and strategies that make real impact for those facing the impacts of violence.

Despite a dense civil society network in DRC – as one interviewee reflected, “there are more than 5000 NGOs. Everyone has their own. It has become a business” – there remain clear gaps and other issues that are essential to address in pursuit of an effective and comprehensive civilian protection response, particularly in the context of the MONUSCO transition:

## **Sustainability and resourcing gaps**

Overall there remains serious concern about resourcing gaps for protection, particularly as the funding associated with MONUSCO will significantly reduce with the transition to a special political mission (SPM). This not only impacts UN actors, but also impacts the sustainability of the local networks that are the backbone of civilian-led protection initiatives in the region. A lack of dedicated resourcing to local

ii. An overview of different groups and their activities is available on request to NP.

groups, and support for them to become self-sustaining organisations, is likely to lead to the erosion and closure of many of these groups. Investing in programming that strengthens these local groups. Investing in programming that strengthens these local groups and enables them to find pathways to longer term stability is essential to a sustainable long-term protection response system in North and South Kivu.

### **Coordination and partnership**

Though the cluster mechanism is in place in North and South Kivu (the Protection Cluster led by UNHCR), these systems often don't include local protection actors. In addition, not all INGOs coordinate their response efforts through this system, leading to duplication without a clear understanding of what mechanisms already exist. The current system also focuses on civilian protection through a humanitarian lens alone, excluding the many peacebuilding actors that – despite perhaps not identifying as such – play an active role as protection actors in interrupting and preventing violence.

One potential response to this issue is to work to include local civil society and non-traditional protection actors in existing international mechanisms like the Cluster system. For those groups that wish to participate in this way, this engagement should be actively sought and facilitated by coordinating actors. At the same time, it is critical that local coordination mechanisms also be recognised, and that international actors be open to working with local civil society on their own terms.

### **Specialised response needs**

Despite ongoing efforts to meet the needs of specific groups – women and girls, IDPs, former combatants – dedicated responses are vastly under-resourced. What support does exist is often externally imposed and unresponsive to the needs articulated by those populations most impacted themselves. For example, for former combatants - both adults and children - there remain critical gaps in support as noted above. Far more investment in disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration including longer-term socio-economic programming is necessary to prevent ongoing marginalisation and to reduce risks of return to armed groups. For former child combatants, specialised programming is necessary to meet their needs as children.



# Entry points for the application of Unarmed Civilian Protection

In addition to assessing protection needs and existing responses in South Kivu, NP and UNFPA explored how the application of Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) might contribute to minimising protection gaps during and after the draw down of MONUSCO from the DRC and complement existing capacities and efforts to reduce violence against civilians.

In this regard, it is proposed that a multi-partner UCP programme strengthening civilian-led protection efforts be co-created in concert with MONUSCO's drawdown plan and UN and local partners that will develop responses to: (1) minimise the post-MONUSCO gap in direct physical protection; (2) address specific protection needs of women and children; (3) connect short-term protection efforts that interrupt cycles of violence with long-term efforts that re-build trust and establish a conducive environment for social cohesion and peacebuilding; and (4) connect and strengthen networks of peacebuilders in order to address transborder conflict issues and broaden the environment for sustainable peace. These are elaborated below:



## **Focusing on the gap in direct physical protection**

There is an existing track record of peace and security efforts in the DRC and a variety of actors and mechanisms that contribute to protection and peacebuilding in Kivu. However, few of these efforts focus on direct protection of civilians from violence. What sets UCP apart from other forms of protection is its focus on providing direct physical protection to civilians through nonviolent action rather than through the use of weapons or reliance on the threat of force. Thus, the most obvious entry point for the application of UCP in Kivu is the protection vacuum created by the withdrawal of MONUSCO. In fact, interlocutors that NP and UNFPA spoke with during the assessment mission recommended UCP to be prioritised in hotspots such as Uvira, Rusizi Plain, and Kalehe. The IDP sites around Goma, Ituri and North of Tanganyika were also mentioned as areas where the application of UCP could have a critical impact on improving protection in and around IDP camps. Through proactive engagement with armed actors and the physical accompaniment of threatened community members, IDPs and Human Rights Defenders (a notable gap) across insecure areas, UCP can contribute to the creation of a safe environment and a reduction of violent threats to civilians.

## 2

### **Enhancing existing protection infrastructures and initiatives of women and youth**

The assessment team identified significant potential for UCP to strengthen existing community-level civilian protection mechanisms, both in response to intercommunal violence and to attacks by armed groups. Pointing out scepticism among local communities towards the international community because of top-down approaches to protecting civilians, various people expressed a need for a community-based approach that links civilians with DRC state and security actors in areas affected by MONUSCOs withdrawal. They also recommended the establishment of strong partnerships with local protection committees as well as existing protection mechanisms set up by MONUSCO, other UN entities, local communities, civil society organisations, and relevant stakeholders in the security sector. Despite a sense of abandonment that community members in Sange (South Kivu) felt on matters to do with security, they were determined to organise protection activities, even with limited support from the central government.

## 3

### **Bridging short-term protection with longer-term peacebuilding**

A third entry point for UCP programming in Kivu is to connect short-term (military) protection to longer term (civilian) peacebuilding and development efforts. The MONUSCO transition plan notes the need for “greater capacity to respond rapidly to protection threats and resolve intercommunity conflicts” which would be achieved “when women, young people, civil society...participate actively and inclusively in coordination mechanisms dealing with security and conflict resolution”.

UCP is, in essence, a peacebuilding approach to security. It advances safety through the strategic use of relationships. In this capacity it is well equipped to support transition phases, for example de-escalating tensions and mitigating conflicts that may not be ripe for reconciliation, while planting seeds for longer-term peacebuilding and social cohesion. By providing a protective presence, conducting shuttle diplomacy, and facilitate dialogue, safer spaces can be created for conflict mitigation or trust building among conflicting parties. This is relevant in South Kivu, particularly in Kalehe, where local protection mechanisms already work to settle community tensions through dialogue, but struggle with the security aspect of physical protection.



## Advancing the role of nonpartisan third parties

A fourth entry point for UCP in Kivu is the need for (re-)building trust. The assessment clearly revealed high levels of mistrust and lack of communication across groups. MONUSCOs involvement in offensive operations made it hard for them act as a nonpartisan third party or build trust across communities. Being unarmed, non-affiliated with any side in the conflict, and not involved in the provision of material aid makes it easier for UCP actors to be trusted and build trust with a wide variety of actors across the context, including armed groups and militias. Engaging these relationships is a pathway for UCP actors to influence and deter potentially harmful behaviour by these actors. This relational approach to security can assist in rebuilding trust amid stabilisation efforts, rather than for those efforts to be postponed until things have stabilised. This opens space for more engagement with armed groups and to explore areas where violence against civilians can be minimised without interfering or threatening these forces.

A nonpartisan approach to UCP has also the potential to narrow the communication gap between state security actors and communities and make the security discourse and the efforts by security forces more people centred. While local community protection teams are often reluctant or struggle to assume a role of nonpartisan third party, it is one of the (untapped) spaces where NP has witnessed most significant impact, especially in transition phases. Such efforts will also create opportunities for community reintegration of demobilised combatants through dialogue on protection issues and other social tensions that may arise when former combatants return to their communities of origin.



## Connecting to networks of nonviolence at the regional level

Finally, while the assessment focused on South Kivu, it is apparent that there is an active community of individuals and groups that practice some form of nonviolent action across the Great Lakes Region, some of which are part of a global community of UCP practice. A number of credible local and international protection actors were interviewed and several expressed interest to strengthen collaborative actions to respond to trans-national security threats or influence regional policies and practices that may strengthen the protection of civilians.

## Next steps

The assessment mission identified several areas of risk to and needs for protection in which civilian-led UCP activities could effectively and robustly contribute to protection of civilians in eastern DRC. In the follow-up to the assessment, NP and UNFPA are jointly developing a contextually-appropriate protection response to the needs that are elaborated in detail above, i.e. significant gender-based violence with no accountability; insufficient protection of children; unaddressed displacement needs and safety of IDPs; lack of protection information; proliferation of weapons; vulnerability of HRDs, and intra- as well as inter-communal conflict.

This initiative will result in the development and implementation of localised UCP teams composed of national and international actors who will provide direct protection and conflict mitigation efforts in collaboration and partnership with local organisations and networks. With continuous real-time assessment and contextual analysis, this joint NP/UNFPA initiative will tailor the UCP responses to address the specific needs of the selected high-risk localities in the initial phase.

It is anticipated that this UCP work will commence in specific high-risk communities South Kivu in the coming year and be scaled out to other vulnerable communities in additional localities in South Kivu. Ultimately, it is hoped that as the MONUSCO mission draws down in North Kivu and Ituri, a similar scale up in those provinces can be undertaken as the protection needs are identified and discerned through continued collaboration and analysis with local actors and the experience acquired and lessons learned in South Kivu.



Photos


- Cover: View of IDP camps of Mugunga. North Kivu, DRC, March 2024. ©NP
- Page 2: DRC, March 2024. ©NP
- Page 11, back cover: Assessment team. DRC, March 2024. ©NP



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