

CENTERING PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN AFRICAN GREAT LAKES PEACE PROCESSES



RECOGNIZE. PREVENT. PROTECT. AMEND.

October 2025

T +1 202 558 6958

E comms@civiliansinconflict.org

civiliansinconflict.org



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background.....1

Key Civilian Protection Gaps in Current Talks..... 2

Strategic Recommendations and Priority Actions 5

I. BACKGROUND

The prolonged crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the broader Great Lakes region continues to be marked by persistent armed violence, civilian harm, and ongoing humanitarian emergencies. Millions of civilians, particularly in the eastern DRC provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri, still endure serious abuses, including mass killings and maiming, sexual violence, child recruitment and use by armed actors, forced displacement, abductions, and destruction of civilian infrastructure. The causes and consequences of the conflict, including for civilians, extend to several countries in the region, including South Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania.

The ongoing Washington and Doha peace processes represent two of the most recent international efforts to de-escalate the crisis in the DRC and the wider Great Lakes region, building on years of African Union (AU)-led mediation (Nairobi and Luanda processes). At the national level, the CENCO–ECC-led dialogue has long provided a Congolese-owned platform for reconciliation, elections, and governance reforms. Yet, this process is currently stuck, with little progress in bridging divides among key actors, reducing its immediate impact despite its “domestic legitimacy”.

The Washington process, framed by the *Washington Declaration of Principles*, the *Washington Agreements* and their annexes (including the CONOPS), focuses on defining political and security arrangements among the DRC and Rwanda and establishing a roadmap for implementation. In parallel, the Doha process, anchored in the *Doha Declaration of Principles*, seeks to provide a complementary framework for dialogue and confidence-building, especially through Qatari-led facilitation between the DRC Government and the M23/Alliance du Fleuve Congo (M23/AFC) armed group. Together, these frameworks offer a potential opportunity to reverse current destabilizing trends. However, to truly foster peace and stability, the protection of civilians (PoC) and the recognition of civilian agency must be placed at the center of the design, implementation, and evaluation of these peace processes.

...to truly foster peace and stability, the protection of civilians (PoC) and the recognition of civilian agency must be placed at the center of the design, implementation, and evaluation of these peace processes.

This brief lays out the key civilian protection gaps in the current processes and offers recommendations to address them and ensure a sustainable and rights-based peace in the African Great Lakes region. Where not otherwise noted, the findings and recommendations in this brief are drawn from CIVIC staff visits and consultations in the region. These included exchanges with conflict-affected civilians, civil society representatives, government officials, and African Union actors during recent field missions in Kenya, Rwanda, DRC, Togo, and Ethiopia.

II. KEY CIVILIAN PROTECTION GAPS IN CURRENT TALKS

The current Washington and Doha peace agreement processes risk missing critical opportunities to protect civilians, center civilian voices, and ensure sustainable peace, protection, and accountability. Particular gaps include:

- 1. Lack of civilian participation and agency:** The Washington and Doha peace agreement processes remain essentially elitist and centralized, with little to no consultation of affected communities, including those in conflict zones. Civilian populations, and especially women, have not been meaningfully engaged in the discussions that led to the drafting of declarations of principles or peace agreements, nor have their experiences from previous failed peace initiatives and protection needs been taken into account.

This exclusion raises serious protection concerns, including:

- **Limited community buy-in and ownership**, which undermines the agreements' legitimacy and sustainability;
- **Increased risk of communal tensions and intergroup violence**, especially where communities feel ignored or threatened by the political arrangements;
- **Undermining of the transition process for the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), or any future regional force deployment or redeployment**, as local populations may view new arrangements as disconnected or imposed, weakening trust in institutional protection mechanisms; and
- **Exacerbation of competition among armed actors**, where some feel recognized while others perceive themselves as marginalized or sidelined, potentially fueling further violence and civilian harm.

- 2. Confusion due to overlapping peace processes:** The proliferation of overlapping initiatives – including the so-called Luanda, Nairobi, Kinshasa, Lomé, Doha, Washington, and Paris peace processes – has created a fragmented landscape in which local communities and civil society organizations struggle to engage meaningfully. The lack of clarity around who holds decision-making power and which process is responsible for what has made it difficult to know where to raise protection concerns or advocate for action.

- 3. Missing protection of civilians considerations in proposed agreements and related processes:** The frameworks and agreements proposed under the various peace processes – including the Washington Declaration of Principles, the Washington Agreements and the Doha declaration of principles.

- **Lack of preparation for the return of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees:** The absence of inclusive local dialogue on the return of IDPs and refugees (particularly from Rwanda) to volatile areas threatens to reignite communal tensions and violence.
- **Unclear role of MONUSCO:** Vague references to MONUSCO and a lack of coordination with the mission itself have deepened a critical gap in protection mechanisms or further blurred the roles and responsibilities of different actors, particularly in areas where the mission is withdrawing.

- **Ambiguous mention of regional forces and mechanisms:** The agreements refer to regional forces and mechanisms in vague and non-transparent terms, creating serious risks in light of past controversial deployments of regional troops in the DRC. Previous regional interventions were sometimes associated with the looting of natural resources or conflicting interpretations of their mission and mandate vis-à-vis the Congolese government, leading to mistrust and instability. Notably, paragraph (ii) under Point 5 of the Washington Declaration of Principles states: *“The Participants commit to protect, facilitate, and promote the ability of MONUSCO and regional forces and mechanisms to act in accordance with their respective mandates, including as necessary for an agreed-upon verification mechanism and inter-positional force to facilitate the good faith implementation of these Principles by the Participants and non-state armed groups.”* While this provision seeks to strengthen implementation, the lack of clarity around the nature, composition, and oversight of such regional forces heightens the risk of confusion, divergent interpretations, and harm to civilian populations.
- **Problematic exception regarding support to armed groups:** One of the most concerning provisions in the Washington Peace Agreement between the DRC and Rwanda is found in Article II, Section 2(i), which deals with ending state support for armed groups. While the article requires both parties to *“immediately and unconditionally cease any state support to non-state armed groups”*, it also introduces an exception: *“except as necessary to facilitate implementation of this Agreement.”* This exception creates a significant loophole that could be misused to justify continued or selective support to armed groups under the pretext of advancing the agreement. Such ambiguity risks undermining POC by legitimizing actions that prolong violence, fuel mistrust among communities, and weaken accountability mechanisms. For civilians caught in the conflict, this clause could translate into further exposure to harm rather than the peace and security the agreement is intended to deliver.
- **Civilian protection absent from operational phases:** The Concept of Operations (CONOPS), monitoring mechanisms, ceasefire provisions, and stabilization measures outlined in the agreement do not explicitly include mechanisms to prevent, respond to, or repair harm caused to civilians.
- **FDLR retaliation risks are poorly addressed:** The CONOPS suggests organizing popular resistance as a mitigation measure, which risks further exposing civilians to reprisals and exacerbating harm. Past incidents in eastern DRC have shown that when civilians are mobilized against armed groups (including the FDLR), communities often suffer brutal retaliation, including killings, abductions, and the burning of villages. These precedents underscore how such an approach, far from protecting civilians, could deepen their vulnerability to targeted violence.
- **Lack of accountability frameworks:** There are no provisions for accountability, reparations, or amends for past or ongoing violence against civilians.
- **Ambiguity regarding other armed groups and hybrid actors:** Local militias (e.g., Wazalendo), mercenaries, and other non-state actors are not explicitly addressed, which limits the scope and effectiveness of the agreements and exposes civilians to further risks. These groups occupy a fluid status—sometimes tolerated or co-opted by the government as community self-defense forces, and at other times acting as independent or predatory armed actors. In the absence of a clear strategy, they risk becoming spoilers to peace and sources of further civilian harm. Addressing their role requires tailored approaches, including formal recognition of their status, options for demobilization and disarmament, reintegration opportunities for genuine community defense elements, and accountability mechanisms for those responsible for abuses. Without such measures, past experiences show that similar groups have continued to operate outside state control, fueling cycles of reprisals and community-based violence.

- **Unclear support for the CENCO-ECC-led national dialogue:** The CENCO (Conférence Épiscopale Nationale du Congo) and ECC (Église du Christ au Congo) dialogue – [quick clause to explain what this is] – can be a trusted national platform in the DRC, yet its role in the current peace efforts is unclear. While Washington and Doha processes privilege elite negotiations, CENCO–ECC can provide the legitimacy and community buy-in needed for sustainable peace. To succeed, the process must meaningfully include local actors and conflict-affected communities so that civilian needs and perspectives shape outcomes. Regional and international partners should support and link this dialogue with broader peace frameworks and ensure protection of civilians is central.
- **Funding and capacity gaps in the humanitarian sector:** Both chronic and acute underfunding of humanitarian appeals in eastern DRC has left critical protection activities under-supported, including gender-based violence support, civilian harm tracking, and child protection. Local organizations, though closest to affected communities, lack sustained support, while international actors face insecurity and bureaucratic restrictions. This has created fragmented protection coverage, deepening civilian vulnerability and undermining trust in peace processes. To close these gaps, stakeholders should prioritize predictable protection funding, channel resources to local actors, and embed humanitarian protection in political frameworks.

4. Insufficient regional coordination and unclear external involvement focusing on POC: The current response to the crisis in eastern DRC does not address its regional aspect, despite the active participation of neighbouring countries such as Uganda and Burundi and the broader effects of others like Tanzania and South Sudan. Key regional actors have not been adequately involved in the Washington and Doha processes, limiting regional stabilisation efforts' legitimacy and effectiveness.

Although framed as coordinated security efforts, joint military operations between Burundi and the DRC lack transparency and proper oversight. This opacity raises serious concerns about civilian harm, accountability, and coordination with humanitarian responders. Similarly, joint operations between DRC and Ugandan forces in Beni and Ituri, targeting the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF/NALU), have led to severe civilian impacts, including deadly reprisals by the ADF, restricted humanitarian access, and the absence of robust civilian harm tracking mechanisms. Uganda's ambiguous role in the region, including support to both the DRC government and elements within the M23, further complicates the protection landscape and fuels mistrust among affected communities.

III. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS AND PRIORITY ACTIONS

- 1. The African Union (AU)-led mediation process, currently steered through Togo, should assume a more active and structured leadership role in shaping a coherent regional security and political response that places civilian protection at its core.** While previous frameworks such as the Pact on Security, Stability and Development in the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and the 2013 Addis Ababa Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework (PSC Framework) offered a foundation for addressing the structural drivers of instability, they fell short in systematically integrating civilian protection principles. They did not establish operational mechanisms to track civilian harm, protect displacement sites, or hold state and non-state actors accountable for violations. The AU-led initiative must explicitly integrate POC as a non-negotiable pillar of all security and political engagements.

As part of this, all regional military cooperation agreements (e.g., Uganda-DRC and Burundi-DRC) should include:

- **Civilian harm mitigation provisions**, such as tracking, reporting, and response mechanisms;
- **Access frameworks for humanitarian actors**;
- **Independent oversight** through AU or ICGLR-led civilian protection monitors; and
- **Clear accountability clauses**, including linking compliance to political and financial support from continental and international actors.

- 2. Ensure Community Inclusion and Legitimacy:** The Washington, Doha, and other processes must integrate inclusive, community-based dialogue mechanisms and build strategic communication channels with civilians to ensure transparency, legitimacy, and local support and to ensure that any peace agreement addresses the root causes of violence and includes civilian priorities regarding accountability and amends. For example, CENCO-ECC with the African Union support should organize territorial-level dialogues (across all 149 territories or in the affected territories of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri) to integrate local needs and priorities, including protection of civilians and transitional justice. They should also establish community accountability and feedback mechanisms linked to political, diplomatic, and peace processes.

- 3. Strengthen Civilian Protection Safeguards:** Congo and Rwanda with the support of the USA mediation team should explicitly integrate PoC into the Washington agreements' CONOPS, verification mandates, protection of civilians plans, and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) frameworks. MONUSCO's mandate should also be revised; while its Protection of Civilians (PoC) mandate should be maintained, its focus should be narrowed to function as a temporary interposition force dedicated to the protection of IDP sites, the safeguarding of humanitarian corridors, and the monitoring of ceasefires. This would ensure MONUSCO continues to provide essential protection while aligning its role with current realities and preventing duplication with emerging regional or national mechanisms.

- 4. Undertake Strategic Communication and Counter-Misinformation:** National and regional parties with mediators and facilitators support should develop a joint communication strategy grounded in verified facts and harmonized messaging. They should also support coordinated

conflict-sensitive peace communication and counter-disinformation initiatives at the local, national, regional, and international levels, with a focus on narratives that could undermine civilian protection.

- 5. Protect and Engage with Refugees and IDPs:** DRC and M23/AFC with Qatar mediation and African Union mediation support should establish inclusive community dialogue platforms before refugee returns. MONUSCO and other security actors should also strengthen protection of IDP camps and host communities to prevent violence and retaliation.
- 6. Prioritize the Protection of Civilians in all Regional Mechanisms and Verification Structures:** Ensure clearly defined protection mandates, rules of engagement, and accountability mechanisms for any regional or multinational forces envisioned or deployed as part of the peace process. Include systematic POC provisions in all monitoring, verification, and implementation mechanisms to ensure mitigation of harm and response to violations.
- 7. Engage with Armed Groups and Non-State Actors through DDR Processes:** All DDR processes should have robust POC and accountability components to ensure the process is done as part of a transitional justice process that address truth, justice, no repetition and reparation and ensure communities safety, **DRC government with** CENCO-ECC support should develop parallel community-led dialogues with local armed groups (e.g., Wazalendo) to discuss their future and civilian protection responsibilities.
- 8. Inclusive and needs-based resources mobilization :** technical and financial partners need to support needs-based and inclusive responses to the humanitarian crisis and protection of civilian needs, including via the France-led humanitarian conference and existing financing mechanisms.
- 9. Establish an AU Great Lakes Regional Civilian Protection Taskforce. Under the coordination of the AU High Representative (designated by Togo), the AU should form a task force mandated to:**
 - **Monitor PoC risks** across eastern DRC and border regions,
 - **Engage directly with military actors** (e.g., FARDC, UPDF, FDNB) to align operations with civilian requirements for protection.
 - Support the **design of PoC-sensitive disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR)** programs, and,
 - Promote **regional dialogues that include civil society, displaced communities, and women's groups**, ensuring local ownership and legitimacy.
- 10. Engage South Sudan and Tanzania as constructive partners.** Given their relative neutrality and their exposure to spillover effects, the AU should proactively involve South Sudan and Tanzania in the process as stabilizing actors, capable of bridging divides and championing a civilian-focused regional consensus.
- 11. Institutionalize AU monitoring of bilateral operations.** The AU Peace and Security Council should mandate regular reporting and monitoring of regional operations in DRC to track their impact on civilians, ensure civil-military cooperation, and investigate and respond to allegations of violations and civilian harm.

The regional aspect of the crisis in eastern DRC cannot be tackled through isolated bilateral military actions alone. Under Togo's leadership, the AU must leverage its political influence, institutional credibility, and normative structures to bring together and coordinate a civilian-focused regional response. By learning from past agreements and emphasizing accountability, inclusion, and cooperation, the AU can help guarantee that the region's pursuit of peace does not compromise its people's safety and dignity.

As an organization dedicated to protecting civilians in conflict, CIVIC urges regional and international partners not to allow the Washington and Doha processes to become yet another missed opportunity in the long quest for peace in the DRC. Any sustainable solution must prioritize the voices of affected communities, prevent harm, reduce violence, and ensure accountability for civilian protection failures.

