

Policy brief

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# From peacekeeping to proxy wars: impacts of the current conflict on women and girls in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

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## Introduction

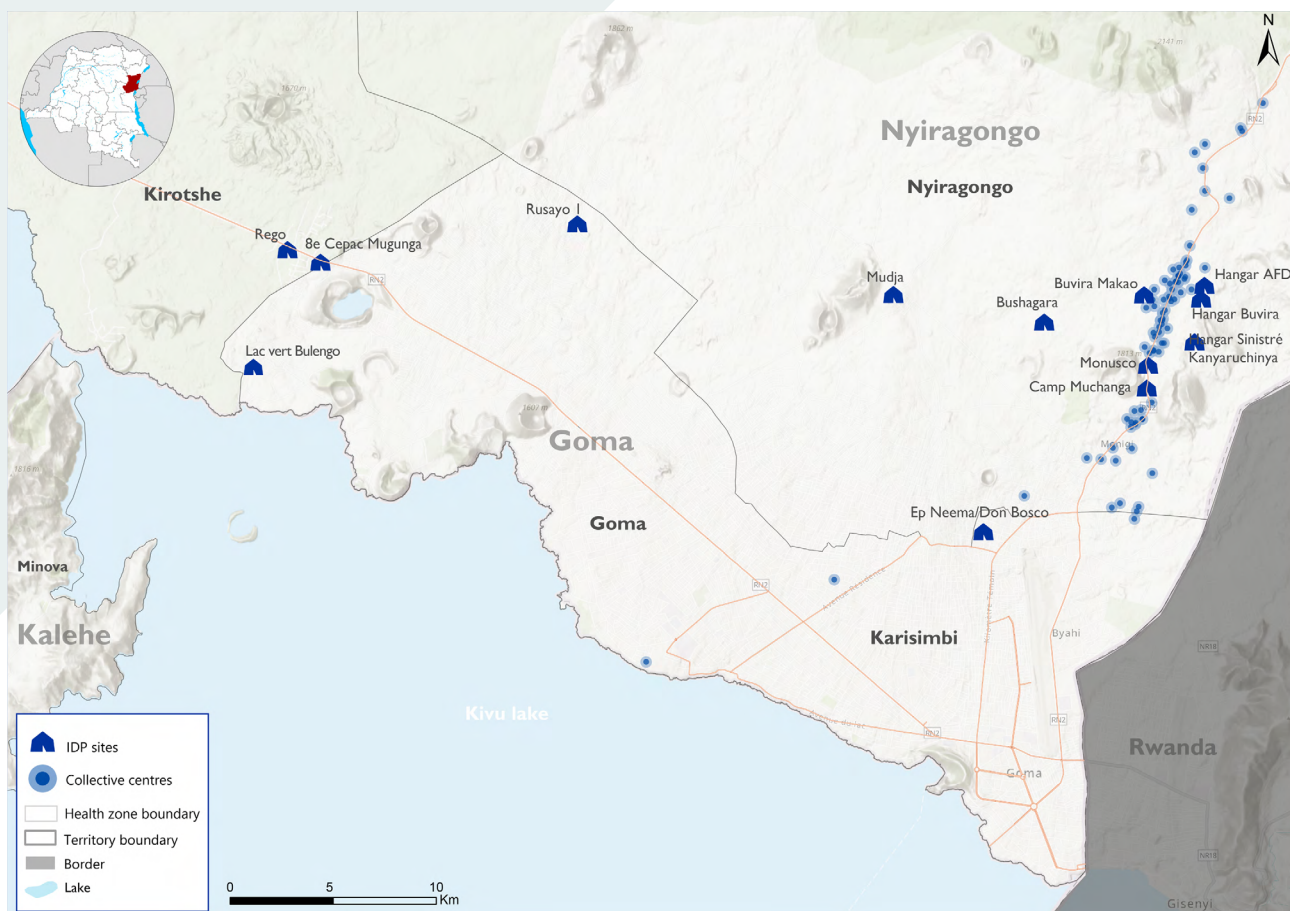
Conflict and insecurity in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) increased in 2024, with renewed fighting by the March 23 Movement (M23), alongside other armed groups. The ongoing conflict has resulted in widespread forced displacement that has included alarming levels of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and serious gendered repercussions, with implications for cross-border and domestic security.

This paper examines internally displaced women's experiences of SGBV; the links between SGBV and displacement; and the role of international actors in perpetrating and responding to these abuses. The research aimed to better understand links between SGBV and forced displacement in the current security crisis in the DRC. The study was intended to explore the international and local actors taking part in this conflict, and to determine how they contribute to and hinder perpetration and prevention of SGBV in North Kivu province, in eastern DRC.

Interviews with 30 members of civil society organisations (CSO) and 89 internally displaced women were conducted in December 2024 by researchers with the Congolese organisation Solidarité Féminine Pour La Paix et le Développement Intégral (SOFEPADI).

Our research findings establish that gender-based violence often precipitated displacement, and that women and girls living in IDP camps continue to report being subjected to high levels of sexual assault once they have arrived in the camps. The conflict has been exacerbated by the presence of foreign armed groups and forces. Attempts to mitigate the conflict are also internationalised, with numerous multilateral peacekeeping forces operating in eastern DRC.

The conflict that led to widespread displacement has only escalated since the data discussed here was collected. The M23 took the city of Goma at the beginning of February 2025, and subsequently captured Bukavu on 17 February 2025. While these data were collected prior to the rapid escalation in



**Figure 1. Displaced persons camps in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, December 2024.**  
**Source: International Organization for Migration.**

early 2025, the recommendations remain relevant, as Congolese officials, states, and international organisations develop responses to this acute humanitarian and security crisis.

- Respondents often noted that those responsible for gender violence in IDP camps were armed groups (civilian militias, soldiers, members of M23 or FARDC), unknown groups (bandits, unknown actors, or masked men), or civilians.

## Key findings

Analysis revealed that conflict-related violence was extremely high among displaced women living in the IDP camps in Goma and Nyiragongo areas:

- 73% of all respondents (key informants and displaced women) interviewed were victims of or had witnessed violence related to the conflict, with many stating that SGBV had contributed to their displacement.
- When considering only displaced women, this figure rises to 97% (87 of 89 women)
- The M23 was overwhelmingly identified as being responsible for women's displacement, with 71.4% of displaced women stating that this had been the case. A further 5% indicated that Rwanda/ Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF) were responsible.

## Methods

Interviews with internally displaced women (n=89) and civil society representatives and community leaders (Key Informants, KIs n= 30) were conducted by researchers employed by SOFEPADI. Interviews were conducted in six IDP camps, three in the Goma area and three in Nyiragongo (see Figure 1). KIs included social workers, counsellors, and other professionals working with civil society organisations – from the Movement for Survivors of Conflict Violence (Mouvement des survivants des violences liées aux conflits, a collective of survivors), women's groups, the committee of displaced persons in the camp, and the IDP site management.

## Context

The eastern regions of the DRC have endured long-term armed conflict and insecurity since the two Congolese wars (1996-1997; 1998-2003). Women in these regions have been subjected to high rates of sexual and gender-based violence and forced displacement in the ongoing security crisis.

In 1999, the United Nations (UN) launched a peace-keeping mission, which continues to operate, the 'Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en République Démocratique du Congo' (MONUSCO).<sup>1</sup> MONUSCO supports the activities of the Congolese military (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC)). MONUSCO's mandate centres protection of civilians, with a clear mandate to address conflict-related sexual violence.<sup>2</sup>

In December 2023, the UN announced an expedited draw-down of the mission,<sup>3</sup> following widespread protests from the public, along with the withdrawal of support by prominent local politicians. The protests centred on MONUSCO's perceived inefficacies and failures.<sup>4</sup> The UN's withdrawal comes during a resurgence in armed conflict and militarised interventions from neighbouring countries. For instance, Uganda launched 'Operation Shujaa', a joint operation with FARDC, in 2021, in order to combat the Allied Democratic Forces, a non-state armed group with purported ties to Islamic State. The South African Development Community (SADC) has also deployed a multinational force in support of the DRC government ('SADC Mission in the DRC', SAMIDRC). The East African Community recently deployed a regional force (EACRF), led by Kenya and with troops from Uganda, South Sudan,

and Burundi, aimed at combatting non-state armed groups, including the M23.<sup>5</sup>

There is significant evidence that Rwanda, also a member of the East African Community, has financed and directed M23 attacks and activities within the DRC. The United Nations Group of Experts has identified at least 4,000 Rwandan soldiers operating in eastern DRC, alongside research establishing the M23 as utilising Rwandan weaponry and intelligence.<sup>6</sup> As one CSO member stated in their interview, "The main perpetrators of sexual violence are particularly the M23 and the RDF/Rwanda. The other players are difficult to identify because when there is a coalition the majority do not have uniforms, they are confused with bandits and others."<sup>7</sup>

Within this complex theatre, high levels of gendered violence have increased even further, perpetrated by both armed and unarmed actors and resulting in displacement to formal and informal IDP settlements and camps. Physicians for Human Rights<sup>8</sup> recently conducted research with 16 health care workers in IDP camps and found a marked increase in SGBV cases over the preceding two years. Despite the proliferation of missions led by both regional and international forces aimed at securing stability in eastern DRC and protecting civilians, SGBV continues largely unchecked. Many of these same state actors, charged with the protection of civilians, have been credibly accused of perpetrating SGBV.<sup>9</sup>

The violence and insecurity precipitating the fall of Goma to the M23 in February 2025 has resulted in a displacement crisis, with over two million people internally displaced in eastern DRC, close to one million people displaced in 2024 alone.<sup>10</sup> Many displaced persons were sheltering in camps around

1 United Nations Peacekeeping, 'MONUSCO Fact Sheet'. Available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/monusco>.

2 United Nations Peacekeeping. (n.d.) Conflict related Sexual Violence. Available at: <https://bit.ly/4gQu9MJ>.

3 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2717 (2023). Available at: [https://docs.un.org/S/RES/2717\(2023\)](https://docs.un.org/S/RES/2717(2023)).

4 Liakos, C.; Princewell, N.; Colliva, C., 'Dozens killed during anti-UN protests in the DRC.' CNN, 1 Sept. 2023. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/01/africa/anti-un-protests-drc-peacekeeping-intl/index.html>.

5 Congo Research Group. 2023. A Majority of Congolese Reject East African Community Regional Force. Available at: <https://s44308.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/version-anglaise-sondage-gec-ebuteli-deuxieme-note-thematique-force-regionale.pdf>.

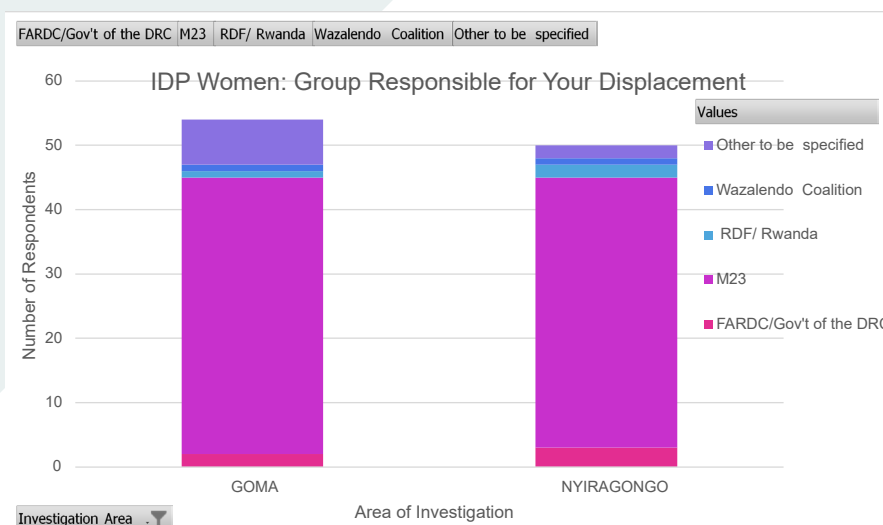
6 See <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/373/37/pdf/n2437337.pdf>.

7 Key informant in IDP camp, Goma.

8 Physicians for Human Rights, "Massive Influx of Cases": Health Worker Perspectives on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo', Oct. 2024. Available at: <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/massive-influx-of-cases-sexual-violence-drc/>.

9 United Nations Group of Experts. (2023). 'Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo' (Group of Experts Report 2641 (2022) 421; pp. 1–240). United Nations Security Council.

10 Group of Experts on the DRC Report 969, UN Security Council S/2024/969; UNHCR, January 2025. Democratic Republic of the Congo situation. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/democratic-republic-congo-situation>.



**Figure 2. Groups responsible for displacement of interviewed IDP women**

Goma, living in a state of long-term insecurity and precarity, made only worse by the recent security and humanitarian crisis in Goma. In mid-February 2025, following their capture of Goma, the M23 began ordering the IDP camps to empty. However, at the time of writing, it is not clear if displaced people will return to their home communities, if it is safe to do so, or if they will move to another area and continue to live in IDP camps away from Goma. Internally displaced women interviewed for this study in December 2024 have almost certainly been displaced again by further conflict intensification, increased violence since late January 2025, and orders by the M23 to empty the IDP camps.<sup>11</sup> According to a report by the Global Protection Cluster for North-Kivu,<sup>12</sup> after the M23 attacks at the end of January 2025, IDP camps had emptied by 50%-80% of their capacity. By 4 February 2025, the Global Protection Cluster notified SOFEPADI researchers that many IDP camps had been emptied by 90-100% of their capacity.<sup>13</sup>

## Detailed findings

Interview results revealed patterns of SGBV leading to displacement and continuing SGBV perpetrated in contexts of displacement. Despite the widespread presence of international troops, as evidenced

through Rwanda's support of the M23, and operations by MONUSCO, SAMIDRC, EACRF, and Burundi and Uganda's involvement in the conflict, few women in this study identified any of the peacekeeping forces or international militaries as either responsible for perpetration of or protections from SGBV. The M23 were identified as the primary actors responsible for GBV and displacement, and links between Rwanda and the M23 were discussed by some participants (see Figure 2).

## Displacement

Data analysis revealed that experiences of conflict-related SGBV was extremely high among displaced women. 97% of displaced women interviewed were victims of or had witnessed violence<sup>14</sup> during the conflict, with some stating that sexual violence had contributed to their displacement: "I was living in Kitshanga and then the war started, but I didn't leave right away. One day I went to the field and I was raped. That's the day I left Kitshanga and I came here to Goma in the camp," a displaced woman in an IDP camp in Goma recounted.

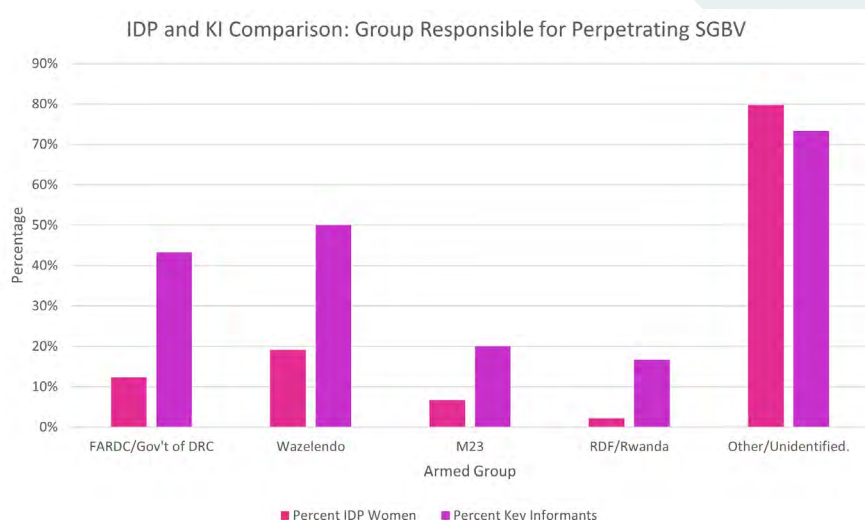
KIs identified increased perpetration of sexual violence over the course of the conflict, with more women arriving to the IDP camps having suffered

11 Human Rights Watch. February 13 2025. DR Congo: M23 Drives Displaced People From Goma Camps. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/13/dr-congo-m23-drives-displaced-people-goma-camps>.

12 Global Protection Cluster, 'Protection Alert: Intensifying Crisis in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo', 27 Jan. 2025. Available at: [https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/gpc\\_protection\\_alert\\_dr\\_congo\\_27\\_jan\\_2025\\_final.pdf](https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/gpc_protection_alert_dr_congo_27_jan_2025_final.pdf).

13 Personal communications, SOFEPADI, February 4, 2025.

14 Because the interviews took place in IDP camps with vulnerable women, we avoided asking direct questions about personal sexual violence victimization to avoid exposing women to increased risk (both trauma and security-related). We opted instead to open the question as "witnessing or experiencing violence". Dozens of women nonetheless disclosed personal experiences of sexual violence.



**Figure 3. Respondent views on groups responsible for perpetrating SGBV**

sexual violence than earlier in the war. Many women also explained they had witnessed killing and massacres in their home communities. Some women had lost close family members or had themselves been wounded in the fighting. Women further explained that they had been separated from family members and had to travel long distances by foot to reach the IDP camps.

The M23 was overwhelmingly identified as being the group whose members were responsible for women's displacement, with 71.4% of displaced women stating that they left their homes, as a result of the M23: "I am displaced from Kitshanga, I found myself in this camp following the massacres, rapes and the war taking place in our country and caused by the M23" (Internally Displaced Woman, Nyiragongo). A further 5% indicated that Rwanda/RDF were responsible, either solely or in conjunction with the M23. Women were confident that it was the M23 who attacked their homes, based on their uniforms and language spoken (Kinyarwanda).<sup>15</sup>

## SGBV in IDP Camps

SGBV was a contributing factor in women's displacement. It was also a serious risk for women living in IDP camps. Women were subjected to SGBV within the camps, including in their tents and when accessing sanitation facilities. SGBV was also committed against women when they left the camp to access necessary provisions, including firewood for cooking.

Respondents noted that those responsible for gender violence perpetrated in and around the camps were local militias fighting alongside FARDC, known as 'Wazalendo', 'armed men', 'les inconnus' (the unknown), civilians, 'bandits', the M23, FARDC, 'soldiers who spoke Kinyarwanda', 'masked men', and others.

Women and community leaders emphasised that there are a high number of arms in the camps, contributing to a general sense of insecurity and threats of violence. KIs stressed that weapons contribute to a generalised sense of insecurity and violence that worsens rates of SGBV. In other words, the insecurity in the region increases incidences of gender violence from 'civilians as well as military'.

## Protection

This research aimed to better understand the protection roles played by different security actors in Goma and Nyiragongo, North Kivu province. Specifically, we were interested in uncovering how displaced women and KIs understand who is most responsible for their protection, and whether this protection has been effective.

MONUSCO holds a 'protection of civilians' mandate, which compels them to act in direct defence of civilians as well as to deter violence against civilians. Congolese security actors, including the FARDC and the police, are also responsible for preventing violence against civilians. The police are charged with preventing and responding to civilian perpetrated

<sup>15</sup> Kinyarwanda is widely spoken in Rwanda and by Tutsi people in the DRC. The M23 is a Tutsi armed group.



violence, and FARDC is tasked with preventing violence by armed actors. However, results showed that the near absence of protective forces in communities in and around the IDP camps leads to both widespread perpetration of SGBV, as well as total impunity for these offenses.

Despite the number of international forces operating in eastern DRC, these forces were given little consideration by either CSO representatives or displaced women in this research. Goma remains the operational centre of the MONUSCO mission, and yet MONUSCO troops were not identified as providing security in the areas surrounding the camps: only one displaced woman (of 89) identified MONUSCO as providing protection in and around the camp. While international forces supporting the DRC were not identified as perpetrators of SGBV, they were also not identified as preventing or responding to SGBV, either in participants' home communities or in displacement settings.

Police and the DRC government/FARDC were more widely named as holding responsibility for protection. Although FARDC were identified by many as GBV perpetrators, many parties felt that they should be the ones with primary responsibility for preventing SGBV. Displaced women consistently identified the Congolese government and/or police as holding the primary responsibility to prevent SGBV in displacement contexts and more generally for protection of civilians.<sup>16</sup>

Risks of SGBV are significantly exacerbated by a lack of sufficient humanitarian aid. Women have no choice but to leave the camp to seek firewood, forage for food, or attempt to earn money to support their children. This puts them at serious risk of rape by armed groups and civilians living in the areas surrounding the camps. The near absence of protective forces around the camps increased these risks. KIs and displaced women jointly emphasised the need for improved medical care, including emergency sexual and reproductive healthcare following rapes.

## Conclusions

The security situation in eastern DRC is shifting

rapidly. What remains consistent, however, are high levels of forced displacement, SGBV, and an internationalised conflict that has worsened women's security. Immediate steps must be taken to alleviate humanitarian suffering, to protect women and girls from further SGBV, and to move toward a peaceful resolution that results in Congolese civilians able to return to their homes and begin the process of recovering from this devastating conflict.

## Recommendations

Outlined below are recommendations arising from this research for regional and international actors responding to the humanitarian crisis in the DRC and to SGBV for displaced women and girls. Amid the advancement of the M23 through South Kivu province, these recommendations are especially timely, given the likelihood of further displacement and risks to women and girls from the actors identified as most responsible for SGBV in North Kivu province. These recommendations also are informed by SOFEPADI's involvement as a core member of the Global Protection Cluster.

To donor governments, the United Nations, and the African Union:

Rwanda has been widely identified as financing and militarily backing the M23, along with deploying Rwandan soldiers to eastern DRC to further the conflict. Rwanda should not be considered a human rights respecting state and should be investigated for the crime of aggression along with other international crimes, including rape.

- All parties to the conflict must commit to establishing and advancing peace in eastern DRC. Solutions to the conflict must be developed based on the needs and priorities of the Congolese and not be imposed.
- Women and civil society actors must be included in peace talks to ensure gendered rights and needs are well-represented and provisioned. This norm is well-established through the UN Women, Peace and Security Agenda,<sup>17</sup> the African Union

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<sup>16</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2765. 20 Dec 2024.

<sup>17</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security. Available at: <https://www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/content/united-nations-security-council-resolutions-women-peace-and-security>.

Gender Policy<sup>18</sup> and the African Union's Maputo Protocol.<sup>19</sup>

- Increase funding support to civil society organisations to allow them to provide medical, legal, and economic supports for survivors of SGBV.

To MONUSCO:

- Increase patrols nearby IDP camps and informal settlements where displaced people are sheltering to deter SGBV perpetration.
- Increase dialogue with the M23, FARDC, Wazalendo, and other armed actors to insist on zero tolerance for conflict-related SGBV. This attention to conflict-related SGBV is in line with MONUSCO's mandate and must be advanced.

To the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC):

- Put in place policies to ensure that those residing in the IDP camps, including civilians and Wazalendo, do not have weapons, in order to prevent the perpetration of armed violence.
- Work with police and military to increase security patrols in and around the camps, by police and FARDC, to increase safety and prevent SGBV perpetration and other violence.

To Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo (FARDC):

- Develop more robust accountability measures such as discipline, military court martials, discharge for misconduct, and specialist training. FARDC commanders must do everything in their power to prevent soldiers and Wazalendo militia members from committing sexual and gender-based violence. Principles of command responsibility are well-established in international law:<sup>20</sup> commanders have an obligation to prevent violations of international humanitarian law.

To International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC/ CICR) and Global Protection Cluster:

- Organise awareness sessions on International Humanitarian Law with soldiers and armed groups to insist that belligerents emphasise respect for rules of engagement, distinction between civilians and combatants and protection of civilian populations during armed conflicts, including impressing upon armed actors the prohibition of rape and other forms of sexual violence.

To international non-governmental organisations including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), UNICEF, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), World Health Organisation (WHO):

- Reinforce collaboration between humanitarian actors, with a view to strengthening the distribution of humanitarian aid to and safety of internally displaced persons in the zones in and around Goma.
- Increase and diversify humanitarian aid to prevent women needing to provision firewood and search for food in the areas surrounding the camps. Women are most at risk when leaving the camp or needing to go to the outskirts of the camps. Immediate protection needs warrant reducing the number of times women are forced to leave camp settings to provide for their basic needs.
- Provide adequate access to emergency medical care following SGBV, including emergency contraceptives, anti-HIV and STI medications, and to have physical injuries treated. Mental health-care needs are high for SGBV survivors, including psychosocial counselling and programming.

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18 African Union, 'African Union Gender Policy', 2009. Available at: <https://www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/content/african-union-gender-policy-2009>.

19 African Union, 'The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol)'. Available at: <https://www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/content/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-women-africa-maputo-protocol-2003>.

20 International Committee of the Red Cross Advisory Service on International Humanitarian Law. (n.d.), 'Command responsibility and failure to act'. Available at: [https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/document/file\\_list/command-responsibility-icrc-eng.pdf](https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/document/file_list/command-responsibility-icrc-eng.pdf).

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**SOFEPAI** (Solidarité Féminine Pour La Paix et le Développement Intégral) is a Congolese NGO which has been working for more than 22 years to promote and defend the rights of women and girls in DRC: prevention of gender-based violence, skills training, medical and psychological support, and legal services for SGBV survivors.

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