

# DR Congo: 'New waves of violence' likely, UN warns, unless State acts to prevent intercommunal reprisals in Yumbi territory

"New waves of violence" could erupt "at any time" in western Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the UN rights office [warned on Tuesday](#), unless the Government acts to ease "tensions and resentment" between the two communities involved.

Several days of planned and orchestrated killings took place in Mai-Ndombe province, in Yumbi territory at the end of last year, where hundreds of men, women and children were killed. The final assessment of a UN [probe](#) into the events of 16-18 December, says the violence may amount to crimes against humanity.

Preliminary results of the investigation [released last month](#), found evidence of extended attacks carried out between 16 and 18 December 2018, in four locations. Initially, it was reported that 890 people had been killed and thousands displaced as a result of clashes between the Banunu and Batende communities, UN Human Rights Office ([OHCHR](#)) spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani told journalists in Geneva.

"We've been able to verify fully that at least 535 men, women and children were killed and 111 others were injured in Yumbi town, Bongende village and Nkolo II village," Ms. Shamdasani said.

These figures "are most likely an underestimate", she continued, as the bodies of other victims "are believed to have been thrown into the Congo River".

## **Thousands still displaced in Republic of Congo**

The [OHCHR](#) spokesperson also explained that it was not possible to confirm the number of persons still missing as an estimated 19,000 people were displaced by the violence, 16,000 of whom crossed the Congo River into the Republic of the Congo.

According to the investigators – who come from the UN's DRC peacekeeping mission, [MONUSCO](#), and the OHCHR team in the vast country – the violence was triggered by a dispute over the burial of a Banunu chief, reportedly on Batende land.

The attacks were "strikingly similar" and characterized by their extreme violence and speed, leaving little time for people to escape", Ms. Shamdasani said, noting that Batende villagers were "equipped with firearms, including

hunting rifles, machetes, bows and arrows, and gasoline”.

Among the report’s findings are witness testimonies that victims were asked if they were ethnic Banunu, before being killed.

## **No proof of election link to gruesome attacks**

Ms. Shamdasani highlighted other alleged “horrors” in the report, including how a two-year-old child was thrown into a septic tank and a woman raped after her three-year-old child was decapitated and her husband killed.

Faced with such evidence, the OHCHR officials highlighted the investigation’s conclusion that the crimes documented in Yumbi “may amount to the crimes against humanity of murder, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, as well as persecution”.

Asked whether there was a possible link between the intercommunal attacks and elections that were due to take place in December – but which were postponed to the end of March because of the violence – she said that no concrete proof had been found.

“There are going to be elections held in this territory on 31 March,” she said, “but of course these people who’ve been displaced and who’ve had to flee across the border to the Republic of Congo, will probably not be able to vote because of ongoing fears of violence and reality this impossibility for them to get back to their homes.”

## **‘Police left before attacks began’**

Turning to the responsibility of the DRC Government to protect its citizens, Ms. Shamdasani insisted that there were “clear indications that there were rising tensions”.

She added: “There were police that had been deployed, but they left before the attacks actually took place, so there was a clear absence of preventive action.”

As for now, the final UN report states that “tensions and resentment between the two communities, combined with rumours of reprisals, could give rise to new waves of violence at any time.”

The UN Special Representative, and head of [MONUSCO](#), [Leila Zerrougui](#), called on the Government to take urgent measures to restore State authority in Yumbi territory, and to create conditions for the safe and voluntary return of the displaced.

“The neutral presence of State institutions, including the police, is important to maintain law and order and prevent the risk of further violence”, she added.

In addition to an appeal to hold the perpetrators responsible for their actions, Ms. Shamdasani repeated the call by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Michelle Bachelet](#), for a truth and reconciliation between the Banunu

and Batende communities to prevent further violence.

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## Dozens killed and injured by new airstrikes in western Yemen, UN coordinator condemns 'outrageous' toll

Reports from Yemen's Hajjah Governorate indicate that scores of civilians have been killed following airstrikes that hit residential areas over the past two days. Medical sources suggest that at least 22 have died, with more than 30 injured during the aerial bombardment.

"We condemn these deaths and injuries unequivocally and we share our deep condolences with the families of the victims," said UN Humanitarian Coordinator in the country, Lise Grande. "It is outrageous that innocent civilians continue to die needlessly in a conflict that should, and can be solved", she added.

Reportedly, the attacks took place in Kushar district, and took the lives of 10 women and 12 children. Among the 30 injured, at least 14 were under-18. Many of the injured children have been sent to hospitals in Abs district and in Sana'a for treatment and several require possible evacuation to survive.

In [her statement](#), Ms. Grande added that "a higher percentage of people in Yemen are hungry and suffering, than in any other country." The province of Hajjah is one of the worst impacted, with more than a million people going hungry and thousands of new cholera cases being reported on a regular basis.

"We fear that thousands of civilians are trapped between the parties [to the conflict] and lack the basic services they need to survive," lamented Ms. Grande.

"We're doing everything we can to reach the people who need help in Hajjah and throughout the country," she explained, noting that in Hajjah specifically, humanitarian organisations have distributed emergency supplies, provided access to safe drinking water and dispatched emergency mobile medical teams.

"We desperately want to help people but we are facing serious problems," said the Humanitarian Coordinator. "We need access, visas, specialized equipment and approvals for our programmes," she added, asking all parties to the conflict to help humanitarians do their life-saving work.

Since conflict escalated in 2015, Yemen has been facing the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Nearly four in five Yemenis in the country depend on

humanitarian assistance and protection to survive. About 10 million people are on the brink of famine and starvation, and 7 million people are malnourished.

The [2019 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan](#) requires US\$4.2 billion to assist more than 20 million Yemenis including 10 million people who rely entirely on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs every month. To date, the response is only [4 per cent funded](#).

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## **UN rights expert calls for end to 'purgatory' of 'international inaction' facing Myanmar's remaining Rohingya**

A humanitarian crisis fuelled by the suppression of basic human rights is continuing across Myanmar's Rakhine state, a UN Human Rights Council-appointed expert [said on Monday](#), in an appeal for alleged atrocities there to be referred to the International Criminal Court ([ICC](#)).

Presenting her latest report to the 47-Member body in Geneva, [Yanghee Lee](#), Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, highlighted several areas of concern across the country, including grave abuses linked to the mass exodus of some 700,000 Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine in August 2017, which was sparked by separatist violence against police posts.

A separate [Council-appointed probe](#) last year called for the prosecution of top Myanmar military commanders for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

In reply, Myanmar's Kyaw Moe Tun, Permanent Representative of the Republic to the UN in Geneva, rejected the Special Rapporteur's update.

### **Rohingya 'torched their own houses' officials claim**

Among her findings, Ms. Lee noted that just last week she had received a report that 24 Rohingya houses in the town of Buthidaung in Rakhine, had been burned down, which officials explained afterwards by saying that the owners had torched the properties themselves.

Under the terms of a 2018 UN led agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh – which hosts more than a million Rohingyas in exile – Myanmar has agreed to create conditions conducive to the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya refugees.

Today, the conditions of this Memorandum of Understanding have not been met, the Special Rapporteur said.

The deal “expires in a few months”, she added, insisting that there was “nothing to indicate that conditions have improved for the Rohingya who remain in Myanmar”.

Staying with Rakhine state, the Special Rapporteur maintained that clashes between the separatist Arakan Army and the Myanmar military had forced 10,000 people to flee since November.

“Allegations exist of fighters dressing as civilians and using civilian vehicles, landmine use, forced recruitment and forced portering, and arrest and detention of civilians suspected of being associates or sympathisers of the Arakan Army,” Ms. Lee said. “It does not appear that the situation will improve in the immediate future.”

Given the gravity of the situation, she appealed for the [UN Security Council](#) to take the international lead on the matter.

“I still firmly believe that the situation in Myanmar must be referred to the ICC by the Security Council...Victims must not be forced to wait in the purgatory of international inaction,” she said.

## **Exploitation of gems, timber, high on list of alleged rights violations**

Allegations of misuse of Myanmar’s natural riches constituted one of the biggest areas of the Special Rapporteur’s investigations, particularly in the gemstones and timber sectors.

“Revenues from natural resource extraction needed for vital services and development being diverted to the military and its allies undermines the civilian Government, democratic reforms, the peace process, sustainable development and the realisation of rights,” the Special Rapporteur explained.

## **Rohingya refugees give Council testimony for first time**

For the first time, the Council heard testimonies from two Rohingya refugees, Hamida Khatun from Shanti Mohila and Muhub Ullah from the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights.

“In August 2017, I fled Burma to Bangladesh when my village was attacked,” Mrs Khatun said. “My Rohingya brothers and sisters were killed, my husband and mother were killed. I’m the only Rohingya woman who could leave Bangladesh to tell you what happened to hundreds of thousands of us.”

In her comments, delivered by Lawyers’ Rights Watch Canada, Mrs Khatun added that she had “three requests for the international community: first, justice including compensation; second, to return home in safety and security including citizenship; and third, access to education.”

## **Rakhine problem vast and complex, says Myanmar**

Myanmar told the Council that the Government had sought sustainable peace and national reconciliation, while the issue in Rakhine state was vast and complex.

"We share the concern over the plight of all affected communities due to the violence triggered by provocative, coordinated attacks of ARSA terrorists against multiple security outposts in October 2016 and August 2017," said Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun.

"I would like to reiterate Myanmar's readiness to receive the verified returnees in a voluntary safe and dignified manner in accordance with the bilateral agreements with Bangladesh."

In response to Ms. Lee's appeal for an international tribunal to investigate alleged abuses, Mr. Kyaw insisted that his country "will not accept any call for referring the situation in Myanmar to the ICC. The Government of Myanmar established an Independent Commission of Enquiry in July last year. The Commission will investigate...as part of Myanmar's effort to address the issue of accountability," he said adding that the Government "is willing and able to address the accountability issue."

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## **UN chief sends condolences to families of Malawi flood victims**

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has extended his condolences to the families of flood victims across Malawi, where at least 23 have died in recent days, and to the Government and citizens of the country.

In a statement released on Monday, Mr. Guterres said that he was "deeply saddened" by the loss of life and the "significant damage to people's homes and livelihoods" caused by the heavy rains and subsequent flooding.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)) estimates that the flooding has affected some 115,000 people, particularly in the south of Malawi. In a [factsheet](#) on the floods released on Saturday, [OCHA](#) warned that the number of people affected is expected to rise, as assessment teams reach new areas.

The flooding has had a major impact on power supplies in Malawi: according to media reports, the country's main utility company, EGENCO, has said that more than 80% of the country's available hydro-electric capacity is down.

On Friday, Malawian President Peter Mutharika declared a State of Emergency

in the areas hit hardest by the rains and flooding, which followed the formation of a “tropical disturbance” over the Mozambique Channel earlier in the week.

Search and rescue teams from Malawi’s Department of Disaster Management Affairs, have been working with local partners to deliver relief to affected people, including tents, plastic sheets, maize, rice, beans, blankets and kitchen utensils, according to a statement issued by the Ministry of Homeland Security.

The United Nations expressed its solidarity with the Malawian authorities, and committed to support them as they respond to the humanitarian needs of the population: the UN response has involved several main agencies. The World Food Programme ([WFP](#)) has deployed two boats to accompany the assessment and response; the UN Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) is providing drones; and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)), in collaboration with the [WFP](#), will support mapping using satellite imagery.

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## Annual UN women activists’ summit opens with focus on services, infrastructure

A wheelchair-bound Pakistani mother who yearned to visit a park without worrying about ramp access, and a young South Sudanese woman who dreams of having affordable health care, were among the speakers opening the United Nation’s largest annual gathering on gender equality and women’s rights on Monday.

Addressing the [63rd session](#) of the UN [Commission on the Status of Women](#) (CSW) in a joint speech, Muniba Mazari and Mary Fatiya, both asked for basic social protections to be extended to women and girls around the world, based on need, and in line with their inalienable human rights.

“Being a woman has its challenges. Being in a wheelchair is the cherry on top,” Ms. Mazari, who is also the [Goodwill Ambassador for UN Pakistan](#), told several thousand activists, diplomats, and academics gathered in the UN’s General Assembly Hall.

Ms. Fatiya, who described going long distances to a school where only two toilets were available for around 600 children, said her ideal world centred around a peace existence, access to healthcare and good infrastructure: “I’m not asking for a luxurious road. I just need it and it’s my right to have it.”



The annual meeting of the Commission, which dates back to 1947, will bring more than 9,000 representatives from civil society organizations to the UN over the course of the next two weeks. This year's theme is "social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls." Many of the marathon-discussions are expected to also focus on gender equality and the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development.

## **Gender equality, 'fundamentally a question of power'**

In his opening statement, Secretary-General *António* Guterres said the Commission on the Status of Women could equally be called the "Commission on the Status of Power".

"Because that is the crux of the issue. Gender equality is fundamentally a question of power," he said, noting that the world had lost its way, highlighting a pushback on women's rights.

Mr. Guterres – who called himself a "proud feminist" – said that changing power relations, overcoming gaps and biases, and fighting to preserve gains, necessitates engaging women as equal participants in society.

"When we exclude women, everyone pays the price. When we include women, the whole world wins," he said.

Similarly, this year's Commission Chair, Ambassador Geraldine Byrne Nason of Ireland, said in her speech that "resilience is in women's DNA and the world needs women's resilience now more than ever."

The topics that will be covered over the next two weeks, range from planning urban space and public transport, with women's safety and mobility in mind, to improving rural women's access to skilled birth attendants.

## **Invest to 'free up time', opportunity, for women and girls**

The President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Inga Rhonda King, also noted, for example, the importance of public services, infrastructure and social protection for recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work – which often falls to women and girls in the family.

Investing here is "critical to free up women's and girls' time, support their mobility and women's access to economic opportunities," Ms. King said.

Highlighting some of the progress made in recent decades, the head of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, said thanks to investment in infrastructure and access to public services, more girls are in school now than ever before.

She noted the need to close the gaps, however, saying that 71 per cent of the world's population, still does not have full access to universal social protections.

Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka urged greater leadership on women's issues, saying women and girls have a vital role to play in shaping the policies delivery of



services and infrastructure that impacts their lives.

Among other speakers on the opening day, was Marlène Schiappa, the French Minister of State for Gender Equality, the nation holding the Presidency of the Security Council this month. She said that the involvement of more women in political and peace processes was vital for women's empowerment, and a problem that affects the diplomatic community. She urged the Security Council to redouble its efforts to more fully include women in these discussions.

Meanwhile, in the Security Council itself on Monday morning, where Afghanistan was top of the agenda, Storai Tapesht, Deputy Executive Director of the Afghan Women's Network organization, raised concerns about the movement towards striking a peace deal with Taliban extremists.

"We, the women of Afghanistan, have cautious optimism for peace. Yet we are concerned – more than ever – that women's human rights will be compromised in the name of peace."