

Speech: The Need for Free and Fair Elections in DRC

Thank you Mr President.

Let me begin by welcoming the presence today of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Okitundu, and thank you also to SRSZ Zerrougui for updating us on the intensifying instability, and the dire humanitarian consequences, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The United Kingdom is deeply concerned by the proliferation of violence in the DRC, particularly in North and South Kivu, Tanganyika, Ituri and the Kasai and at significant increases in human rights abuses, with 744 violations in January, 60% of which were perpetrated by state agents.

As is too often the case, and as the civilian population of the DRC know all too well, the result of this instability has been devastating. 4.5 million Congolese have now fled their homes and communities; there are more internally displaced people in the DRC than anywhere else in Africa. 40,000 people have fled from Ituri to Uganda in this year alone, bringing the refugee population up to 670,000. This has caused a devastating humanitarian crisis – over 13.1 million are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection. This number has doubled since 2017.

Mr President,

There is clearly a link between the ongoing political uncertainty and the increasing insecurity. The Congolese people cannot express their legitimate concerns with the political situation without risking their lives. On 21 January and 25 February, security forces once again violently repressed demonstrations leaving at least 9 people dead, dozens wounded and hundreds arrested. This must stop.

The holding of credible and constitutional elections by 23 December this year leading to a democratic and peaceful transition of power is essential to ending the political crisis. Without this, there is a significant risk of further violence destabilising not just the DRC, but the wider region also.

We welcome the progress made towards elections so far, including the completion of voter registration, the passing of electoral laws and the announcement of an electoral budget. However, this is no time for complacency. There is much more to do.

It is essential that the election calendar is honoured and that key dates set out in the electoral timetable are met, including the completion of the Voter Register List by 5 April, the Audit for the electoral list by 25 May, convocation of the electoral process in June and registration of Presidential candidates in July.

But, Mr President, holding credible elections is about more than complying

with timelines, it is also about creating the conditions than enable free and fair elections to take place. In order to do this, we call on the Government to implement the 31 December Agreement in full, including full implementation of the confidence-building measures set out in this agreement.

The Government must also respect the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people of the DRC, opening political space and allowing peaceful demonstrations and freedom of expression. The UK is extremely concerned at the high numbers of violations of political rights and fundamental freedoms in January. And we were appalled by the disproportionate use of force against churchgoers and peaceful protesters on 31 December 2017, 21 January 2018, and 25 February 2018 and the subsequent loss of life.

We recognise that the onus is not only on the Government to deliver credible elections and in this context we call on the opposition to engage constructively in the process on the basis of the 31 December Agreement, which will demonstrate their credibility and potential to govern.

Mr President,

MONUSCO has a crucial role to play in this crucial year in the DRC in protecting civilians and supporting the implementation of the 31 December Agreement.

We welcome the efforts to improve MONUSCO's ability to carry out these tasks more efficiently and more effectively. In particular we welcome efforts to enhance the flexibility and mobility of MONUSCO's forces and to improve their performance. It is important that these reforms are implemented swiftly.

Mr President,

In conclusion, let me be clear: the violence and resulting dire humanitarian situation in the DRC are the result of continual disappointment of the people in the political process and the political leaders responsible for this process. The only way to avert further violence is for free and fair elections to take place in December and for the 31 December Agreement to be fully implemented. Further excuses and delays will only lead to more violence and despair. The Security Council cannot allow this to happen. The people of the Democratic Republic of Congo cannot afford to wait any longer.