

March 23, 2021

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C St NW  
Washington, DC 20520

**Re: The Need for a High-level U.S. Special Envoy to Implement a Regional Strategy to Address the Crises in Africa's Great Lakes Region**

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We are deeply concerned about the growing crisis in the Great Lakes region of Africa. The longstanding conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has worsened over the past year. Over [five million people](#) are now displaced in the country, the third highest level of displacement in the world; conflict-related killings of civilians in the Kivu provinces [increased](#) by around 50 percent over the past year; armed groups and troops from neighboring countries are [present](#) in eastern DRC; conflict gold and other [natural resources](#) are being smuggled with impunity from the DRC to its neighbors, thereby fueling the violence; and the United Nations recently [warned](#) that nearly 20 million people are acutely food insecure in the DRC. There is a danger that the violence could further escalate.

At the center of the DRC's vulnerability to these destructive currents has been its corruption-driven state, including its security forces that often [violate human rights](#) and [collaborate](#) with armed groups, and its failure to hold those most responsible for abuses to account. Congolese civil society groups are [calling](#) for the correction of serious flaws in the electoral process that brought President Felix Tshisekedi to power. The country has yet to meaningfully combat high-level corruption, systemic violence, and impunity. There is a real risk that the DRC could descend into another protracted, potentially violent political crisis as the next scheduled elections in 2023 approach. [Burundi](#), [Rwanda](#), and [Uganda](#) are also at pivotal moments as ruling parties strengthen their grip on power, with space for dissent highly restricted and deepening repression.

Past U.S. special envoys have played a vital role in mitigating conflict and addressing democratic crises in the Great Lakes region, when they were high profile, combined [diplomacy](#) with U.S. financial pressure, reported to the Secretary, and were well staffed. Presidents Clinton, Obama, and Trump all dispatched special envoys to provide diplomatic focus on regional conflicts by strengthening cooperation with regional and international partners and informing a coherent U.S. policy. And, along with escalating U.S. and European Union [targeted sanctions](#), efforts by special envoys played a critical role in getting then-DRC President Joseph Kabila to organize [elections](#) in 2018 and step down as provided by his constitutionally mandated two-term limit.

**Recommendations:**

We urge the Biden administration to adopt a rejuvenated regional policy strategy to address these urgent security and humanitarian issues and to once again recognize that their scope and intensity

go beyond the remits of capable bilateral ambassadors and require a special envoy. This strategy should particularly address:

- 1) Armed conflicts in eastern DRC and the presence of abusive regional forces and armed groups on Congolese soil;
- 2) The trade in conflict gold and other natural resources that fuels armed violence and corruption and that is smuggled to and refined in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda;
- 3) The need for a vetting mechanism to remove abusive officers from command positions in the Congolese security forces, an effective Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program for former combatants, and a new judicial mechanism to investigate and prosecute those most responsible for widespread human rights abuses;
- 4) The failure to complete a democratic transition in the DRC and related problems across the region;
- 5) The use of U.S. financial leverage to complement traditional diplomatic tools to achieve U.S. policy goals of conflict transformation, human rights, and democratic reform – including network sanctions, anti-money laundering measures, and coordination with the private sector.

We strongly recommend that the administration appoint a high-level and well-resourced Special Envoy for the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Great Lakes Region of Africa who reports directly to the Secretary of State in order to bolster this strategic approach. A rejuvenated strategy and special envoy will help bring into play the full range of diplomatic tools, including modernized/targeted sanctions, State Department travel restrictions, and anti-money laundering measures, to reduce regional conflict and strengthen the rule of law and democratic governance.

Lastly, we would like to call your attention to an important global interest in President Biden's foreign policy that a special envoy for the Great Lakes could help address. In this time of global warming, the Congo rainforest – second in size only to the Amazon rainforest – is a precious resource that is threatened by advancing, unregulated agricultural development and deforestation. Supporting efforts to protect the forest in a way that respects the rights of people living and working in the surrounding communities could go a long way in advancing the administration's broader goals around climate change and in preventing increased food insecurity, fighting over resources, and abusive or illegal exploitation.

We are eager to work with you and a new Special Envoy towards America's well-founded objectives of strengthening democratic governance, respect for human rights, the rule of law, conflict resolution, and environmental preservation in this important region.

Human Rights Watch

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