

OSESG-GL supports the implementation of regional commitments on the fight against impunity, the strengthening of the rule of law and the promotion and protection of human rights as key contributors to peace, security and sustainable development in the Great Lakes region

In 2020 the Great Lakes region continued to register a high number of human rights violations committed by armed groups, state actors and other non-armed actors. Extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, violations to physical integrity including sexual and gender-based violence are amongst the violations registered. Perpetrators of serious crimes continue to benefit from impunity, including through taking advantage of porous borders to seek shelter



UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, Huang Xia, commemorating International Human Rights Day, 10 December 2020

from prosecution in neighboring states - a factor that contributes to accrued mistrust and tension. Some positive developments in efforts to address the human rights situation and impunity in the Great Lakes region have been noted over the course of the last months, including with the sentencing of several perpetrators of serious crimes. Nonetheless, the United Nations and partners continued to report human rights violations and abuses, including restrictions to political rights and freedoms, particularly during electoral processes and in areas with weak state authority. Furthermore, since the declaration by WHO of the world pandemic, human rights violations have also been documented in the context of the enforcement by authorities of measures to

prevent the spread of COVID-19. Of concern is also the use of COVID-19 containment measures to muzzle dissenting voices and limit activities of opposition groups and Civil Society Organizations in countries preparing for elections.

Unless the current situation is reversed, the number of human rights violations is curbed, perpetrators of serious crimes are held accountable, and victims receive due remedies the Great Lakes region will remain a fertile ground for violence and development prospects will continue to be undermined. Heads of State and Government of the Great Lakes region have repeatedly indicated that greater regional judicial cooperation and the strengthening of the rule of law will contribute to moving the region towards sustainable peace and security and have therefore made a series of commitments.

In light of the above, [The Peace, Security and Cooperation \(PSC\) Framework for the Democratic Republic of Congo and the region](#), signed in Addis Ababa in 2013, commits the signatory countries to work together to address long-standing issues that have contributed to violence and atrocities in the Great Lakes region for almost 30 years. Furthermore, the [Great Lakes Judicial Cooperation Network \(GLJCN\)](#), created in 2016 with the support of the United Nations,

represents a key instrument to implement the judicial cooperation commitments of the PSC Framework and the decisions made by Heads of States in its Regional Oversight Mechanism (ROM). The [GLJCN](#) is a mechanism of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and the only vehicle in the region that supports central authorities and other bodies dealing with international cooperation in criminal justice matters. The Office of the United Nations Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region (OESG-GL), as a co-guarantor of the PSC Framework (with AU, ICGLR, SADC), hence engages and coordinates support to the GLJCN. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, at the request of Member States, the OESG-GL has facilitated initiatives to strengthen the capacity of the GLJCN focal points to remote access to justice and online trials.

Furthermore, the OESG-GL has made the support to the implementation of **the commitments made by the Ministers of Justice of PSC Framework member states, under the auspices of Kenyan President Kenyatta, in [the Nairobi Declaration on Justice and Good Governance in May 2019](#)** one of its priorities. In 2020, as called for in the Nairobi Declaration, the OESG-GL, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the ICGLR supported National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI) as well as Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and Human Rights Defenders ([HRD](#)), in a series of regional workshops and consultation, so as to enable them to better consult and coordinate their support to peace and security initiatives in the region, including through creating and sustaining a more enabling environment for them to work in. In this regard, the regional initiatives led to:

- The NHRI workshop of August 2020 resulted in the adoption of a series of key actions to be undertaken by NHRIs, supported by key partners, through the implementation of national roadmaps which were developed towards the strengthening of the NHRIs, including on their COVID-19 related activities.
- Participants of the regional CSO and HRD consultation held on 10 December 2020, adopted the [“Declaration on Civil Society’s contribution to Peace and Security in the Great Lakes Region”](#), with specific recommendations addressed to ICGLR Member States, NHRIs, CSOs and HRDs, the UN, regional and continental organizations, donors, as well as parties to armed conflicts. The Declaration recommends, *inter alia*, that UN entities, regional and continental organizations facilitate access of CSOs and HRDs to regional and international human rights mechanisms, and that ICGLR Member States take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure respect for and protection of CSOs and HRDs’ rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, of association, of expression and of opinion in accordance with relevant international, continental, regional, and sub-regional instruments.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the above mentioned actors have played key roles on the pandemic response by issuing statements and recommendations on how to respond while protecting human rights, by issuing guidance on how to protect the most vulnerable groups in society, by continuing their activities in support to fight against impunity and their monitoring on human rights and by sharing information with the public. In this regard, and in line with the newly developed UN regional strategy for peace consolidation conflict prevention and conflict resolution in the Great Lakes region, the OSESG-GL pledges to **continue its support to NHRI's, as well as to the many inspiring members of civil society, including women, youth and grassroot organizations, to reinforce their role as "forces vives" for peace and security in the Great Lakes.** The OSESG-GL will further "enhance its support for cross-border judicial cooperation, the promotion and protection of human rights and the strengthening of the rule of law and good governance as pathways to addressing and preventing tensions and building trust and peace. Capacity-building initiatives already underway in this area will be reinforced and framed in the context of regional efforts and supported by advocacy and good offices to ensure sustained political attention and commitment."

"When I'm gone, do not try to wake me up, let me go: Do not cry when thinking of me; be only grateful for the beautiful years spent together; Above all, do not accept that evil occupies a special place in your hearts. In my absence you will defend the just, you will avoid evil, and try to always do good, and that's how you will become peacemakers." (to his children)

Pascal Kabungulu – Human Rights Defender - shot dead in front of his family - DRC - 31 July 2005"