

Alert No. 3

The right of Congolese refugees to voluntarily return to their country must be upheld by the Government of Burundi and UNHCR.

As part of UMUSEKE program, human rights organizations, the Burundian League of Human Rights Iteka and King Umurundi Freedom, continue to document the humanitarian situation of Congolese refugees who fled the crisis shaking Eastern DRC.

Following up on the previous alert¹, the two organizations draw the attention of both the national and international community, particularly the Government of Burundi, United Nations mechanisms, the African Union, and the Great Lakes sub-region, to the alarming humanitarian situation of refugee children and women from Congo, which continues to deteriorate in the Busuma camp and in other transit centers in Burundi.

These alarm calls are based on the following facts:

1° In less than three months after their settlement at the Busuma site in the Ruyigi commune, Buhumuza province, in eastern Burundi, more than 700 Congolese refugees had already died, the majority being children, due to poor living conditions in this camp: famine, hygiene issues, almost non-existent access to healthcare, with all the resulting consequences;

2° Exorbitant amounts are demanded from refugees who decide to return home for bribes and transportation fees by vehicle drivers, amounting to around 500,000 FBU per person, a large part of which is given to the police on the Ruyigi-Gitega-Bujumbura road so that they do not carry out identity checks;

3° Our organizations have received information indicating that among the refugees at the Busuma site are fighters from the DRC, including the WAZALENDO, FDRL, and FARDC, who are also alleged to be promoters of uprisings frequently observed at the site. The latest uprising occurred on Thursday, February 19, 2026, during a visit from a UNHCR headquarters delegation in Geneva, and six refugees suspected of being instigators are being jailed at the police station in Ruyigi. Gunfire was used by the police to stop the

¹ https://ligue-iteka.bi/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Alert-1-Ligue-Iteka_King-Umundi-Freedom.pdf

unrest. Note that a visit by an EU delegation that was planned for the same day was reportedly refused by the government of Burundi.

4° Our organizations welcome the positive responses to the concerns that had been raised in various alerts and reports regarding the closure of the Gatumba border and the bribes demanded by Burundian security agents and young Imbonerakure from Congolese individuals who were using unofficial routes to return to their home country.

These advances include:

- The reopening of the Gatumba border;
- The arrest and imprisonment of Imbonerakure involved in the practice of extorting Congolese refugees returning via informal routes and engaging in fraud between the two countries;
- The initiation of dialogue between the two governments and humanitarian partners to facilitate the voluntary return of Congolese refugees;
- The commitment of various states, including the EU and the United States of America, as well as technical and financial partners, to assist refugees in Burundi.

5° Our organizations encourage UNHCR's representation in its communications regarding the concerns of various stakeholders monitoring the situation of Congolese refugees in Burundi and the efforts mobilized with its partners to meet the primary needs of refugees at the Busuma site.

In light of this situation, our organizations remind that the principles of refugee protection established by the Geneva Convention of July 28, 1951, and its Protocol of January 31, 1967, relating to the Status of Refugees, as well as other applicable international instruments, stipulate in Article 1 (C.1.) that protection ceases for a person 'if they have voluntarily invoked the protection of the country of which they are a national again.'

The 1951 Geneva Convention, ratified by Burundi, preserves the right of refugees to voluntarily return to their home country in its first article and the right to freedom of movement (art. 26).

In view of all of the above, the Iteka League and King Umurundi Freedom recommend:

To the Government of Burundi, in collaboration with its partners, UNHCR, and other stakeholders in the field such as ONPRA, TPIO, CARITAS, THE RED CROSS, etc.:

- To accelerate dialogue on the procedures for the repatriation of those Congolese refugees who wish to return home.
 2. To ensure that the procedures to facilitate all Congolese refugees who wish to return to their country comply with the Geneva Convention and other relevant international instruments, as well as the Constitution of Burundi;
- To continue assisting refugees on its territory in general and repatriated Burundians in the Tanzanian provinces and other countries such as Rwanda, Zambia, etc.

To the technical and financial partners of the Government of Burundi, including the UN, the EU, and the diplomatic missions accredited to Burundi:

- To continue supporting the Government of Burundi and its partners so that they can fulfill their duty of protecting and taking care of these refugees;
- To ensure respect for the rights of refugees, especially providing a prompt and safe solution for those requesting assistance for their voluntary return to their home country.

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