

Alert No. 8

The voluntary repatriation of Congolese refugees must be accelerated to safeguard their fundamental rights, particularly the right to education for their children.

Within the framework of the UMUSEKE program, the Burundian League for Human Rights Iteka and King Umurundi Freedom are continuing their work documenting and monitoring the humanitarian situation of Congolese refugees who fled the conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and are being hosted in Burundi.

Following our previous alerts concerning the right of Congolese refugees to voluntary return, our organizations note with satisfaction that the voluntary repatriation process, implemented by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in collaboration with the Government of Burundi, is proceeding steadily. This development represents significant progress in the implementation of international commitments regarding the protection of refugees and respect for their right to freely choose to return to their country of origin.

Since the launch of this operation on April 23, 2026, twelve voluntary repatriation convoys have enabled the gradual return of thousands of refugees to the Democratic Republic of Congo. The convoys organized to date have involved 463 people on April 23; 991 on April 30; 1,002 on May 7; 978 on May 21; 1,030 on May 28; 1,021 on June 4; 956 on June 11; 749 on June 18; 1,048 on June 25; 575 on July 3; 1,034 on July 9; and finally, 1,101 refugees distributed across 32 buses during the twelfth convoy organized on July 22, 2026.

The Burundian League for Human Rights Iteka and King Umurundi Freedom commend the efforts made by UNHCR, the Government of Burundi, and all partners involved in this operation. However, given the still high number of refugees at the Busuma site, estimated at around 67,000, the current rhythm of repatriations remains insufficient to meet the expectations of the thousands of refugees who wish to voluntarily return to their country, reunite with their families, and allow their children to resume their schooling in their homeland.

According to information gathered by our organizations, this prolonged wait is fueling growing frustration among the refugees. On July 22, 2026, protests were observed at the Busuma site, particularly by children and women demanding an acceleration of the voluntary repatriation process. To disperse the demonstrators

and restore order, police fired warning shots into the air. At the time of writing this alert, our organizations had not received any reports of casualties.

Nevertheless, this incident reflects the growing impatience of the refugees who wish to return to their country as soon as possible. Our organizations reiterate that voluntary return is a fundamental right enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. They also emphasize that the best interests of the child must remain a priority in the implementation of this process, particularly by guaranteeing refugee children the opportunity to resume their schooling in their country of origin as soon as the next school year begins.

While welcoming the efforts already made by UNHCR, the Government of Burundi, and their partners, the Burundian League for Human Rights Iteka and King Umurundi Freedom believe that further measures are needed to accelerate the voluntary repatriation process and meet the legitimate expectations of refugees.

To this end, they make the following recommendations:

To the Government of Burundi:

- Continue to facilitate the voluntary repatriation process for Congolese refugees in close collaboration with UNHCR and the competent authorities of the Democratic Republic of Congo;
- Ensure that law enforcement operations in refugee sites are conducted in strict compliance with human rights and the principles of necessity and proportionality;
- Strengthen dialogue with refugee representatives to prevent tensions and promote peaceful solutions.

At the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR):

- Expedite administrative and logistical procedures to reduce waiting times for refugees who have expressed their willingness to return voluntarily to the Democratic Republic of Congo;
- Increase the frequency of convoys and the number of refugees repatriated on each departure, within the limits of available logistical capacity;
- Enhance communication with refugees regarding the convoy schedule to prevent frustration, rumors, and protests;

- Continue to ensure that each return is carried out in strict compliance with the principles of voluntary participation, security and dignity.

To the technical and financial partners of the Government of Burundi and the DRC, including the United Nations, the European Union, etc.

- Continue to provide financial and logistical support for voluntary repatriation operations to increase their rhythm.
- Support the reintegration programs for returning refugees in the Democratic Republic of Congo, particularly in education, health, and livelihoods.

To Congolese refugees

- Continue to prioritize dialogue with the competent authorities and UNHCR for any claims regarding repatriation.
- Maintain the peaceful nature of claims to promote a voluntary, organized, and safe return process.

For the UMUSEKE program

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