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## OHCHR – UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Author)

### Democratic Republic of Congo: Parties to conflict must treat dead bodies with dignity

**GENEVA** – Parties to the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo must ensure bodies of the deceased are treated with respect and dignity and are properly documented before burial to prevent them from becoming missing persons, UN experts\* said today.

“We are shocked by the nearly 3’000 dead bodies and remains mostly retrieved from the streets and lake Kivu, in Goma, following the announcement of a unilateral ceasefire by the M23 armed group, on 4 February,” the experts said.

“This human toll provides evidence of serious crimes perpetrated against the civilian population amid escalation of fighting,” they said.

As of 11 February, the World Health Organization (WHO) documented 939 intrahospital deaths in Goma, awaiting burial.

#### ecoi.net description:

Nord-Kivu province: Nearly 3,000 bodies retrieved from the streets of Goma and lake Kivu after a ceasefire announced by the armed group M23

#### Country:

Congo, Democratic Republic

#### Source:

[OHCHR – UN Office of the High  
Commissioner for Human  
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“Professional forensic examination and documentation of the deceased bodies is paramount, not only to identify the deceased and determine the cause of death, but also to establish whether any unlawful killings, including extrajudicial executions may have occurred,” the experts said.

This process is an integral part of the international legal obligation to undertake effective investigations and accountability, protecting the identity of deceased persons, to ensure that serious human rights violations and international crimes are properly documented, investigated, prosecuted, and punished, and families receive full reparations in compliance with international law.

“We are deeply concerned about the reported burial of over 2000 bodies without proper identification or documentation of the circumstances or causes of death, alongside an additional 900 bodies in overwhelmed mortuaries and hospitals,” experts said.

A lack of identification results in bodies becoming missing persons, which has legal implications, further traumatises bereaved families and can hinder criminal investigations in cases of potentially unlawful deaths, they warned.

The experts recalled that families have a fundamental right to know the truth regarding the deaths of their relatives, including by accessing information about the causes and circumstances of death.

“The right of families to mourn their loved ones and honour their memory requires that burial procedures respect local traditions and beliefs,” the experts said.

“The conflict in Goma has taken a devastating human toll, and we urge all parties to the conflict not to exacerbate the suffering of affected families and communities. Heavy bombardment caused families from at least nine displacement sites on the periphery of Goma to flee into the city with many sleeping on the streets and in green spaces across the city,” they said.

The experts warned against the hasty burial of dead bodies in mass graves on the basis of unfounded fears of spread of disease, recalling that dead bodies of persons who died from violence do not transmit diseases and that they pose no health risk to their communities.

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“We call on all parties to the conflict to immediately take measures to ensure that the bodies of those who have been killed or died during armed confrontations are searched for, recovered, properly documented and identified, respectfully managed, and buried in accordance with international human rights and humanitarian law provisions and guidelines,” the experts said.

“The obligation to account for the missing and forcibly disappeared, the protection of public health, and the preservation of cultural and religious burial practices must be guaranteed,” they said.

The experts recalled that the dignity of a person does not cease with death, and that improper protection of deceased bodies and remains infringes upon the rights of victims and their families to truth, justice and reparation. They expressed their availability to advise on the proper management, documentation and disposition of the dead in accordance with international standards.

\*The experts: [Morris Tidball-Binz, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions](#); [Bernard Duhaime, Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence](#); [Nazila Ghanea, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief](#); [Paula Gaviria Betancur, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons](#), [Alice Jill Edwards, Special Rapporteur on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#).

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