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DR Congo: Renewed Repression, Impunity Top Rights Concerns

Visiting Human Rights Watch Head Presses Senior Officials to Change Course

(Kinshasa) – The Human Rights Watch executive director, [Philippe Bolopion](#), urged senior Congolese officials to respect freedom of expression, end arbitrary arrests and detentions, and ensure accountability for abuses during his visit to the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) from May 17 to 21, 2026, Human Rights Watch said today.

The visit took place against a backdrop of the Rwandan-backed M23 armed group's occupation in eastern Congo; a crackdown against journalists, activists, and political opposition members; and the renewed use of secret detention sites in the capital, Kinshasa.

"The current crackdown in Congo is eerily reminiscent of the Joseph Kabila era, with many Congolese activists and political opponents living in fear of retaliation by the authorities for merely expressing their opinion," Bolopion said. "Human Rights Watch is concerned that restrictions on free expression and criticism of officials could usher in a broader repression."

While in Kinshasa, Bolopion met with senior government officials, including Prime Minister Judith Suminwa Tuluka, and the ministers of defense, communication and media, and justice. He also met with victims of human rights abuses and their relatives, civil society and religious leaders, rights activists, members of the Banyamulenge community (a Congolese Tutsi minority from eastern Congo), opposition political party members, the National Human Rights Commission, United Nations officials, and foreign diplomats. Bolopion held a news conference in Kinshasa on May 21.

Human Rights Watch documented several cases in which the [National Cyber Defense Council](#) (Conseil national de cybersécurité, or CNC), an agency attached to the presidency, arbitrarily arrested and forcibly disappeared dissidents, holding them in secret locations without formal charges or access to lawyers.

"I see my husband once a week, but I don't know where he is," said a woman whose husband had been abducted from their home one night. "I am blindfolded and don't know where they take me."

"Reports from Kinshasa of a sprawling network of secret detention sites, outside any judicial process, sends a chilling message to Congolese civil society," Bolopion said. "It's a practice that President Félix Tshisekedi had pledged to end when he took office."

Government officials told Bolopion that some of those arrested were detained in villas, and that officials were still finalizing the investigation against them before transferring them into the justice system. They also indicated that reforms concerning the CNC were underway and that in the future, no arrests would be made without the presence of judicial police, who act under prosecutorial authority to investigate crimes.

"The serious security challenges facing Congo can't justify an assault on the rule of law and basic human rights," Bolopion said. "The authorities need to transfer those arbitrarily detained to the justice system, inform detainees' families of their whereabouts, and abide by due process standards."

Political opposition members and civil society activists expressed concern about a possible constitutional amendment to extend the president's mandate beyond the two-term limit. This issue had previously arisen when then-President Joseph Kabila stayed in office past the constitutional limit.

In meetings with officials, Bolopion raised concerns about grave abuses committed by the parties to the conflict in eastern Congo, including the Congolese army, the allied Wazalendo militia, and pro-government armed groups, as well as the Rwandan army and the M23. He reiterated the importance of respecting international humanitarian law, including when carrying out airstrikes, and providing for the protection and free movement of civilians, and called for renewed international efforts to ensure accountability for crimes committed by all parties.

"For decades, civilians in eastern Congo have borne the brunt of abuses by government forces and armed groups," Bolopion said. "Despite some important progress made by Congolese courts, judicial authorities have largely failed to prosecute senior commanders responsible for atrocities."

Bolopion encouraged government officials to prioritize accountability for current and past international crimes, including by creating specialized mixed chambers with some international members, or a similar internationalized mechanism within the Congolese justice system. Congolese officials should also continue to support domestic prosecutions and International Criminal Court investigations.

In April, Human Rights Watch requested a meeting with President Paul Kagame of Rwanda to discuss abuses by the Rwandan military and M23 in eastern Congo, but received no response.

"Impunity breeds more abuses," Bolopion said. "Donor governments including the European Union should support Congo's efforts for accountability and sanction senior Congolese and Rwandan officials responsible for supporting abusive armed groups."

