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What it's like to be a journalist in Africa's Great Lakes region

RSF REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS

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FOREWORD

Sadibou Marong - © RSF

URGENT ACTION IS NEEDED TO PREVENT VIOLENT CONFLICTS FROM KILLING JOURNALISM IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION

Thirty years ago in Rwanda, during the genocide against the Tutsi, one radio station became a vehicle for hatred and deadly propaganda. The painful memory of Radio Mille Collines has endured throughout Africa's Great Lakes region ever since. Reporting the news is still a constant challenge in this area, which is plagued by instability and armed conflict. From Rwanda to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), from Uganda to Burundi and from Kenya to Tanzania, being a journalist means working in a deteriorating security environment compounded by media polarisation, financial insecurity, the misuse of laws and high susceptibility to disinformation.

The epicentre of these difficulties lies in the eastern DRC, where journalism is paying the price of a war that began in the late 1990s in the city of Goma and escalated in 2012 with the creation of the Rwanda-backed March 23 Movement (M23). Independent reporting from the east of the DRC, which borders Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania, has become virtually impossible since Goma's fall in early 2025. Those who try are caught between the M23's anvil and the hammer of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC). The consequences include arrests, attacks, threats, enforced disappearances, executions and the closure, looting or ransacking of newsrooms. Reporters are left with no other option than to leave. Hundreds have had to face the hardship of exile in Burundi, Uganda and Rwanda.

As the political and security situation has been so unstable for decades, being a journalist in the Great Lakes region also means working in an environment where a collective memory marked by violence is constantly instrumentalised to sway public opinion. Rhetoric around national unity, promoted by various political forces, is used in many countries to discredit any journalistic coverage deemed sensitive by the authorities. This has been the case in Burundi since the political crisis in 2015, which led to a mass exodus of journalists and years-long bans on independent media outlets, such as *Iwacu*. It is the only country in the region where two women journalists have been sentenced to prison terms on trumped-up charges: Floriane Irangabiye in 2023 and Sandra Muhoza in 2024. In Rwanda, an international example of post-genocide reconstruction, independent media are still timid, and a widespread code of silence fostered by censorship and self-censorship has taken hold on domestic coverage. The suspicious death of journalist John Williams Ntwali, who was critical of authorities, is a case in point. In Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, elections are accompanied by waves of hostility towards the media – including shots fired at reporters in Kenya and Uganda, and internet shutdowns in Tanzania – that demonstrate the fragility of press freedom. It is, therefore, no surprise that all of the region's countries, except Tanzania and Kenya, rank in the bottom third of the RSF World Press Freedom Index.

As journalism in this region is extremely perilous, most of the journalists interviewed for this report spoke anonymously. The report pays tribute to their courage — their choice to continue reporting despite all the dangers — and highlights the survival strategies and resilience initiatives they have developed. Their determination drives us on, and this report issues recommendations to governments and the international community so that we can shift the tides. Defending press freedom is a collective imperative, from Goma to Kampala, from Kigali to Dar es Salaam, throughout the Great Lakes region.

Sadibou Marong,
Director of the RSF Sub-Saharan Africa Bureau

REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

April-July 1994 — **RWANDA**
Genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda. Radio-Télévision Libre Mille Collines (RTLM) plays an active role in the spread of hate and propaganda.

1996-1997 — **DRC**
First Congo War. Deposition of Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko, in which Rwanda and Uganda play a part.

1998 - 2003 — **DRC**
Second Congo War. Major regional conflict involving several African states. Armed groups in the eastern DRC proliferate.

6 May 2012 — **RDC**
Creation of the M23, a major player in the conflict in the eastern DRC and supported by Rwanda.
Resumption of the conflict in the east until 2013.

May 2015 — **BURUNDI**
Attempted coup d'état, persecution of media, exodus of journalists.

2020 — **UGANDA, TANZANIA**
COVID-19 pandemic. Violence against journalists covering the pandemic in Uganda. Tanzanian authorities impose news blackouts on the subject.

2022 — **DRC**
M23 military resurgence and takeover of several localities in eastern DRC, including Rutshuru and Kiwanja. Journalists exiled and displaced.

January 2025 — **DRC**
M23 takeover of Goma. News outlets are threatened and controlled. Journalists flee to Kinshasa, neighbouring cities and neighbouring countries.

29 October 2025 — **TANZANIA**
Presidential election in Tanzania. The opposition is systematically persecuted.

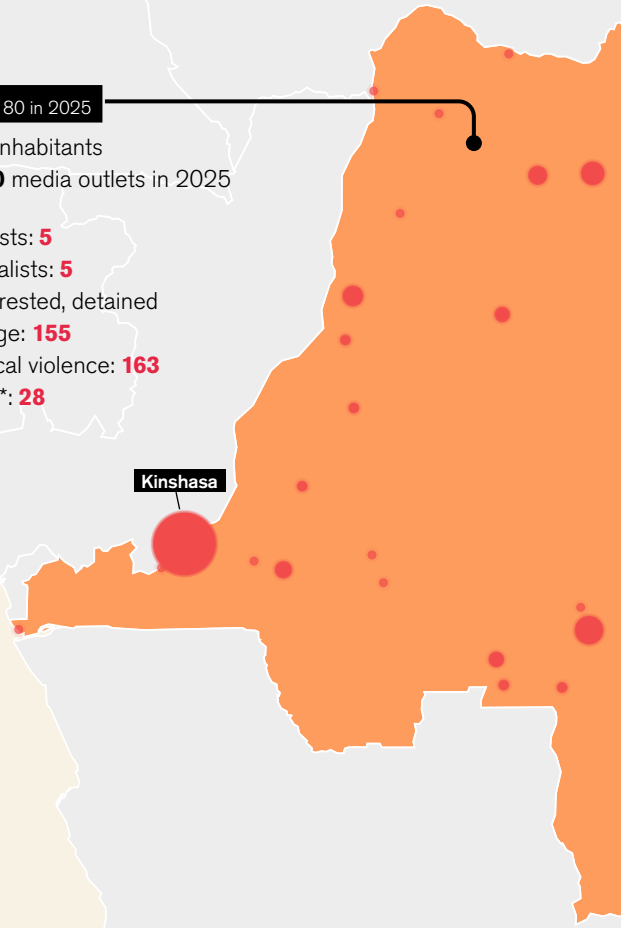
THE GREAT LAKES: AT LEAST 630 ACTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALISTS DOCUMENTED BETWEEN 2021 AND 2026

DRC

133rd/180 in 2025

115 million inhabitants
At least **4,700** media outlets in 2025

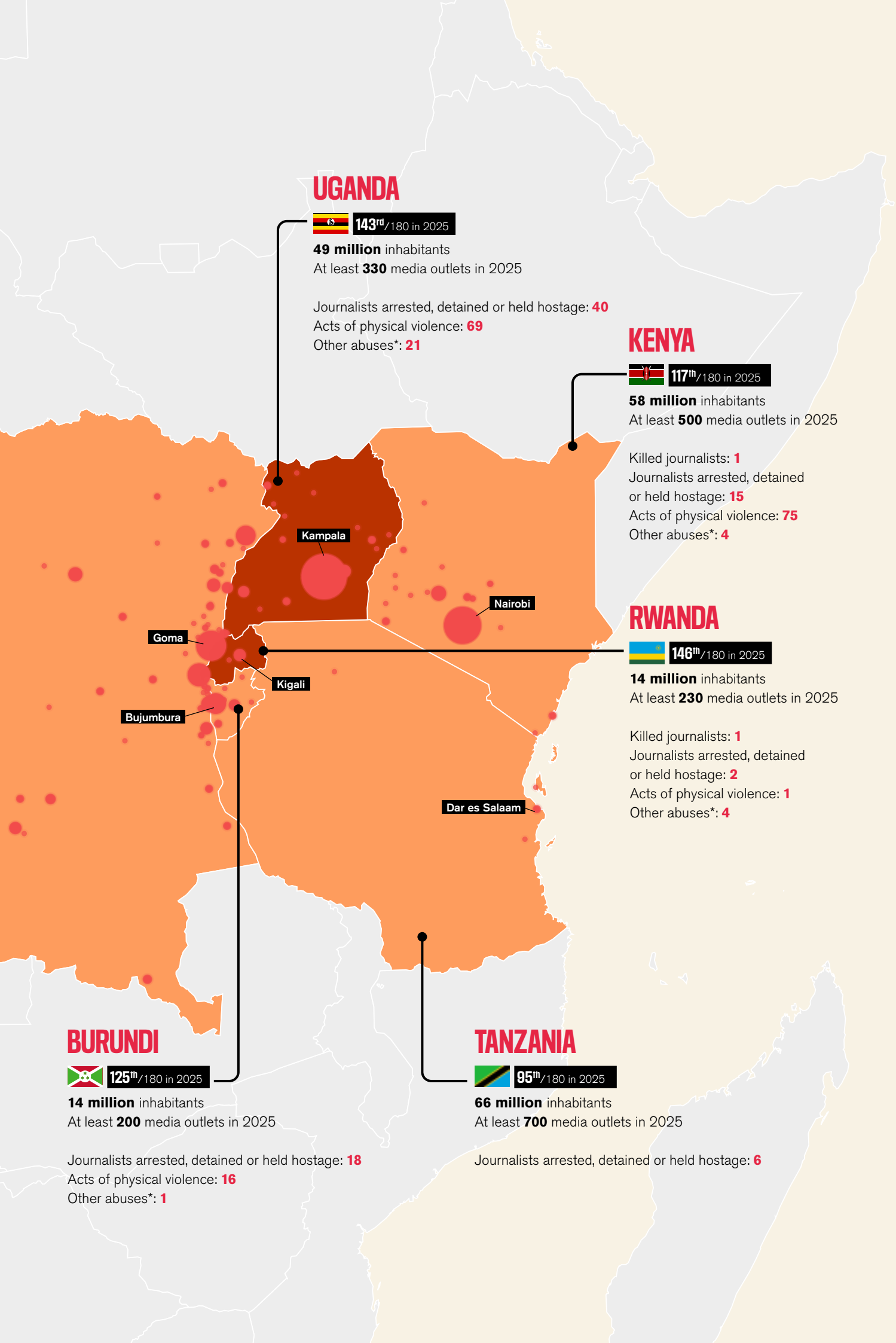
Killed journalists: **5**
Missing journalists: **5**
Journalists arrested, detained or held hostage: **155**
Acts of physical violence: **163**
Other abuses*: **28**



"DIFFICULT" SITUATION for press freedom according to the 2025 World Press Freedom Index

"VERY SERIOUS" SITUATION for press freedom according to the 2025 World Press Freedom Index

* The "other abuses" category includes: stolen equipment, refused accreditation, looted or forcibly shutdown newsrooms, abusive lawsuits.



UGANDA

143rd/180 in 2025

49 million inhabitants
At least **330** media outlets in 2025

Journalists arrested, detained or held hostage: **40**
Acts of physical violence: **69**
Other abuses*: **21**

KENYA

117th/180 in 2025

58 million inhabitants
At least **500** media outlets in 2025

Killed journalists: **1**
Journalists arrested, detained or held hostage: **15**
Acts of physical violence: **75**
Other abuses*: **4**

RWANDA

146th/180 in 2025

14 million inhabitants
At least **230** media outlets in 2025

Killed journalists: **1**
Journalists arrested, detained or held hostage: **2**
Acts of physical violence: **1**
Other abuses*: **4**

BURUNDI

125th/180 in 2025

14 million inhabitants
At least **200** media outlets in 2025

Journalists arrested, detained or held hostage: **18**
Acts of physical violence: **16**
Other abuses*: **1**

TANZANIA

95th/180 in 2025

66 million inhabitants
At least **700** media outlets in 2025

Journalists arrested, detained or held hostage: **6**

Since the M23 took up arms against the Armed Forces of the DRC again in 2021, media outlets in the country's eastern provinces have been subjected to unrelenting harassment.
© Guerchom Ndebo: AFP

1

THE MEDIA'S MANY ENEMIES

Being a journalist in the Great Lakes region means being exposed to many forms of violence, which have intensified and diversified due to the political and security crises that have plagued the region's countries for the past decade. Arrests, physical assaults, financial insecurity and laws that restrict rather than protect press freedom are just some of the obstacles confronting journalists in the region, who are increasingly forced to censor themselves.

1. PRESSURE FROM POLITICIANS AND SECURITY FORCES

POLICE VIOLENCE AND PHYSICAL ATTACKS: WHEN JOURNALISTS BECOME TARGETS

Journalists are being physically assaulted while doing their jobs in several of the region's countries. In Kenya, long considered a benchmark for press freedom in the area, at least seven journalists were attacked or targeted by security forces between June 2024 and March 2025 while covering protests. *Kameme TV* reporter **Catherine Wanjeri Kariuki** was hospitalised in July 2024 after being hit by three rubber bullets fired by a police officer.

In Uganda, at least 13 journalists sent to cover parliamentary by-elections in Kawempe, a northern district of the capital, Kampala, were severely beaten by security forces, including soldiers and the Joint Anti-Terrorist Task Force (JATT), in March 2025. Members of the JATT also detained two journalists from the media outlet *New Vision*, **Ibrahim Ruhweza** and **Isaac Nuwagaba**, in a van. The journalists told RSF they were beaten "with sticks and electric cables" and then forced to delete their video reports. Three weeks earlier, five journalists were attacked while covering the election campaign — even though they were wearing press vests. **Miracle Ibra**, a journalist with the privately-owned television channel *Top TV*, nearly lost sight in his left eye. Similarly, at least five media professionals were attacked by law enforcement or activists from September 2025 to January 2026, in the run-up to the general elections.

RSF also documented at least four press freedom violations in Burundi in the run-up to parliamentary and local elections in June 2025 that involved law enforcement or presumed members of "Imbonerakure," the youth wing of the ruling CNDD-FDD party. **Willy Kwizera**, a journalist for the independent radio station *Bonesha FM*, was abducted and beaten by Imbonerakure members who accused him of trying to smear the country's image as he reported on the living conditions of students at the University of Bujumbura. The Imbonerakure, self-proclaimed guardians of security on the university campus, demanded he sign a document that accused him of "disturbing the peace" and colluding with exiled activists. He signed, as it was the only way to stop the violence.

Congolese journalists are also often harassed by police, the National Intelligence Agency (ANR) and politicians and their supporters. They are targeted due to their work, particularly while covering protests. **Patient Ligodi**, the director of the news site *Actualite.cd* and a correspondent for *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*, was arrested by police while covering a protest in Kinshasa in September 2021. He was beaten, dragged along the ground and thrown into a vehicle that drove off with his legs hanging out of the open door. In May 2022 in Boende, in the northwestern province of Tshuapa, journalists **César Sabiti** of *Radio Tshuapa*, **Samuel Mutela** of *Radio Libéral FM* and **Junior Batungole** of *Radio Boende* were threatened by the ANR's local director and then detained, stripped and tortured after broadcasting a programme about irregularities in local secondary school graduation exams.

Mimi Etaka, the provincial director of the national radio and television broadcaster *RTNC* in the DRC's Équateur province, was beaten in February 2024 on the orders of provincial governer Bobo Boloko when he forced his way into the media outlet's premises with his bodyguards and ransacked its newsroom after wrongly

Demonstrators flee police during the "Gen Z" demonstration on 25 June 2025 in Nairobi (Kenya). © Michel Lunanga: Getty Images via AFP

A look back at...

Kenya: the trauma of a media failure in 2008

Violent protests left thousands dead in Kenya in late 2007 after the result of the presidential election was announced, which was won – not without irregularities – by the incumbent, President Mwai Kibaki. On 30 December, the information ministry's permanent secretary announced a ban on all live news coverage. Wachira Waruru, CEO of the Royal Media Services group and Chair of the Media Council of Kenya (MCK), described the decision at the time as "ridiculous and impossible to enforce." Despite the criticism, all outlets complied with the order except *Kiss FM* radio, which broadcast open-mic programmes. The information ministry finally lifted the ban on 4 February 2008, but newsrooms had given up, as several media executives acknowledged at the time. "The media did not pursue investigations into these events," said Kwendo Opanga, the Standard Group's editorial director. "We didn't write any articles on the subject, and this failure still haunts me today. We weren't at the forefront of the search for the truth. When we realised the results had been rigged, we didn't shed light on this anomaly." While the ban made a lasting impression on the media, it did not prevent the authorities from acting in a similar manner during a subsequent election. On 30 January 2018, following the latest presidential election, the Kenyan Communications Authority suspended *NTV*, *KTN*, *Citizen TV* and *Inooro TV* for an indefinite period after they broadcast opposition leader Raila Odinga's inauguration ceremony. The first two television channels were reinstated on 5 February, and the others on 8 February, following a high court ruling.

accusing her of refusing to broadcast government decrees. In June 2024, **Tatiana Osango**, a journalist for the private television channel *Réaco News* in Kinshasa, was beaten, slapped and stabbed in the thigh by men identified as ruling party allies, who accused her of criticising the president during an interview she gave to one of his opponents. More recently, in November 2025, **Caroline Ndoba**, *RTNC* provincial director in Gbadolite, a town in Mongala province, was beaten and threatened with a machete by residents while covering a fatal road accident.

Journalist Canary Mugume during the Kawempe parliamentary by-election in March 2025. © Canary Mugume

DETAINED JOURNALISTS: THE SHADOW OF POLITICAL PRESSURE

According to non-exhaustive figures from RSF, at least 494 journalists have been arrested in connection with their work in the Great Lakes region in the past ten years, 111 of whom were held for more than two days. Two are still behind bars in Rwanda. One of them, **Dieudonné Niyonsenga**, head of the Rwandan YouTube channel *Ishema TV*, is kept in appalling prison conditions, according to a 2024 report by the human rights organisation Human Rights Watch and the US public broadcaster *Voice of America (VOA)*. The journalist said he has no access to light and is subjected to frequent beatings. The reason for his seven-year prison sentence in 2021 is absurd: while on his way to cover a story, he was arrested for "contravening COVID-19 lockdown measures" and showing "false press cards" to the police. Known for his reporting in impoverished neighbourhoods, he had posted video interviews a few weeks before his arrest in which Rwandan soldiers were accused of theft and looting. The media regulatory body, the Rwanda Media Commission, does not consider YouTube channel owners to be journalists. In total, 17 journalists have been jailed in Rwanda since Paul Kagame took over in 2000.

Sandra Muhoza, a journalist for the online outlet *La Nova Burundi*, was arrested in Burundi on 13 April 2024 for sharing information in a private WhatsApp group for media professionals about an alleged distribution of weapons by the government. She was finally granted a provisional release on 4 March 2026 after being held for 685 days, but her appeal is still pending. Her 2024 arrest was followed by a string of unjust judicial decisions. After being sentenced on 16 December 2024 to 21 months in prison – 18 months for "undermining the integrity of the national territory" and three months for "racial aversion" – her appeal hearing was postponed three times. Then, in June 2025, the Mukaza court of appeal in Bujumbura, which was handling the case, declared itself incompetent to issue a ruling and referred the case to the courts in Ngozi, her place of residence. This lack of territorial jurisdiction should have automatically overturned both her initial conviction and the arrest warrant issued by the Mukaza prosecutor's

Burundian journalist Floriane Irangabiye greets members of her legal team as she leaves Bubanza prison following a presidential pardon, on 16 August 2024.
© Tchandrou Nitanga: AFP

office that had led to her detention. However, she remained in Mpimba central prison for more than three months before being transferred on 26 September 2025 to a jail in Ngozi, where the court sentenced her on 13 January 2026 to four years in prison and a fine of 200,000 BIF (about 60 EUR) for "undermining the integrity of the national territory" and "racial aversion."

Sandra Muhoza was the second woman journalist to receive a prison sentence in Burundi in less than two years; the first was *Radio Igicaniro* host **Floriane Irangabiye**, who was given a ten-year sentence in 2023 for "undermining the integrity of national territory." She was finally released under a presidential pardon after more than 700 days in detention. Known for her criticism of the Burundian authorities, she had been based in neighbouring Rwanda since 2015 but was arrested by intelligence agents while visiting Burundi on 30 August 2022.

According to RSF data, more than 50% of the journalists arrested in the Great Lakes region in the past ten years were arrested in the DRC, which counts at least 253 arrests and 69 detentions, 24 of them (nearly 35%) ordered by governors of several of the DRC's 26 provinces.

- In Équateur Province: **Steeve Mwanyo Iwewe**, the director of *Radio Télévision Sarah (RTS)*, was sentenced in March 2019 to a year in prison on the charge of "insulting authority" and was ordered to pay 200 USD (about 170 EUR) in damages to provincial governor Bobo Boloko Bolumbu. The court issued its decision two days after the journalist was arrested while covering a demonstration by employees of the province's environmental protection agency. His *RTS* colleague, **Chilassy Bolumbu**, spent over seven months in prison, from November 2021 to July 2022, after he was arrested while covering a peaceful protest.
- In Maniema province: **Dek'son Assani Kamango** of *Radio Omega* and the news site *Actualités Maniema* spent eight days in detention in February 2020 for nothing more than an online article critical of the governor of this eastern province.
- In Mongala province: *Radio Liberté Lisala* director and journalist **Erick Ngunde** spent three days in detention in February 2021 after hosting a political programme that brought interim governor Clémentine Sole storming into his office with about 20 police officers to have him arrested.
- In Maï-Ndombe province: **Blaise Mabala**, the coordinator of *Radio Même Morale FM* in the city of Inongo, was arrested twice in 2023 by a member of the National Intelligence Agency (ANR), which is responsible for national security. He spent more than four months in detention for broadcasting a programme and a song in which listeners criticised the province's governor.

"Truth stands the test of time. Let professionalism be our bulwark."

© Arsène Mpiana Monkwe - AFP

Stanis Bujakera Tshiamala

"The suffering is constant in Makala prison. It was designed for 1,500 inmates during the colonial era and now houses more than 15,000, crammed together in inhumane conditions – no drinking water, an erratic electricity supply, food served only once a day, virtually no sanitation and no access to medical care. I saw inmates die. Internal security is partly entrusted to inmates, leading to power struggles and violence. I also witnessed endemic corruption. Makala is a veritable hell where human rights are trampled underfoot. It is not a prison; it is a detention centre that resembles a concentration camp. I left Makala after receiving an unjust sentence. Independent journalism continues to be a struggle in the DRC. My message to journalists is this: never give up, never betray, never feel intimidated and never yield to any pressure. Truth withstands the test of time; let professionalism be our bulwark."

Stanis Bujakera Tshiamala, editor of the news site *Actualité.cd*, was arrested at Kinshasa airport on 8 September 2023 after the publication of an article in the magazine *Jeune Afrique*, for which he is a correspondent. Signed not by him but by "the editorial staff," it discussed the role of the DRC's military intelligence services in the death of opposition leader Cherubin Okende. After being held arbitrarily for 192 days, he was sentenced on 18 March 2024 to six months in prison and a fine of 1 million CDF (about 375 EUR) and was released the next day.

SPOTLIGHT ON BURUNDI

KEY EVENTS

2015: a devastating year for Burundi's media

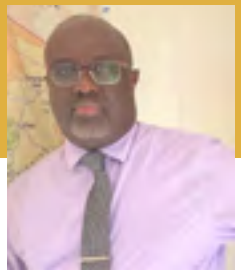
In 2015, after an attempted coup against President Pierre Nkurunziza, who wanted to run for a third term that was deemed unconstitutional, the president launched a crackdown on the media. On 14 May 2015, fighting broke out between government forces and putschists near the headquarters of *RTNB*, the national radio and television broadcaster, which went off air before resuming its programming under the control of the government. The night before, government forces had attacked several private radio stations, including the popular *Radio Publique Africaine (RPA)*, which was hit by a rocket and set on fire. Accused of being close to the opposition, *RPA* had been closed at the end of April before reopening on 13 May. *Radio-Television Renaissance (RTR)*, the leading private radio station, and *Radio Bonesha FM* were also stormed by security forces. Ten years later, neither *RTR* nor *RPA* has reopened. *Rema FM*, which supports the government, and *Isanganiro* were allowed to broadcast under strict conditions in February 2016. In September 2017, the National Council for Communication (CNC) stripped *RPA*, *RTR* and *Bonesha FM* of their operating licences, but reinstated *Bonesha FM*'s license in February 2021. Meanwhile, the website of the country's most widely read weekly newspaper, *Iwacu*, was blocked from 2017 to December 2022.

Four Iwacu journalists jailed in 2019

Christine Kamikazi, **Agnès Ndirubusa**, **Térence Mpozenzi** and **Egide Harerimana** were arrested in Musigati, a commune in northwestern Burundi, while covering an incursion by a Burundian armed group based in the eastern DRC that was opposed to then-president Pierre Nkurunziza. Charged with "complicity in undermining state security" and convicted of "attempted complicity in undermining state security" despite lack of evidence, they were sentenced on 30 January 2020 to two and a half years in prison. All of them were also ordered to pay a fine of 1 million BIF (482 EUR). They were released under a presidential pardon on 24 December after 430 days in detention.

Iwacu journalists Christine Kamikazi, Agnès Ndirubusa, Térence Mpozenzi and Egide Harerimana on 30 December 2019 in Bubanza, Burundi. © Iwacu.

"In the Great Lakes region, governments are weakening independent media"



© Antoine Kaburahe

Antoine Kaburahe

Antoine Kaburahe worked at Burundi's national radio and television broadcaster, *RTNB*, before moving to privately-owned media and then being forced into exile. On returning to Burundi, he founded the media outlet *Iwacu* – which means "in our home" in Kirundi – before being forced into exile again. He was decorated by the City of Paris for his journalistic work in 2016 and is a member of the RSF Board of Directors.

What is the situation like for journalists in Burundi?

Being a journalist in Burundi means being surrounded by a hostile legal framework, a violent recent history that saw media outlets torched in May 2015, journalists forced into exile — some with heavy sentences — and tragedies such as the murder of Jean Bigirimana and the detention of our *Iwacu* colleagues [see the Key Events section]. For my part, after an initial ten-year exile until 2008, I had to leave again in 2015 because of trumped-up accusations of complicity in the coup.

What have been the major stages in the decline of press freedom in Burundi?

I began my journalism career in 1992, during the "democratisation" era. Before that, the media just supported what the government did, and journalists were regarded as "civil servants." I left the government radio station – I deliberately avoid the term "public radio" – to join the first independent radio station, a moment of hope that was quickly dashed by the October 1993 crisis and the elected president's assassination. I could describe this period by talking about a few key moments. First, the period of fragile foundations (2000-2014): after the Arusha Agreement [the Arusha Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi was signed in 2000 to end years of civil war], hope was reborn, but journalists quickly encountered limitations, particularly regarding security issues. The 2013 media law established the legal basis for future repression. Then came the cataclysmic year of 2015, which marked an irreversible change. Independent radio stations were burned, attacked and looted. More than a hundred journalists went into exile. A dark decade followed (2015-2025): the *Iwacu* website was blocked, foreign radio stations were silenced and journalists were arrested. The convictions of Floriane Irangabiye and Sandra Muhoza confirmed the justice system was being used to silence the media.

In your view, is this a regional trend in the Great Lakes region?

Violence against journalists in the region is not accidental. With the relative exception of Kenya, where strong media groups exist, this repression is the result of a political choice: independent media are seen as a threat to the government, and almost any criticism is viewed as a destabilisation attempt and is criminalised in the name of national security. This conflictual relationship has been reinforced by exploiting violent memories – 1972 in Burundi [when, after Hutu extremist groups massacred Tutsis by in the south of the country, the Tutsi government launched a major crackdown on Hutus, resulting in 80,000 to 200,000 deaths] and the 1994 genocide against Tutsis in Rwanda – and by a narrative around national unity that disqualifies all sensitive investigations. The law is instrumentalised and checks and balances are absent. The consequences are lasting: an information desert, exiled journalists, impunity and subservient journalism.

KILLED AND MISSING JOURNALISTS: THE CASES OF JEAN BIGIRIMANA, JOHN WILLIAMS NTWALI AND ARSHAD SHARIF

Over the past ten years, ten journalists have been killed and five have gone missing while working in the Great Lakes region (seven have been killed and two gone missing in the DRC alone). The cases of **Jean Bigirimana**, **John Williams Ntwali** and **Arshad Sharif** are especially emblematic of the impunity for these crimes that has persisted in the region over the past decade.

Colleagues pay tribute to Jean Bigirimana, a journalist who disappeared in 2016.
© Iwacu

- **Jean Bigirimana in Burundi**: the *Iwacu* reporter disappeared on 22 July 2016. According to several witnesses, the 37-year-old journalist was on his way to meet a source in Muramvya province, about 50 km from his home in the economic capital Bujumbura, when he was arrested by members of the National Intelligence Service (SNR) and forcibly taken away in a vehicle. The authorities initially denied the arrest, then briefly acknowledged it, and then retracted their statement that he had been detained. In the days that followed, two decomposing bodies were found not far from where he was last seen, one of them decapitated. His wife was shown the bodies but was unable to identify either as her husband because of their condition. No DNA analysis was ever carried out despite formal requests. Since then, no serious, transparent investigation has been conducted into the crime.

The day of journalist John Williams Ntwali's funeral. © DR

- **John Williams Ntwali in Rwanda**: on 18 January 2023, the 43-year-old editor of *The Chronicles* newspaper was killed instantly when struck by a vehicle as he rode a motorcycle taxi. Known for investigating government actions and human rights violations, he had been targeted for more than a decade by the authorities, who had arbitrarily detained him and repeatedly threatened him. Following a swift, closed-door trial – a rare occurrence for road accident cases – the driver responsible for his death was sentenced to nothing more than a fine. The court's decision was based on an investigation that was never made public.

Members of the Shiite Ulema Council light candles in a tribute to Arshad Sharif, a Pakistani journalist killed in Kenya in October 2022.
© Rizwan Tabassum: AFP

- **Arshad Sharif in Kenya**: the 49-year-old Pakistani journalist, an anchor on Pakistan's *ARY News* television channel, was shot dead by Kenyan police officers on the night of 23 October 2022 while driving near Nairobi, where he had fled from Pakistan for security reasons. After initially explaining the shooting as a case of mistaken identity while police tried to intercept a stolen vehicle at a traffic stop, the authorities later claimed that the police had opened fire in response to shots fired from the vehicle. Both versions were met with widespread scepticism. In July 2024, the Kenyan high court ruled the use of force was unlawful and ordered compensation for his family, but no police officers were prosecuted. Both the Kenyan and Pakistani investigations were criticised for being inconsistent, biased and lacking international cooperation.

Tutsi refugees are evacuated on 18 June 1994 by UN soldiers from the Mille Collines Hotel in Kigali. © Abdelhak Senna - AFP

A LOOK BACK AT...

Hate media in Rwanda

Founded by allies of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana in April 1993, Radio-Télévision Libre Mille Collines (RTLM) broadcast for the first time on 8 July of that year. The country's only privately-owned radio station, it became the main news outlet in the following months. Its rhetoric became increasingly radical, culminating in calls for murder on 6 April 1994, just hours after the plane crash that killed the Rwandan and Burundian presidents.

RTLM issued lists of people to be killed, offered bounties for bodies, and constantly referred to Tutsis as "cockroaches." At the end of April, it announced that 5 May – the day of the Rwandan president's funeral – was the deadline for completing the "clean-up" of Tutsis and members of the opposition. It also threatened organisations that denounced the ongoing genocide, such as Doctors Without Borders (MSF), and announced that it would offer a reward to the first militiaman who "brought back the arms of a white man."

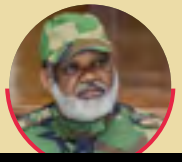
The radio station ceased broadcasting three months and 800,000 deaths later, at the time of the fall of the capital, Kigali — except for a brief return to the airwaves in July 1994. The weekly newspaper Kangura (which means "wake him up!") was another outlet that incited hatred. In December 1990, it published the "Ten Hutu Commandments," an openly racist diatribe against the Tutsi. Kangura's propagandistic mission was clearly spelled out when it called itself "the organ of the majority" under its name on its frontpage.

Several RTLM presenters and shareholders were convicted of "direct and public incitement to commit genocide." RTLM founders Ferdinand Nahimana and Jean-Bosco Barayagwiza were sentenced by the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to 30 and 32 years in prison, respectively, in 2007. The radio station's presenter, Valérie Bemeriki, is serving a life sentence in Kigali Central Prison, where she has been held since 1999. Kangura founder Hassan Ngeze was sentenced to 35 years in prison in 2007.

IN FOCUS

WHO ARE THE REGION'S PRESS FREEDOM PREDATORS?

From government leaders to the spokespersons of armed groups, multiple actors are responsible for suppressing news and information, both directly and indirectly. Here is an overview of the main perpetrators in a region where journalists pay a high cost for keeping the public informed.



Corneille Nangaa Yobeluo
© Cyrile Ndegeya ANADOLU - AFP

Willy Ngoma
Alexis Huguet - AFP

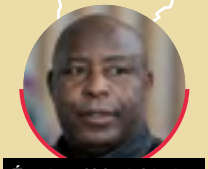
Paul Kagame
Guillem Sartorio - AFP

William Ruto
Amanuel Sileshi - AFP

Yoweri Museveni
Isaac Kasamani - AFP

Lawrence Kanyuka Kingston
Alexis Huguet - AFP

Félix Tshisekedi
Saul Loeb - AFP



Évariste Ndayishimiye
Amanuel Sileshi - AFP

Samia Suluhu Hassan
Daniel Pier - NurPhoto - AFP

KEY ACTORS

M23

The **March 23 Movement (M23)** is an armed group operating in eastern DRC, created in 2012 by former members of the armed group called the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP). It became militarily active again in 2021. The M23 demands respect for the 2009 peace agreements and better political and social representation for local communities. Several United Nations reports condemn Rwanda's support for the M23, which is accused of many acts of violence against civilians.

AFC/M23

The **Congo River Alliance/M23 (AFC/M23)** is a political-military coalition formed in 2023 with the M23 as its main armed force. This alliance brings together several armed groups and local political actors, giving it both a military and political dimension. It aims to coordinate M23 operations with other forces in order to strengthen their influence in eastern DRC and advance broader political demands on the central government.
In this report, unless otherwise stated, the term "M23" refers to the political-military organisation operating under the name of AFC/M23 when discussing events that took place from 2023 onward.

DRC

Corneille Nangaa Yobeluo: Formerly president of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), he became an opponent of the government before creating the Congo River Alliance (AFC) in 2023. He is the subject of an international arrest warrant and has been charged with high treason, war crimes and insurrection. According to Journaliste en Danger (JED) – a Congolese NGO and RSF partner – 80% of attacks against the media in the DRC in 2025 took place in areas controlled by the AFC/M23.

Lawrence Kanyuka Kingston: This M23 civilian spokesperson was a member of the Union for the Congolese Nation (UNC), the party of opposition leader Vital Kamerhe, until he was expelled in 2013 for collusion with armed groups. He helps lead the charge in the AFC/M23's attempts to control the media in occupied territories.

Willy Ngoma: The M23's late military spokesperson, he was killed on 24 February 2026. He used threats and force to silence critics, including journalists, and was on the list of individuals sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council.

Félix Tshisekedi: President of the DRC since 2019, he promised to turn the media into a true fourth estate when he took office, but journalists are still being arrested, assaulted and threatened, and media outlets are still being shut down and looted, especially in conflict zones in the east of the country. According to RSF data, over 50% of the arrests of journalists in the Great Lakes region in the past ten years took place in the DRC.

Rwanda

Paul Kagame: The president of a post-genocide Rwanda since 2000 — he was re-elected in 2024 with more than 99% of the vote — he runs a country where press freedom is virtually non-existent. The media landscape is strictly controlled and journalists critical of the authorities risk imprisonment or enforced disappearance, or have to flee abroad. Legacy media outlets, which are mostly linked to the authorities, are regarded as a government mainstay rather than a counterweight. Accounts of the conflict in eastern DRC that differ from the Rwandan government's narrative are systematically suppressed and the Rwandan authorities are accused of supporting the M23.

Uganda

Yoweri Museveni: President of Uganda since 1986, he has repeatedly displayed a marked hostility towards privately-owned outlets and social media, accusing journalists of sabotaging the country. In 2018, he described the staff of the country's leading newspaper, the *Daily Monitor*, as "evil" and threatened to "do something about it" if the paper kept talking about the country's rising debt. Self-censorship is common and is fuelled by the concentration of power: the First Lady is also Minister of Education and Sports, while her eldest son heads the army. The latter, who is known for controversial social media posts, warned the media not to question him about governance issues, threatening journalists and accusing reporters at the *Daily Monitor* of being "terrorists" who have "always" undermined the government.

Burundi

Évariste Ndayishimiye: When this former media boss was elected as president in 2020, hopes were high. However, they were dashed when journalists' working conditions deteriorated again in 2024 and 2025, as the security apparatus continued intimidating news outlets and imprisoning reporters.

Kenya

William Ruto: Kenya has one of the most dynamic media landscapes in the region, but tensions with the press have increased since William Ruto became president in 2022. Security forces attacked journalists during protests against the government's finance bill in June 2024 and again during protests in July 2025. The government has also resorted to internet shutdowns and putting financial pressure on the press.

Tanzania

Samia Suluhu Hassan: When she took office following the death of President John Magufuli in 2021, she initially allowed several newspapers banned by her predecessor to reopen. However, as the 2025 elections approached, her administration tightened its control over the press by maintaining repressive laws, suspending publications critical of the government, cutting off internet access and enabling violence against journalists.

2. A HOSTILE LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE ENVIRONMENT

THE LAWS RESTRICTING MEDIA FREEDOM

Legislation in the region is extremely repressive for the media. The six Great Lakes countries criminalise journalists and their content for:

- undermining the the integrity of the national territory or state security
- insulting the head of state (except in Kenya)

And most of these countries criminalise the dissemination of false information and defamation. The vague wording of these laws leaves the authorities a great deal of room for interpretation.

DRC: The new press law passed in 2023 – revising the 1996 law from Marshal Mobutu's dictatorship – does not explicitly abolish prison sentences for press offences. Journalists continue to be exposed to prosecution for offences such as defamation, spreading false rumours, insulting authorities or endangering state security, and pretrial detention is frequently used as punishment.
Hallmark case: Bujakera Tshiamala's conviction on charges of "counterfeiting," "spreading false rumours," "using forged documents," "falsifying documents," and "transmitting erroneous messages." He was detained for more than six months. The prosecutor requested a 20-year prison sentence at the end of his Kafkaesque trial (see page 10).

Burundi: Despite the new press law enacted in 2024 that revised the 2018 law, several press-related offences carry prison sentences, especially in cases linked to national security.
Hallmark cases: Sandra Muhoza, arbitrarily sentenced to 21 months in prison in 2024 for "undermining national territorial integrity" and "racial hatred," and **Floriane Irangabiye**, sentenced in 2023 to ten years in prison for "undermining the integrity of national territory." Seven journalists in exile, including the directors of four privately-owned radio stations, were wrongfully accused of complicity in Gen. Godefroid Niyombare's 2015 coup attempt and were sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment in 2020. They had already fled the country – some in 2015 – to escape criminal prosecution on charges such as "undermining state security," "participating in a coup", "insurrection" and "spreading false information."

Rwanda: Defamation has been decriminalised, but the 2018 Penal Code reform maintained prison sentences for insulting and defaming the head of state via the press. Journalists can be prosecuted under charges unrelated to their professional activity or because they are deemed to be activists – a pretext that is often used to legally harass them.
Hallmark case: Dieudonné Niyonsenga, the head of *Ishema TV*, was arbitrarily sentenced to seven years in prison in 2021 for "falsifying documents," "illegally exercising the profession of journalist," and "obstructing public works."

Uganda: Threatening national security, defamation, the publication of fake news and insulting the head of state continue to be criminal offences punishable by imprisonment.
Hallmark case: Norman Tumuhimbise and **Faridah Bikobere** of *The Alternative Digitalk TV* were charged with "cyberstalking" and "offensive communication" against President Yoweri Museveni and spent ten days in pretrial detention in March 2022.

Tanzania: The 2016 Media Services Act, enacted under President Magufuli, allows the government to suspend newspapers. Since the 2020 COVID-19 crisis, publishing information "related to a deadly disease" or disseminating foreign media content without government approval has been banned.
Hallmark case: Talib Ussi Hamad, a reporter for the newspaper *Tanzania Daima*, was suspended for mentioning a patient with COVID-19 (see page 17).

The Kenyan exception: Media laws do not directly provide for prison sentences for journalists. But certain standard offences (such as criminal defamation and incitement to violence) can be applied to journalists under the Penal Code. In March 2026, the Kenyan Court of Appeal struck down provisions of the 2018 Cybercrimes Act that made publishing "false information" punishable by imprisonment. However, the legislation's other articles remain in force, including one that provides for up to ten years in prison for cyberharassment.

In Kenya, Daily Nation threatened by Safaricom

When *Daily Nation*, Kenya's most widely read newspaper, ran an investigative story on 29 October 2024 accusing Safaricom, the country's biggest private-sector telecoms operator, of involvement in widespread surveillance, the company pulled out all the stops to bury the story's claims. In a letter seen by RSF, Safaricom threatened the newspaper's parent company, the Nation Media Group (NMG) and the journalists involved in the investigation with legal action if the story was not taken down and a correction published. The company then withdrew its advertising from NMG's media outlets – a significant move as it is one of the country's biggest advertisers, with an advertising budget of nearly 5 million USD (4.3 million EUR) a month. The company followed through with its threats when NMG investigative reporter **Robert Wanjala Kituyi** filed a request under Kenya's Access to Information Act in November 2024 for clarification about cooperation between the police and Safaricom. Instead of responding, Safaricom filed a complaint with the Nairobi High Court. The case is still ongoing.

A LOOK BACK AT...

The impossible coverage of COVID-19 in Tanzania

© Gado (Kenya) - Cartooning for Peace

In 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 crisis, Tanzania stood out for the severity of its crackdown on media outlets that criticised the government's management of the pandemic, at a time when then-President John Magufuli was arguing that Tanzanians needed to "pray to God rather than rely on face masks." As early as April 2020, the government stopped reporting infections and deaths in the country, referring openly to a "Western plot." An editor contacted by RSF at the time confirmed that no data was being provided. "According to the authorities, no one has the virus," she said. Media outlets that broached the issue, including *Mwananchi*, the country's leading Swahili-language news daily, were suspended. *Star Media*, *Multichoice Tanzania* and *Azam Digital Broadcast* were fined and forced to apologise after airing a report criticising the president for not imposing a lockdown. **Talib Ussi Hamad**, a reporter for the newspaper *Tanzania Daima*, was suspended for six months in April 2020, for mentioning the virus in a story. In July, a new law tightened these restrictions by making it illegal to publish anything about the pandemic without approval from a state official. The following month, a new regulation banned the publication of "information about the outbreak of a deadly or contagious disease" in Tanzania and elsewhere "without the approval of the respective authorities." Broadcasting content from foreign outlets also required authorisation, tying the hands of the Tanzanian radio stations that retransmit programmes from international broadcasters such as the *BBC*, *VOA* and *RFI*.

WHEN REGULATORS RAMP UP MEDIA SUSPENSIONS

Regulators are much more likely to impose arbitrary suspensions on media outlets during elections or major protests.

- **Uganda**: In 2019, the Ugandan Communications Commission (UCC) ordered the suspension of 39 journalists from 13 radio and television stations for their coverage of the arrest of opposition leader Bobi Wine, a candidate in the 2021 presidential election. In a crude attempt to stifle coverage of the opposition, these media outlets were accused of reporting the news in a manner "likely to create public insecurity or violence." In January 2026, less than 48 hours before general elections, the UCC ordered that internet access and access to certain mobile phone services be suspended on the grounds of combatting disinformation.
- **DRC**: The High Council for Broadcasting and Communication (CSAC) often suspends programmes critical of authorities. For example, it suspended the show "Bosolo na Politik" on the popular channel *Bosolo TV* for a month in May 2024 after the show's host, **Israël Mutombo**, made remarks considered critical of a member of parliament. Since the resurgence of the conflict in the east, the CSAC has taken a harder line with journalists and media outlets that quote or interview the M23 (see page 30).
- **Tanzania**: The Tanzanian Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) arbitrarily suspended the digital licences of the newspapers owned by Mwananchi Communications Limited – including *The Citizen*, *Mwananchi* and *Mwanaspoti* – for a month in October 2024 after the *The Citizen* posted an animated clip on social media showing Tanzania's president watching statements about enforced disappearances on television. The TCRA accused the media outlets of publishing "prohibited content" that could "disturb the public order" or "ridicule, abuse or harm the reputation, prestige or status" of Tanzania. Prior to these suspensions, President Samia Suluhu Hassan had promised to respect press freedom and, at the beginning of her term, ordered the reinstatement of the operating licences of four media outlets – *Mawio*, *Daima*, *Mwanahalisi* and *Mseto* – that had been suspended in 2016 and 2017.
- **Kenya**: The Communications Authority of Kenya (CAK) suspended all live radio and television broadcasts during major street protests in June 2025 against police brutality, corruption and tax measures seen as unfair. The suspension angered broadcasters and was lifted the very next day.

ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL OVER FOREIGN MEDIA

"It's becoming increasingly difficult to obtain accreditation in the region," says **Noé Michalon**, a French journalist with *Africa Intelligence* who specialises in East Africa. "It can cost several hundred dollars in Uganda and Tanzania. It's a laborious and discouraging process. And there's a kind of race to the bottom, with countries copying each other. In Tanzania, during the October 2025 election, foreign journalists were not granted accreditation, making their legal presence impossible. Today, there are almost no foreign correspondents left in Dar es Salaam."

Rwanda carefully selects the journalists allowed to enter its territory. In Burundi, the National Communication Council (CNC) is also very selective about who gets accreditation, except for official visits supervised by the authorities. This trend is also beginning to be felt in Kenya, the main base for news outlets covering the region. Its government is gradually changing the rules for obtaining work permits. "Costs have increased sharply," added Noé Michalon, who has been based in Nairobi since 2022. "It

was initially doubled, and now we pay four times more than two years ago, or about 4,000 euros per year. Imagine the enormous expense this represents for freelance journalists."

A foreign journalist who has worked in Uganda and requested anonymity told RSF about a regional trend: "In Uganda, accreditation procedures are lengthy, opaque, sometimes arbitrary and obtaining accreditation guarantees nothing, since it can be suspended without explanation. Sometimes, visas are deliberately delayed to the point where any coverage becomes impossible. These decisions are increasingly overt. Governments feel less and less obligated to justify them, in a global context where sovereignty is often invoked to legitimise these practices. Added to this are more indirect restrictions: international correspondents seeking one-year accreditation are required to obtain residence permits, which are often selective and expensive. This automatically limits reporting opportunities, especially for freelance journalists who wish to work in several countries in the region."

Even when journalists are accredited, the battle is not over, especially during elections. *France 24*'s East Africa correspondent, **Bastien Renouil**, was forced to leave Uganda shortly after arriving, at the time of President Museveni's reelection in January 2026. Although he had a valid work permit and accreditation, immigration officials said he lacked authorisation from the defence ministry, yet he had never been informed of this requirement. Two French journalists for *RFI* encountered similar restrictions. One was turned back at the border, the other was put on a flight back, despite having valid documents. A journalist familiar with Uganda who requested anonymity described these practices as a form of "administrative censorship" of the media.

In November 2022, shortly after joining the British news agency *Reuters*, French reporter **Sonia Rolley** was expelled from the DRC despite having a temporary residence permit. A year earlier, she had made a significant contribution to the "Congo Hold-up" investigation into the alleged embezzlement of a vast amount of public funds. "The pressure applied to foreign media reporters, whether Congolese or foreign, is extremely intense," she said. "This level of restrictions has rarely been seen outside election periods."

Colette Braeckman: 40 years of journalism in the Great Lakes region

© Gérald Garitan

Colette Braeckman

Colette Braeckman is a Belgian journalist and writer who specialises in Central Africa. A senior correspondent for the Belgian daily *Le Soir* for many years, she has covered news from the Great Lakes region for several decades, particularly in the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi.

Looking back over your career, how would you describe the evolution of press freedom in the Great Lakes region?
When I first became interested in the region, Zaire was under Mobutu's rule. The press was controlled. In the early 1980s, there were attempts to liberalise the press. I reported on this in Belgian outlets. In the 1990s, with the advent of a multi-party system, newspapers with a freer tone began to appear. At the time, news mainly came from these publications and a few foreign radio stations such as *RFI* or the *BBC*. Then, with the arrival of the internet in the 2000s, there was a boom in independent radio stations. Today, the situation is very different; everyone gets their news on their mobile phones. Thirty years ago, people in Kinshasa were unaware of what was happening in Kivu. For example, people in Kinshasa knew very little about the 1994 Rwandan genocide and its consequences, and were unaware of the reality of the exodus of Hutu refugees, as the local press couldn't get to the scene. Foreign radio stations were giving their own accounts. In the 1990s, the only radio station broadcasting from the ground was that of the United Nations, MONUSCO – a reliable source, but the only one. Things changed when independent radio stations sprang up across the country, particularly on the border in Bukavu and Goma, and broadcast nationwide. Congolese people were then able to express themselves en masse in the media. Today, the country's population can find out in real time what is happening in Goma, Bukavu… And now that news is more accessible, it has a political impact in what is a vast country. Being informed from east to west, in real time, has strengthened a sense of belonging, a Congolese national consciousness. This carries weight on the political scene and in the negotiations taking place.

Across the Great Lakes region, would you say that news remains heavily controlled by political regimes and that working as a journalist there is particularly risky?
That is very true, especially in Burundi and Rwanda. In both these countries, information remains more tightly controlled than elsewhere. In Rwanda, anyone who shares news can face significant risks. Journalists have been killed in the country. It's the same in Burundi. These are systems where the state controls and punishes. These are small countries where identifying sources of information is easy, and they can be silenced.

How can foreign outlets cover the region?
The authorities would very much like to control the foreign press. To gain access to the country, you must apply for accreditation, which is very expensive, and you must be sponsored by a media outlet that requests your accreditation. It is more difficult for a freelance journalist, without a sponsor, to obtain it.

Beyond security issues, what else threatens journalists' work?
The material and economic aspects. The precarious living conditions of local journalists are a real cause for concern. I salute their courage: they often work in extremely difficult situations, both in terms of security and finances. Many cannot afford to send their children to school, see a doctor or even go to hospital. And yet, they continue to do their job. These material constraints are just as significant as physical threats.

3. THE ECONOMIC BURDEN ON JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA

THE FRAGILITY OF THE NEWS MARKET

In the Great Lakes region, being a journalist often means working for media outlets with limited resources and which sometimes lack a robust infrastructure. To illustrate the reality of reporting in these conditions, RSF is highlighting the first-hand accounts of journalists from the region's six countries. While their stories do not reflect the full range or diversity of individual career paths, they nonetheless provide a concrete insight into the overall climate.

"Journalists are among the lowest-paid professionals, especially those working for radio and television. Many work without contracts. The average salary of a journalist in Uganda is about 250 dollars [215 EUR] a month. The majority of Ugandan journalists are freelancers who earn per story. I am one of them. So, it's hard to determine their exact earnings, as that depends on the number of stories published each month. How much I earn is also difficult to determine because it depends on how many stories are published in a month. In all my years as a journalist, I have never earned one million shillings [230 euros] in a single month. When I work extremely hard, the most I can earn is about 500,000 shillings [115 euros]. However, my daily expenses average 30,000 shillings [7 euros] which amounts to about 900,000 shillings [207 euros] a month. This money goes toward breakfast, lunch and transport. I mainly do investigative journalism, which is particularly challenging. Such stories demand a lot of time and money. While media houses do contribute funds to execute these stories, the budgets are often limited. I recall traveling to the Kalangala Islands [in northwestern Lake Victoria] to investigate the trafficking of young girls. I was given 300,000 shillings [69 EUR] for three days, only to realise upon arrival that the amount could barely cover accommodation. I still had to pay for food and transport. I ended up using my own money. Being a Ugandan journalist therefore requires deep passion. If you are driven primarily by money, you will not survive in this profession."

Uganda
"If you are driven by money, you won't survive in this profession"

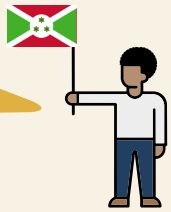
"Most journalists earn less than 500,000 shillings a month [168 EUR], and only a small percentage earn more than 2,000,000 shillings a month [670 EUR]. Correspondents and freelancers have no set salary and can go months without pay. They earn between 1,000 and 5,000 shillings per published article [35 cents to 1.68 EUR], which forces them to find other sources of income to survive."

Tanzania
"Some journalists can go months without pay"

"You don't make a living wage from journalism in the DRC. More than 80 per cent of journalists work without a contract, health insurance or any other insurance. Only journalists working for public media get a salary, which doesn't cover all their needs. As a result, most journalists have a second job. A distinction must also be made between urban and rural journalists. Those who earn nothing are above all those in rural areas. Local radio stations that can afford to pay their journalists give them between 40 and 80 dollars a month [35 to 70 EUR]. Some radio stations have motorcycles for getting to assignments. But fuel is a challenge. It's around three dollars [2.50 EUR] for two litres. For radio stations with no transportation, journalists have to pay for taxis. A meal costs around five dollars [4.30 EUR] a day, and between two and three dollars for transport."

DRC
"Most journalists have a second job"

"The financial situation of Burundian journalists is very precarious, with an average monthly salary of less than 600,000 Burundian francs [174 EUR]. Many live in outlying neighbourhoods, spending half their salary on rent, a quarter on transport and the rest on food, often on credit. Media outlets rarely provide vehicles for reporting, forcing journalists to rely on public transport. Advertisers are scarce, and only a few correspondents for international media have better resources."

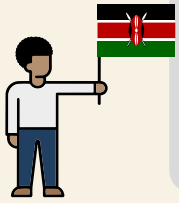


Burundi
"Journalists often live on credit"

"More than 80 per cent of journalists have no written contract. Entry-level journalists generally earn between 180 and 250 dollars [155 to 216 EUR] a month. In Kigali, the cost of living for a single person is estimated to be between 250 and 450 dollars [216 to 388 EUR] a month, which means journalists earning around 200 to 250 dollars [172 to 216 EUR] a month are below the subsistence level. The cost of living can be slightly lower outside the capital. This situation forces many of them to take on other jobs. One sign of the sectors' precariousness is freelancers, who were pejoratively nicknamed 'free lunch' as they covered events primarily to access the free meals. Event organisers have been restricting access for several years now. Only Rwanda's public news agency and broadcaster and a few privately-owned media outlets have some degree of financial stability, with regular salary payments."

Rwanda
"More than 80% of journalists have no written contract"

"Fewer than 10 per cent of those working for privately-owned media are full-time employees, with monthly salaries ranging from 450 to 600 dollars [388 to 518 EUR] at leading media companies such as Media Group, Radio Africa Group, Standard Group and Royal Media Services. At smaller media outlets, mainly radio stations and websites, salaries range from 115 to 150 dollars [100 to 130 EUR]. Due to the obligations associated with permanent contracts (taxes and pension and social security contributions), most smaller media outlets prefer short-term contracts. Low salaries mean it is hard for journalists to make a living in Nairobi. Modest housing costs around 150 dollars [130 EUR], a meal costs around three to five dollars [2.50 to 4.30 EUR], while transport costs around 50 dollars [43 EUR] a month. Lacking resources, journalists live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, eat cheaply and have to pay for their own work-related travel."



Kenya
"Lacking resources, journalists live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods."

A group of Congolese men listening to the radio in Goma in 2011. © Simon Maina: AFP

THE LACK OF TECHNICAL AND LOGISTICAL RESOURCES

While the region is rich in energy resources, its media outlets face critical logistical challenges, including fuel shortages and limited access to the internet and electricity. In Burundi, a fuel crisis has dragged on for nearly five years. In fact, the reason repeatedly cited for postponing journalist **Sandra Muhoza**'s court hearings was a lack of fuel to transport the journalist from prison to court. Some media are forced to smuggle in fuel from Uvira, a city in eastern DRC, where 20 litres can cost up to 50 USD [43 EUR]. Others abandon the idea of sending their journalists into the field altogether. The fuel shortages are compounded by chronic power outages, especially in Bujumbura. "Broadcasts are suspended and news programmes interrupted due to the lack of electricity," says Eloge Willy Kaneza, the coordinator of SOS Médias Burundi (SMB), an independent Burundian journalists' collective. "Even media outlets with generators are struggling to operate them due to the fuel shortages." As a result, the independent weekly newspaper *Iwacu* was unable to print in August 2025 and even the pro-government *Rema TV* had to suspend broadcasting at around this time.

In the DRC, many community radio stations are located in areas where access to electricity is difficult. "In Butembo [North Kivu], several radio stations struggle to broadcast, since we only have one source of energy: an old, poorly maintained hydroelectric plant that breaks down at the slightest provocation," said Kennedy Muhindo Wema, president of Butembo-based *Radio Soleil*. "Too much rain is a problem, and so is too much sun. And as for the internet, forget about it. I had to pay for my own Starlink kit and a solar kit, but at what cost? Electricity and the internet are a luxury." As he points out, solutions such as a broadband connection via the satellite internet provider Starlink are not within everyone's reach. A kit including an antenna, router and cables costs between 450 and 600 USD [388 and 518 EUR], and the monthly subscription is between 20 and 50 USD [17 and 43 EUR].

Germain Lubela Muembo, the director of *Radio Fraternité*, which broadcasts from Mbuji-Mayi in the DRC's Kasai-Oriental province, also laments a lack of electricity that "severely complicates broadcasting." He says his radio station "does not have a professional internet connection and so in order to work, each journalist has to pay for their own mobile data. The lack of equipment is another challenge. In the absence of voice recorders, journalists use their phones to record, which affects the quality of their reports. The newsroom only has one desktop computer for editing. The reporters also lack press vests. And for each report, they have to pay for their own transport, often by motorcycle taxi." These difficulties are familiar to journalists at provincial radio stations, such as Steeve Mwanyo Iwewe, the director of *Radio Télévision Sarah (RTS)* in Mbandaka, in Équateur province. "Our radio station and the 16 others around it are experiencing serious problems related to electricity," he said. "We use generators. Sometimes we can't even go out to report because we don't have any fuel."

DEPENDENCE ON ADVERTISING AND INTERNATIONAL FUNDING

Many media outlets in the region rely heavily on local advertising or foreign funding, making them vulnerable to pressure from advertisers or governments, as illustrated by the situation in Kenya and Rwanda in particular.

The economic pressure throttling Kenya's media market

- **Advertising revenue taken by online platforms and national TV**: Since 2023, the government has been encouraging state institutions to allocate advertising to online platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube. In March 2024, the government issued a directive requiring all public sector advertisements to be broadcast exclusively on the national

television channel of the public broadcaster *Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC)*, a measure deemed unconstitutional a year later by the Kenyan High Court.

- Meanwhile, the state has suspended the payments it owes to media outlets for advertising. It has owed the Standard media group 1.25 billion KES (8.2 million EUR) for the past five years, according to RSF information.
- **Media outlets that closed for financial reasons:**
  - Three of the four television channels belonging to the Standard Group (*KTN News*, *KTN Burudani* and *KTN Farmers TV*) shut down and *Radio Vybez* had to close in 2024.
  - *Ebru TV*, which used to produce television broadcasts, has been transmitting its programmes exclusively via social media since 2024.
  - *Look Up TV* stopped producing news programming and ended its Swahili and English-language programming after six years in June 2024.
  - *People Daily* stopped producing a print edition in October 2024 and now exists only online.
  - The privately-owned Nation Media Group, one of the most influential media groups in East Africa, had to lay off 180 employees in June 2024 and announced the closure of one of its main regional bureaus, in Mombasa, in March 2026.

Private news outlets struggle to survive in Rwanda

- Most government advertisements and announcements are allocated to public media.
- The once-popular *Radio Flash* is on the point of closing as of early 2026.
- The privately-owned *KT Radio* has had to lay off several journalists.
- Feeling the financial squeeze, many journalists have created YouTube channels to monetize their content, but the state does not recognise them as media outlets.

The impact of US aid cutbacks: As a result of the Trump administration's drastic cuts to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) that began in 2025, funding for media support projects and journalist training sessions was reduced or terminated. *Uganda Radio Network (URN)*, a local press agency that provides news content to some 120 media outlets, was particularly hard hit; it was forced to lay off staff and reduce its content production, depriving many outlets of reliable news content. In Kenya, the cuts to USAID reduced funding for capacity building in organisations such as the Media Council of Kenya and the Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK). In the DRC, this has affected more than 75 community radio stations supported by the American NGO Internews (which received almost 70% of its funding from USAID), more than 100 partner stations of *Voice of America (VOA)* and dozens of other media outlets supported by NGOs that received USAID funding.

Donald Trump's attempt in March 2025 to dismantle the US Global Media Agency (USAGM), the government entity responsible for US international public broadcasting, including *VOA*, also had a big impact in the Great Lakes region. *VOA* — which has been present in Africa for 62 years — suspended all of its radio programmes dedicated to the African continent. In the DRC, the termination of Swahili-language broadcasts deprived more than 20 million listeners of a major news source. In Burundi, where *VOA* had been banned since the 2015 crisis, some of the population had still managed to access it via smartphone in order to view news censored by local media. The closure left many correspondents unemployed and ended the training and support provided to partner media outlets.

THE WIDESPREAD CORRUPTION DRIVEN BY THE MEDIA'S ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

Economic difficulties can also compromise journalistic independence. In the DRC, there is a a widespread form of corruption known as "*coupage*," in which politicians, state entities, private sector companies and event organisers reward journalists via per diems or material benefits (such as transport, meals or accommodation) for favourable media coverage, guaranteed publication or, conversely, a pledge to ignore inconvenient facts. This practice — often referred to by euphemisms such as "last question" or "transportation" — is frequently used at press conferences, official ceremonies and government activities, and during election campaigns. Presented as logistical support, these favours undermine editorial independence and blur the line between reporting and publicity. "Corruption is the norm and ethics the exception," laments Kennedy Muhindo Wema. The use of bribes to cover or not cover events has also become widespread in Rwanda and Uganda, where it is known as "brown envelopes."

A boy listens to the radio in Kiwanja, around 80 km north of Goma, on 13 November 2008, following fighting between members of the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) and pro-government militias.. © Yasuyoshi Chiba: AFP

2

THE IMPACT OF WAR IN EASTERN DRC

The ongoing armed conflict in eastern DRC has had a huge impact on journalism, especially since the war's resurgence in 2024. Media professionals are targeted and work in a dangerous environment, caught between the violence of the M23 and threats from the state. Congolese journalists are often forced to flee to neighbouring countries and the region's media professionals are facing an expansion of taboo subjects concerning the war and relations between countries.

1. PERSISTENT INSECURITY

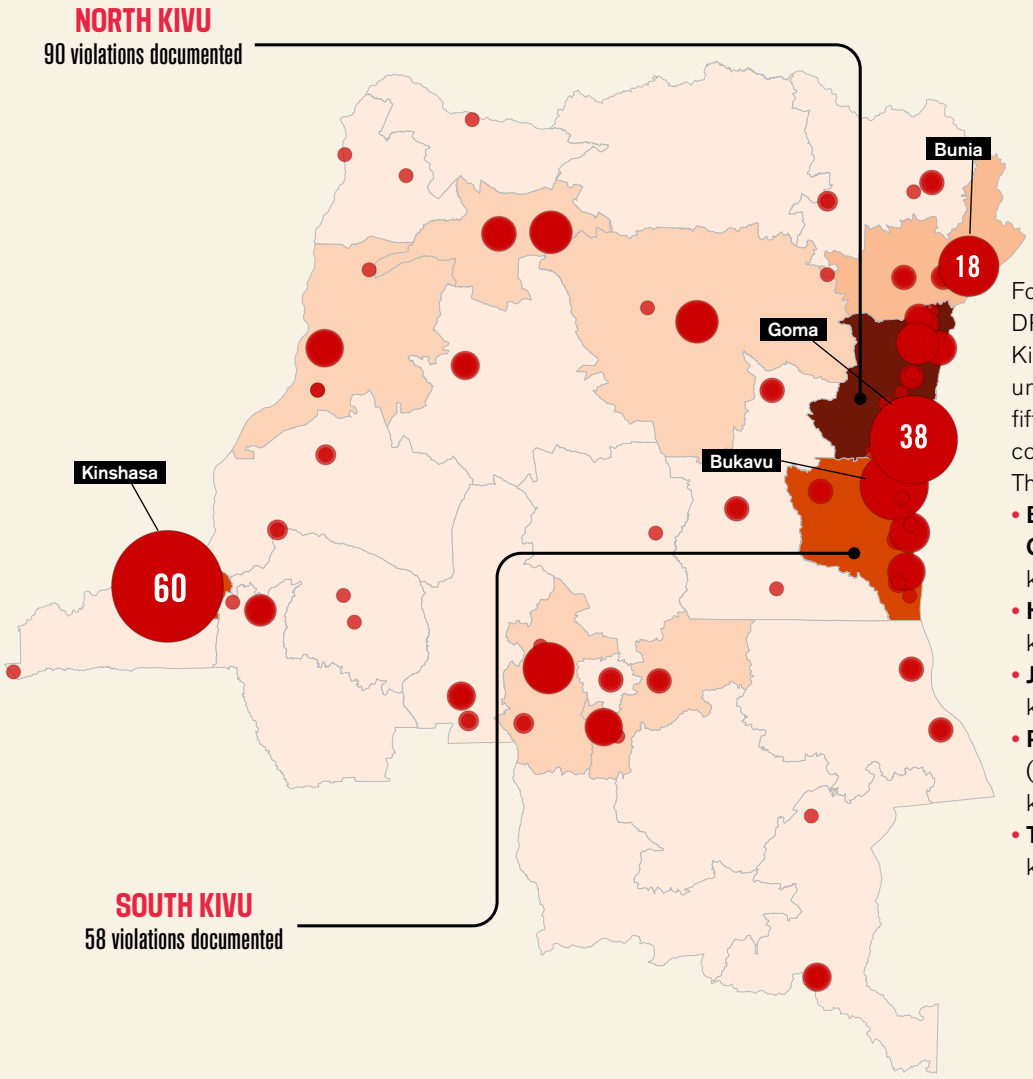
EASTERN DRC, THE DEATHBED OF OVER HALF OF THE JOURNALISTS KILLED IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS

The DRC continues to be one of the most dangerous countries for journalists in not just the Great Lakes area, but the entire continent. It has seen more journalists killed while working than any other country in the region, with five killed since 2021. Four of these deaths occurred in the eastern provinces (see map), where journalists face an especially high level of abuse, mainly due to the long-standing conflict. This violence comes mostly at the hands of the M23 rebels, the FARDC (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo) and the pro-government armed militias known as the Wazalendo ("patriots" in Swahili).

VIOLATIONS DOCUMENTED IN THE DRC IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS (2021 TO 2025) BY REGION

At least 355 abuses were committed against journalists.

More than half of the abuses – killings, assaults, arrests, detentions, enforced disappearances, threats and media outlets closed, looted or ransacked – **against journalists in the DRC from January 2024 to January 2025 took place in the east** (in North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri provinces), totalling **42 out of 78** cases of abuse. **Thirty percent** of these violations occurred in North Kivu alone.



Four of the journalists killed in the DRC since 2021 were killed in North Kivu (**2**) and Ituri (**2**), both provinces under siege since May 2021. The fifth was killed in the southeast of the country, in Haut-Katanga province. They are:

- **Barthelemy Kubanabandu Changamuka** (*CORAKI FM*), killed on 9 May 2021
- **Héritier Magayane** (*RTNC*), killed on 8 August 2021
- **Joël Musavuli** (*RTCB*), killed on 14 August 2021
- **Patrick Adonis Numbi** (*Pamoja TV*), killed on 7 January 2025
- **Thierry Banga Lole** (*RTNC*), killed on 29 December 2025.

Journalist Joël Musavuli (*RTCB*) was murdered on 14 August 2021 by unidentified individuals in the DRC. © RSF website

Journalist Thierry Banga Lole (*RTNC*) was shot dead at his home by unidentified armed men on 28 December 2025. © RTNC:Ituri

Amisi Musada (*DeboutRDC*) was abducted on 15 April 2025 in Bukavu, DRC. © RSF

Ituri is one of the most dangerous provinces in the DRC. Four journalists have been killed in connection with their work there since 2013. **Thierry Banga Lole**, a journalist with *RTNC* in Bunia and co-founder of the online news outlet *La Voix de l'Ituri*, died after being wounded in an attack carried out by unidentified armed men on the night of 28 December 2025. **Joël Musavuli**, director of *Babombi Community Radio and Television (RTCB)* and host of " *Peuple, ouvrons les yeux*" ("People, Let's Open Our Eyes"), a programme in which he criticised armed militias and the FARDC (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo) – who had been sending him death threats for weeks – was stabbed to death in his home by unidentified intruders on 14 August 2021. The journalist and *Lwemba Community Radio* presenter **Papy Mahamba Mumbere** was killed in November 2019, immediately after presenting an awareness-raising programme about the Ebola virus. **Guylain Chandjaro**, a Swahili-speaking journalist for *Radio Canal Révélation (RCR)* who also worked with *RTNC*, was found dead in May 2013 in the Ngezi River in Bunia, 12 days after going missing.

JOURNALISTS THREATENED, KIDNAPPED AND DETAINED

Fear is a constant companion for journalists based in eastern DRC. Many have been threatened, kidnapped or attacked by the various warring parties.

Threats from both sides

Reporters are frequently accused of siding with the M23 and its ally, Rwanda. A former community radio journalist, who left the profession for security reasons and wishes to remain anonymous, says she received threats and was accused of siding with the M23 because of her reporting. "They wrote 'dirty traitor, we're going to kill you' on the fence of my property," she said. "Even our sources are constantly suspicious of us," another reporter said. Threats and pressure from the M23 are also commonplace. Another journalist who asked not to be identified said he received anonymous, threatening calls after interviewing AFC/M23 leader Corneille Nangaa at a press conference following the capture of Goma in 2025. He was then threatened by an M23 member: "He told me, 'be careful, we don't want you asking our leader such questions anymore.' I didn't leave my house for two months."

Abductions and torture

Amisi Musada, a journalist for the news website *DeboutRDC*, was abducted on 15 April 2025 in Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu, by four people in civilian attire. He was found four days later in critical condition on the shores of Lake Kivu, and said he had been tortured and interrogated about his reporting. He had written articles about clashes between the M23 and the army and was finalising a report on allegations of abuses by members of the government's armed forces in the village of Ihusi (South Kivu). He had previously received threats via an unknown number from a supposed general who "promised me the worst," calling him a "traitor" and a "Rwandan."

Since Goma's capture at the end of January 2025, at least eight journalists in eastern DRC have been detained for several days by the M23 or by the regular army's military intelligence unit.

- **Tuver Wundi: February 2025 – Goma (North Kivu).** Former provincial director at the *Congolese National Radio and Television (RTNC)* and JED correspondent in Goma.
  - Arrested by M23 agents in late February; detained for 11 days in the former ANR offices in M23-occupied Goma, nicknamed *chien méchant* ("mean dog") prison.
  - In July, the M23's civilian spokesperson and communications officer, Lawrence Kanyuka, threatened to "annihilate" him.
- **Jérémie Bahati Wakahasha: May 2025 – Goma (North Kivu)**. Reporter for *Radio-télévision chrétienne porte étroite (RTCPE)*.
  - Abducted on 25 May 2025 by members of the M23 in Goma; held for 18 days in a cell, where he was subjected to harsh interrogations and deprived of all outside contact. Shortly before his abduction, he had been followed and had gone into hiding for three days.
  - He had shared a Facebook post in WhatsApp groups written by a colleague in exile about the suspicious disappearance of a community chief, blamed on the M23.
- **Ricardo Olenga: September 2025 – Goma (North Kivu).** *Kako FM* radio contributor.
  - Arrested by the M23 in Goma on 19 September 2025, and detained until 17 November in unsanitary conditions.
  - The reason: the radio station's YouTube channel and TikTok account had broadcast a video in which a member of the public deplored conditions since the M23 takeover.

- **Aimé Paluku: September 2025 – Butembo (North Kivu).** Reporter for *RTNC*
  - Arrested on 27 September 2025 at his home in Butembo by Congolese military intelligence; detained and interrogated three times over three days.
  - Accused of spying for the M23.
- **Honneur-David Safari: December 2025 – Bukavu (South Kivu)**. Editor-in-chief of the press group *La Prunelle RDC*
  - Abducted by unidentified individuals on 28 December 2025 in Bukavu. He was found with signs of torture on 31 December in a vacant lot in the territory of Kabare.
  - A few days before his abduction, his press group reported on a pro-M23 demonstration in Goma that turned into a rally against the M23. *La Prunelle RDC* had also reported on the work environment for journalists in Bukavu, and the impact of disinformation in the province.
- **Justin Panzu Bisengimana: January 2026 – Goma (North Kivu).** *RTNC* correspondent and editor of the news site Panierdesinfos.net
  - Arrested by the M23 in Goma on 10 January 2026; held for five days in a 10-by-15-metre cell with at least 200 other prisoners in *chien méchant* prison.
  - Accused of collaborating with the "Kinshasa regime" on the basis of a photo of victims of a bombardment published by someone close to the communication minister and wrongly attributed to the journalist.
- **Samson Fabrice Nyandabaga: January 2026 – Kamanyola (South Kivu).** Director and journalist at the community radio station *Flash FM* in Kamanyola
  - Arrested on 28 January 2026 and detained for three days by the M23.
  - The armed group accused him of being a spy paid by the FARDC, notably after the journalist posted a photo to his WhatsApp status on 24 January 2025 of a former military governor of North Kivu who had been killed in action in Goma that day.
- **Donatien Bugumba Tanganika: January 2026 – Uvira (South Kivu).** Journalist at *RTNC Uvira*
  - Arrested on 29 January 2026 by ANR agents; held by military intelligence until the following day.
  - Wrongly accused of collusion with the M23. He was criticised for not having fled the city during the occupation, even though he was ill and unable to move due to an accident.

Reporters in Burundi are also targeted for covering the conflict. Journalist Édouard Nzambimana from *Radio CDN – La Voix de Cibitoke* was attacked at his home on 10 December 2025 by militants from the youth wing of the ruling party (Imbonerakure). They accused him of sharing information with the M23 in the DRC, where he had sought refuge between 2017 and 2023, without specifying what that information was. Beaten and forced into the boot of a car, he was then beaten again by a group of around twenty people before being released in the early hours of the morning, stripped of his phone and documents.

RSF INVESTIGATION

LOCKED IN SHIPPING CONTAINERS AND STARVED BY THE M23

Dozens of civilians have been crammed into shipping containers no bigger than ten metres squared. Deprived of light and ventilation, these detainees are only allowed out once a day, at dawn, to relieve themselves. They are fed just once or twice a day, given a thin mixture of beans and corn. Inside these stifling containers, "up to 80" people are squeezed in at a time, according to one former detainee. According to RSF information, at least two Congolese journalists have been subjected to this treatment by members of the M23. The days are stiflingly hot and the damp nights are bitterly cold. According to first-hand accounts, it is not uncommon for prisoners to die. Those who survive remain there for days, or even weeks, before being taken to other detention centres, such as the occupied Munzenze central prison in Goma.

Several of these containers are located on the grounds of the Goma Provincial Assembly, the legislative body of North Kivu province, which the M23 seized after taking the city. The grounds have been turned into an informal detention site, according to an Amnesty International investigation. One of the people contacted by RSF reported being beaten with a whip in the compound; another described the site as "the valley of death."

As part of its investigation, RSF found and verified images of the Provincial Assembly's courtyard where containers are clearly visible, as are around thirty people — presumably prisoners — lined up in single file, held at gunpoint by an armed man. By consulting a satellite image of the site taken during the same period, RSF confirmed the presence of several structures whose shape, layout and colours correspond with the descriptions given by sources as well as with the containers visible in images found by RSF. A comparison with satellite photos from 2023 shows that these structures were not on the site at that time, supporting the hypothesis that the containers were installed after the M23 captured Goma in January 2025.

Read the full investigation on RSF.ORG

COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS ON THE FRONT LINE

Located at the heart of war zones, in rural or isolated areas of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri, community radio stations – the main news source for the local population – are particularly vulnerable because their antennas are often installed on hilltops, which are strategic points as the higher the location, the more stable and far-reaching the signal. These hilly areas are often the site of clashes between the FARDC (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo) and the M23. Just hours after their June 2022 offensive in Bunagana, a North Kivu town located near the Ugandan border and Rwanda, M23 members ransacked the hilltop premises of *Radio La Voix de Mikeno*. Chairs, transmitters, microphones and mixing consoles were destroyed. Eight months later, in February 2023, the M23 looted North Kivu's *Radio Bashali*, whose team is known for its impartial coverage of the conflict.

The Congolese army was not to be outdone. In early June 2024, members of the FARDC seized the premises of *Kanyabayonga Community and Environmental Radio (RCEKA-FM)* and *Radio Maendeleo Kaseghe*, located in the hills of Lubero (North Kivu), in order to establish military positions. "Our equipment was damaged during this attack and our journalists narrowly escaped death," said *Radio Maendeleo Kaseghe* director **Bienvenu Sengemoja Muhindo**, who was forced to flee with his colleagues. As the M23 group advanced south into Lubero in late June 2024, at least six radio stations were vandalised. "They arrived and stole everything from the studio, then tried to sell our generator in the city," said a journalist with *Radio Communautaire Amani (RCA)*, which was ransacked by members of the M23. Radio stations are highly vulnerable to looting because their equipment can be easily resold or reused.

AT LEAST 33 NORTH KIVU RADIO STATIONS LOOTED OR SHUT DOWN SINCE JANUARY 2024

5 Number of radio stations pillaged or shut down

© Pascal Muhindo Mapenzi

Pascal Muhindo Mapenzi

"For my safety, there are subjects I choose not to cover"

Director of *Moto Oicha* – a community radio station based in Beni, a city in North Kivu – and a correspondent for the German public broadcaster *Deutsche Welle (DW),* Pascal Muhindo Mapenzi is also vice-president of a local section of the National Union of Congolese Press (UNPC).

How great are the risks for a journalist in eastern DRC?
We have very few resources to protect ourselves, we even lack bulletproof vests[...] and we are under close surveillance, both by armed groups and the government. It requires a great deal of caution, neutrality, and objectivity. I have already been arrested several times.

What subjects do you cover as a journalist?
I enable the war's victims to speak – the wounded, women who have been raped, people who have been internally displaced, children who can no longer go to school[...] I also cover the psychological support provided to survivors of the massacres or former hostages of the rebels. I also report on the economic consequences of the war, on the healthcare facilities that are closed[...] But for my safety, there are some subjects that I choose not to cover. The authorities are sometimes uncomfortable with reporting that doesn't meet with their approval. And I adapt. We don't use the term "rebellion" much; we talk more about "M23 fighters." Since the fall of Goma, journalists have been trying not to be too critical and adjusting their language.

How do you keep working?
I've worked here for 15 years. I've been exposed to risks and it has affected me psychologically. I experience difficult events that I have to deal with – talking to victims, going to the morgue after civilian massacres, finding shelter with my family, meeting people wounded by the war[...] This creates trauma. But I know that life comes first. Our journalism trainers always reminded us that "a good journalist is a live one" and that no story is worth a journalist's life. So we learn to be resilient, to live with it.

WHAT OTHER JOURNALISTS SAY

Working in an occupied zone: self-censoring to stay alive

All of the journalists interviewed by RSF in eastern DRC say their work methods have changed radically since Goma's capture in January 2025.

A journalist from North Kivu: "Often, journalists gather information on the ground and then, after analysis, decide not to report it. These kinds of decisions are dictated by a survival instinct. Self-censorship also affects sources. For an ordinary, everyday story, a journalist can approach five or more people and all of them refuse to be interviewed. The public fear that their words will be used against them. In this climate of total uncertainty, no one wants to risk incurring the wrath of current or future authorities. This collective silence reflects a brutal reality: in North Kivu, the desire for truth has been stifled by the primal need to stay alive. Doing balanced journalism has become an impossible task. The basic principle of getting both sides to a story has been broken. Respecting national law exposes journalists to reprisals from the M23, while yielding to their demands places them in serious violation vis-à-vis the Congolese state."

A journalist from Goma: "When we try to verify the facts, the rebels deny us access. For example, a mine collapse killed around 100 people in June in Masisi [a town in North Kivu]. When we tried to cover the event, we were told there was nothing to see. We received verbal threats. So did the families. We were also forbidden from calling them."

The local representative of the NGO Journaliste en Danger (JED): "Journalists are more likely to talk about agriculture, for example. They also broadcast more music."

2. CONTROLLING THE WAR NARRATIVE

THE EASTERN MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS CAUGHT IN M23'S GRIP

"The rebel group often tries to seize control of a radio station in order to announce its arrival in a town," said one journalist from a community radio station in Lubero province. Controlling the airwaves allows the warring parties to suppress information about atrocities, population displacements and fighting, and to broadcast a narrative favourable to their cause. Their directives are becoming increasingly explicit; in October 2022, after the M23 advanced into the city of Rutshuru, North Kivu's capital, its members summoned the heads of media outlets. Accused of "inciting hatred," they were ordered to adjust their editorial line. "They invited us to meetings and explained what we had to do," said a former journalist with a radio station in Kiwanja, in Rutshuru Territory. "Then they gave us a number we had to call to verify information with them. And in 2024, they told us they needed to go on the radio. They told me to broadcast recordings of their meetings. They then sent someone to go on air. They came with armed soldiers. They wanted us to teach them techniques."

Starting in 2023, every radio station in North Kivu was also required to broadcast a weekly programme called "*Maisha ya kwetu*" ("Our Life"). Hosted by an M23 member, its purpose, according to the armed group, was to promote "social cohesion, peace and development, and to encourage a favourable climate for business, education, health and security." These directives were accompanied by threats. "If a journalist fails to comply with the instructions, punishment is swift," one media executive told RSF. He added, "We are afraid, so we submit."

After going off air due to the security situation, some radios were forced by M23 officials to resume broadcasting in July 2024. At *Lubero South Community Radio (RCLS)*, regular programming was replaced with religious songs, missing persons notices and M23 communiqués. One of these communiqués – which was read out by an M23 member and announced at a public meeting – was broadcast every hour. When contacted by RSF, the M23's then-military spokesperson Willy Ngoma – killed in the North Kivu town of Rubaya in February 2026 – claimed his movement paid for these communiqués to be broadcast. However, the regional representative of the NGO JED disputes this, arguing, "The M23 doesn't pay, it imposes. When a member comes to deliver a communiqué to be read on air and he's armed, how can you say no?"

The M23 introduced a yet another tactic in March 2025 in North Kivu when they held an "M23 ideology training" for various professionals, including at least four journalists. The month before, members of the M23 communications unit held a meeting in Bukavu with around 60 media representatives and journalists from the province. The directives they issued included a ban on broadcasting statements from Congolese authorities and relaying negative information about the M23, and an order to replace the verb "occupy" with "liberate" when referring to the takeover of territories. Three weeks later, an M23 official went to the community radio station *Maendeleo* in Bukavu, asked to see the programme schedule and demanded the cancellation of

TRANSLATION:
The lack of visibility on African conflicts
"We're not on any TikTok trends!" "We need to work on our storytelling!"
© Rodho (France) - Cartooning for Peace

talk shows featuring political and civil society guests, a ban on broadcasting information from political parties, and the continuous airing of messages demanding the reopening of banks and the disarmament of civilians.

Journalists have even been approached to amplify the M23's narrative about the ongoing war. Several told RSF they had received calls and messages from M23 leaders asking them to join their ranks. One of them, a journalist of some 20 years experience, began being pressured a few days after the fall of Goma: "Corneille Nangaa Yobeluo [leader of the AFC/M23 coalition] offered me a job in his communications unit. Other members of the movement also approached me." A grenade was placed in front of the journalist's house on 12 March 2025. As reporter Anicet Kimonyo told RSF, "This latest war is distinguished from previous ones by the lack of popular support for the rebellion. Faced with this disinterest, the rebels have turned to the media to try to gain the support of communities."

NATIONAL MEDIA BANNED AND BROADCASTS CUT OFF BY THE M23

Relaying content from certain national radio stations that provide reliable coverage of the war is explicitly forbidden in eastern DRC by the M23, which accuses them of "destroying social cohesion." This was the pretext that AFC/M23 civilian spokesperson Lawrence Kanyuka gave in 2023 for censoring *Top Congo FM*, one of the country's most popular privately-owned radio stations, which

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Journalists Linda Mapendo from the community radio station *Maendeleo* and Sarah Ndebo from *La Prunelle DRC* at the *Maendeleo* studio in Bukavu, DRC, on 27 November 2021.© Benoît Doppagne: Belga via AFP

broadcasts from Kinshasa and is relayed by many stations in the east. "They have shown their desire to control the news by setting limits and red lines that cannot be crossed," a journalist for a North Kivu community radio said. "Sometimes, they even want us to refer to the authorities in Kinshasa as 'terrorists'."

Programmes targeted by the M23 include "*Sauti Ya Wahami*" ("The Voice of the Displaced" in Swahili), a daily show that was produced in Goma by journalists who had fled areas under M23 control. Broadcast by more than 40 radio stations in North Kivu, the show was suspended in February 2023 and then again the following July by the head of the AFC/M23's communications and media department. When contacted by RSF, Lawrence Kanyuka denied this. "'The Voice of the Displaced' was never suspended," he said. "Everyone is free, unless they betray or compromise security."

The M23 spokesperson has also threatened to close the United Nations radio station *Radio Okapi*. With much of its local staff no longer based in Goma, it rebroadcasts programmes produced by the Kinshasa office. *Radio Okapi* experienced repeated interruptions in November 2025; while fuel shortages were cited as the official reason, internal sources told RSF that the M23 was blocking "all fuel deliveries to the transmitter located on top of Mount Goma." The deliberate blockade appears to be a form of pressure and retaliation.

PRESSURE FROM THE CONGOLESE MEDIA REGULATOR

How do reporters cover the war from Kinshasa and other regions of the DRC? "It's difficult," says Stanis Bujakera Tshiamala. "We take shortcuts because the government imposes its line on us. We find ways to contact sources on the ground. We sometimes use anonymity for our articles, and we're careful about our phone conversations." The pressure is real: Congolese journalist **John Kabamba**, host of "*Le Peuple Parle*" ("The People Speak"), a programme broadcast on *Congo 26 TV* and *Mercury TV*, was kidnapped and assaulted in Kinshasa on 14 December 2025 by unidentified individuals who held him for 24 days in a secret location. The day before his abduction, he had conducted a live interview with Daniel Safu, a former parliamentarian who had joined the M23.

The media regulator, the High Council for Broadcasting and Communication (CSAC), is the government's vehicle for controlling the narrative about the war in the east. It frequently creates new rules that amount to censorship of the media's coverage of the war:

- **4 April 2024**: The CSAC banned journalists from disseminating information "related to the rebellion in eastern DRC without referring to official sources."
- **7 January 2025**: CSAC president Christian Bosembe accused international French-language media outlets *RFI*, *TV5 Monde* and *France 24* of "glorifying terrorism" and neglecting "the exploits of the FARDC." A written warning was sent to the head of France Médias Monde – the media group that oversees *France 24* and *RFI* – a few days after *RFI* ran a story about a conflict-ridden municipality in North Kivu.
- **13 January 2025**: The CSAC revoked the broadcast license of Qatari television channel *Al Jazeera* for three months following an interview with AFC/M23 deputy coordinator Bertrand Bisimwa by a researcher "notoriously known to be pro-Rwandan," according to communication and media minister Patrick Muyaya. He then summoned representatives of foreign media outlets and said he was prepared to "cut off TV channels to protect public opinion."
- **December 2025**:
  - The CSAC summoned media outlets *France 24* and *TV5 Monde* for announcing the fall of the city of Uvira (South Kivu) the week before. Christian Bosembe reiterated the strict ban on "any media statements by armed groups." The Court of Cassation's prosecutor-general subsequently issued a vague statement warning those responsible for "rumours" and "false information likely to discourage loyalist forces" on social media, and instructed the judicial police to investigate them.
  - The CSAC summoned the CEO of the high-profile Kinshasa radio station *Top Congo FM*, **Christian Lusakweno**, because he had insinuated the authorities were responsible for the fall of the city of Uvira in a live broadcast.
  - While journalist John Kabamba was still missing, the CSAC suspended him from all media activity for 90 days, accusing him of allowing Daniel Safu to make statements deemed harmful to public order and tantamount to an apology for the M23, without correcting him, in an interview conducted the day before the journalist was abducted. The suspension was finally lifted on 20 January.

Pressure on the media also comes directly from high-level officials.

- **March 2023**: Gilbert Kabanda, the defence minister at the time, filed a complaint against Stanis Bujakera Tshiamala, the deputy editor of the news site *Actualité.cd*, accusing him of spreading rumours likely to "demoralise FARDC troops" – an offence punishable by death – in a tweet containing an excerpt from the minutes of a cabinet meeting about the M23's territorial advance.
- **9 January 2025**: In a post on X, then-justice minister Constant Mutamba threatened to seek the death penalty for anyone, including journalists, who reported "the activities of the Rwandan army and its M23 auxiliaries."

RESTRICTIONS ON FIELD REPORTING

Access to the war zone is just as difficult for journalists from the Great Lakes region as it is for foreign journalists. In Burundi, very few, if any, journalists based in Bujumbura would dare venture into eastern DRC, according to those interviewed by RSF. "When I worked for *VOA Swahili* and *Bonesha FM* a few years ago, we could cross the border with foreign correspondents from *Reuters*, *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, *RFI*, the *BBC* and the *Associated Press (AP)*," said *Iwacu* editor **Abbas Mbazumutima**. "We got a bit of a scolding, but that was all. Today, going there from Bujumbura would be too risky. Having an AFC/M23 stamp in your passport would be a serious matter as Burundi is militarily engaged alongside the FARDC and their Wazalendo auxiliaries. A few years ago, I reported from the Burundian refugee camps based in Lusenda, in eastern DRC. There have been other attempts by other journalists, but they ended in arrests or imprisonment."

Local journalists reporting on the ground in South Kivu province.
© SOS Médias Burundi

As well as the standard press accreditation required to enter the country – which costs around 1,000 USD (840 EUR) – non-Congolese journalists need specific accreditation to travel to FARDC-controlled territories in the besieged provinces of Kivu and Ituri. Often, the only solution is to be "embedded" (to accompany a military unit). However, "you have to pay the soldiers to be embedded with the army or to gain access to an area under their control," said a journalist from a European media outlet speaking on condition of anonymity. This complicates access, especially for freelance journalists.

In an effort to improve its international image after capturing Goma, the AFC/M23 coalition temporarily facilitated access for foreign journalists to the occupied territories, albeit with some oversight. Starting in March 2025, journalists working for foreign media outlets began travelling from the Rwandan capital Kigali to reach the M23-controlled territories in eastern DRC. This practice became official on 1 November 2025 when the M23 began refusing to accept any travel documents issued by Kinshasa.

Several journalists interviewed by RSF said they had been approached by the staff of M23 spokesperson Lawrence Kanyuka. "I went to areas controlled by the M23 several times," said a journalist from a neighbouring country. "We were always accompanied by someone close to the armed group." Foreign media reporters, on the other hand, could travel without an escort, although they had to submit their itineraries to the M23 in advance. A few days after the capture of Bukavu, the M23 began implementing an accreditation requirement for entry to the area it controls. But this accreditation in no way guarantees access to all of its territories. Leaving Goma, the only entry point authorised by the M23 requires special permission, which is rarely granted. When reports critical of the M23 emerged, the armed group reverted to a policy of restricting access for foreign reporters, except for those based in Kigali. There has been no permanent correspondent in Goma since the summer of 2025.

Visits to the war zone can have consequences for access to other countries in the region. **Stijn Vercruysse**, a journalist working for the Belgian public broadcaster *VRT*, was scheduled to cover the World Cycling Championships in Rwanda but an airline refused to let him fly on 18 September 2025. He had travelled to eastern DRC in February 2025: "I was in Bukavu when the city fell and during the first days of its occupation," he said, and believes the travel ban is due to his reporting on Rwanda's involvement in the conflict.

WAR COVERAGE: POLARISATION AND OFF-LIMIT SUBJECTS

Between limited access to where news is taking place and intense pressure on how to cover the war, finding reliable sources is one of the chief problems for journalists trying to report on it objectively. "The conflict has strong regional and political dimensions, which makes authorities in neighbouring countries cautious and sometimes restrictive regarding cross-border reporting," said Omar Faruk Osman, who is based in Mogadishu, Somalia, and heads the Federation of African Journalists (FAJ). "As a result, news is highly politicised and takes on a nationalist character. Different actors are trying to influence the narrative, so journalists might have access to information, but not necessarily to reliable sources, making fact-checking difficult. Journalists may therefore be forced to rely on official statements, secondary sources or remote reporting, which reduces their capacity for in-depth reporting and investigation."

Ugandan journalist **Franklin Ezaraku Draku** shares this sentiment. "Because Uganda and Rwanda are involved in the conflict, many journalists and media outlets are afraid to conduct investigations for fear of reprisals. Most who are working on the conflict rely on dispatches or information provided by interested parties, such as the army." When he went to Beni (North Kivu) in July 2019 to investigate the role of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an armed rebel group of Ugandan origin based mainly in eastern DRC, he was unable to publish the story. "My media outlet shelved my article, fearing that the consequences would be disastrous for us."

In Burundi, the army has imposed a "total blackout" on everything happening on the ground in eastern DRC, said Abbas Mbazumutima, editor of the Burundian newspaper *Iwacu*. "Only a few factual reports on the opening or closing of land borders are possible. All Burundian journalists who have been questioned recently by members of the National Intelligence Service (SNR) have been accused or suspected of collaborating with the M23." In March 2025, Burundi's media regulator, the CNC, ordered *Iwacu* to take down an interview with a former officer and respected security analyst about the Burundian army's presence in the DRC. The SNR questioned Abbas Mbazumutima and *Iwacu*'s director, **Léandre Sikuyavuga**, on 22 and 23 December 2025, after *Iwacu* published another interview about the Congolese crisis and the presence of Wazalendo militiamen in Burundi. *Iwacu* was forced

to remove the article from its website and was threatened with reprisals if it did anything similar again.

Covering the war's impact on civilians is also no easy task. "No report on national radio or television has been devoted to the massive influx of Congolese refugees into the country, a matter of public interest, and very few local media outlets have visited the refugee reception centres," said Eloge Willy Kaneza, the coordinator of SOS Médias Burundi (SMB). Louis Gitinywa, a Kigali-based lawyer who specialises in defending journalists and human and digital rights, says the difficulty of getting access to sources dates back to the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. "This war has destabilised security, the peace process and communities throughout the region," he said. "In the Great Lakes region, no one can truly claim to cover this conflict from an absolutely neutral, impartial, and objective perspective." William Oloo, a Kenyan journalist who is also secretary general of the African Journalists' Congress (AJC), says that even in Tanzania, a country slightly further away from the conflict on the other side of Lake Tanganyika, it is hard to obtain reliable sources.

A Congolese journalist interviews displaced people in a camp located in North Kivu province. © SOS Médias Burundi

THE SCALE OF DISINFORMATION

Disinformation has intensified since Goma fell in January 2025. The central government tends to issue clumsy denials of reports from on the ground. When a strategic location is lost, the government tries at all costs to delay the announcement, sometimes claiming that a city has not fallen even when eyewitnesses are reporting the contrary. This phenomenon, which amounts at the very least to withholding information, was especially blatant during the fall of Sake (North Kivu) in February 2025 and the fall of Uvira (South Kivu) in December 2025. This partisan news is often disseminated by pro-government journalists, who amplify the narrative on social media platforms.

Meanwhile, the M23 produces disinformation to bolster its narrative. For example, to highlight the claim that Tutsis are marginalised within Congolese society, it often uses images of burned houses or dead livestock that have come from other countries or are outdated. The M23 also tries to use journalists to "launder" and disseminate one-sided news coverage. Reporters who are deemed credible have easier access to problematic areas and are encouraged to present information that promotes the M23 or denigrates the Congolese authorities.

Some actors go even further by producing deepfakes. Ange Kasongo, founder and director of Balobaki Check, a media outlet specialising in fact-checking, reports that, "In March 2025, on the social media platform X, internet users shared a 47-second video featuring a voice that appeared to be that of the US president claiming to endorse AFC/M23 leader Corneille Nangaa. It was a deepfake." The international French-language broadcaster *RFI* was also the victim of a highly sophisticated deepfake in April 2025. A fake news report that circulated online and used the voices of *RFI* journalists claimed the M23 had laid down its arms in the east of the country. It was viewed more than 100,000 times in just a few days on YouTube. In another example, an audio recording attributed to Magloire Paluku, a former journalist and member of the M23 communications unit who was assassinated in December 2025, went viral on social media a few days after his death. In the fabricated audio file, he complains about his tribe's lack of representation within the armed group. This disinformation often goes viral on social media — notably on WhatsApp, Facebook and TikTok — fuelling polarisation. Part of its virality relies on the strategic use of local languages, depending on the target audience. These deepfakes mainly use Lingala, Swahili and Kinyarwanda.

3. THE DISPLACEMENT AND EXODUS OF CONGOLESE JOURNALISTS

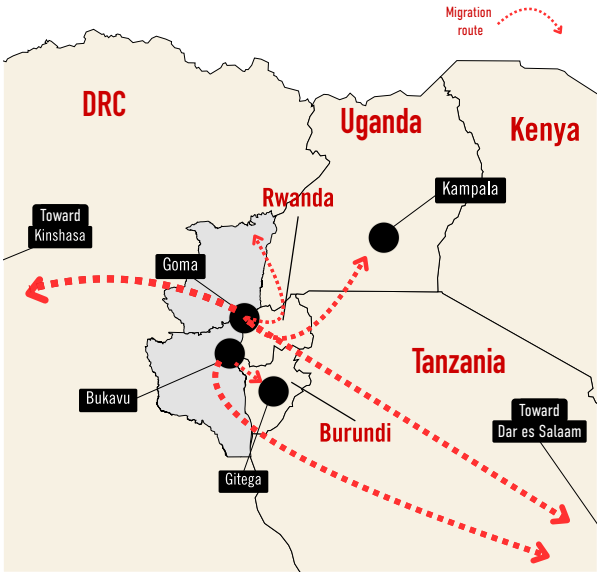
FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN THE EAST

"I'm fleeing into the bush. The bombs are falling heavily. I only managed to grab the transmitter. The rest of the equipment is still at the radio station," a North Kivu radio station director reported in July 2024. The eastern DRC has been one of the most important intervention areas for the RSF Assistance Office since the resurgence of the conflict in 2024 and the capture of Goma in early 2025. Between 2023 and early 2025, around 90 journalists from North and South Kivu had to flee their homes in response to the M23's attacks and seizure of territory, according to the National Union of Congolese Press (UNPC). While some left the country, others chose to remain in the Kivu provinces.

Following the resumption of clashes between the FARDC and the M23 in December 2025 in the Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga territories in South Kivu, 46 journalists were displaced within the province and 34 sought refuge in Burundi and Tanzania, according to the Uvira-Fizi branch of the UNPC. Pascal Muhindo Mapenzi, journalist and UNPC vice-president in Beni, said: "Some travel through Uganda, via Rwanda, to reach Beni, North Kivu's provisional capital since the fall of Goma. It's a long journey, but relatively safe. Others choose not to leave the country and instead take the Goma-Lubero-Butembo-Beni route, passing through areas conquered and controlled by the M23 – Rutshuru, Kiwanja, Virunga National Park, Kanyabayonga, Kirumba, and southern Lubero. The road is in poor shape and there are checkpoints everywhere, with risks of ambush or being caught in a clash between warring parties."

Even when these journalists have reached their destination, daily life is still precarious. A reporter in exile in Beni described the difficult financial situation. "Journalists are unemployed, except for correspondents and contributors to national or foreign outlets," he said. "Otherwise, local radio stations, which have no funding, offer you between 20 and 100 dollars [17 to 85 EUR] a month." Some exiled journalists have therefore been forced to abandon journalism.

THE EXILE AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT OF JOURNALISTS IN EASTERN DRC



A map of the Great Lakes region covers the uniform of an M23 soldier.
© Mutio (France) - Cartooning for Peace

DISPLACED REPORTERS TELL THEIR STORIES:

When abandoning journalism is the only option

"I worked for a community radio station in Rutshuru Territory for eight years. After the M23 arrived in 2022, things became difficult for me and my family. I received many threats. On one occasion, the M23 posted a photo of me on Twitter with the words, 'the movement was well received,' when all I did was carry out an interview. The local population began to mistrust me and threaten me, accusing me of working for the rebels. At the same time, the rebels tried to impose their narrative on us and use our radio to broadcast their communiqués. They would come to the radio with soldiers […] The neighbours suspected us of working with them. And then the economic situation became strained, as our partners fled the area. I finally left Rutshuru in March 2024. I connected with other displaced journalists in Goma via the UNPC. I did some reporting, but eventually I gave it up when one of my colleagues, who had also fled Rutshuru for Goma, was jailed. She ran into the Wazalendo [pro-government militias] and was detained for about ten days. It disgusted me. I now work in accounting at a medical centre. I miss journalism. I would go back to my old job if I could."

"I was a radio journalist from 2018 to 2022. I left Rutshuru after the rebels seized the territory. In Goma, I continued to work for *AgoraGrandsLacs.net* and *"Sauti Ya Wahami"* [a programme hosted by around 50 displaced journalists]. One day, I was arrested by a Wazalendo colonel after I did a report on their activities, particularly how they extort farmers before the harvest. Although a soldier tried to object, I was locked in a cell at the National Intelligence Agency, accused of being an M23 collaborator. The sanitary conditions were terrible. We slept on the floor, and I had nothing to eat […] After ten days of investigating, they released me. I abandoned journalism after the fall of Goma. I feared for my safety. They forbade us from talking about many things. It

was also financially difficult. Going out into the field required money that our newsrooms could no longer provide. I sold my computer and phone to buy clothes that I resell. If the situation changes, I would like to go back to that work. It's my passion."

THE PERILOUS ROUTE OF EXILE TO NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Journalists forced to flee South Kivu generally head to Burundi or Tanzania, while those from North Kivu go to Tanzania or Uganda. A Congolese journalist from Butembo (North Kivu) chose Uganda when he needed to seek refuge: "To get there, I kept a low profile all the time. I chose the most crowded public transport where I wouldn't be noticed. Once across the border, I blended into the crowd. I took a taxi to avoid people who might recognise me and say I was in Uganda. Many Congolese cross the border for business and go to Kampala. I took a less travelled route and went to an insignificant small town, to stay out of sight, incognito."
Investigative journalist Nicaise Kibel'Bel Oka, the editor of the newspaper *Les Coulisses*, also spent a few days in Uganda, "in transit," before travelling to Kinshasa. To leave the territories controlled by the M23, he passed through six checkpoints. "I spent between 30 and 45 minutes at each checkpoint. I finally reached Butembo, a territory controlled by the FARDC, at the end of the day." **Jeanpy Ilunga**, the Goma-based head of the online television news channel *Afrique +243*, fled on 15 February 2025, after receiving threats in connection with a report about a musician involved in the anti-M23 movement who was murdered in Goma. His goal was to reach Tanzania via Rwanda, but he was stopped at the Rwandan border and questioned by men who said they had been looking for him. "The people at the border asked me to accompany them to a room and leave my luggage outside," he said. "I was asked countless questions. They searched for photos on my phone and closely scrutinised my media outlet." After being held overnight, he was returned to Congolese territory, where he was detained for nine days in Mount Goma.
Congolese journalist **David Kalenda Mukendi**, former director of the Goma-based community radio *Pole FM*, was detained during a police operation in Burundi. He chose to seek refuge in Burundi after fleeing the DRC with his wife and four children at the end of January 2025. Their journey into exile took them from Goma to Kigali, then to Bukavu, before reaching Bujumbura with few resources left on 2 February 2025. The authorities grabbed him during a routine check on 7 February 2025 and ended up holding him with nearly a thousand displaced Congolese people, without access to water, food, or sanitation, in an attempt to force them to go to refugee camps or return to the DRC. The Burundian authorities finally released him on 16 February 2025.

THE CHALLENGES TO RESETTLING IN KINSHASA

Some journalists leaving eastern Congo prefer to go to Kinshasa, the capital. But there is no "structure in place to accommodate the journalists who have been forced to flee the occupied zones," says Tshivis Tshivuadi, Secratary General of the NGO JED. "In Kinshasa, at least a dozen reporters complain they've been abandoned. They all hope to return home one day to their families and resume their work." They deplore the lack of professional opportunities and the cost of living. Nicaise Kibel'Bel Oka, an investigative journalist now in Kinshasa after working for more than 25 years in North Kivu, said: "I had to put my YouTube channel on hold because my editor is still in North Kivu. The high rents are hindering my work. I don't have an office where I can meet with sources." A community radio journalist who fled Rutshuru said: "When I arrived, I thought I would find work as a journalist. But the salary wasn't enough. I was paid too little, sometimes only enough for transport. Even when I was paid 200 dollars [172 EUR], it wasn't enough to live on."
Economic difficulties are not the only problem. A journalist who specialises in covering armed conflicts and humanitarian issues in Goma said: "When I arrived in Kinshasa, I encountered a certain amount of mistrust, and sometimes stigmatisation because I come from Goma. I continue to cover the same subjects, but with more caution now." Another said: "The segregation is problematic. In Kinshasa, people tell us that the M23's members are our 'rebel brothers.' There's no solidarity. You can't speak Swahili here."
These displaced journalists sometimes also encounter problems with the Congolese authorities. On arriving in Kinshasa at the end of August 2025, **Tuver Wundi**, the former provincial director of the state radio and television broadcaster *RTNC* and JED correspondent in Goma, was held for three days at ANR headquarters and questioned about his work in the east before being released without any official explanation for his arrest.

TRANSNATIONAL THREATS

Journalists in exile, and even those who are simply travelling, are constantly exposed to threats, including detention. Burundian journalist **Floriane Irangabiye** discovered this firsthand, at a great cost. Based in Rwanda since 2015, where she hosted programmes on *Radio Igicaniro*, a radio station created by Burundians in exile, she was arrested in August 2022 while visiting her family in Burundi. She had often invited well-known Burundians, including government critics, to her show to discuss political issues in Burundi. She was sentenced to ten years in prison for "undermining national security" in 2023, before being pardoned in August 2024.
Some journalists in exile find themselves under surveillance. One journalist who fled the DRC for Burundi after the fall of Bukavu in February 2015 reports that they were followed: "One day, at a gas station, an acquaintance told me a man had been following me since that morning. I pose no threat. I'm just a journalist who fled the war. Another day, I was at the house of a friend who commented that he had noticed a car often parked outside his office while I was working there. Three weeks later, the same man I'd seen before was photographing my car. I shouted, and he ran away. Another day, while I was walking with my son, a pickup truck followed us for a long time, even after we took a motorcycle taxi. I was advised to go to Tanzania, but I refused. I decided I no

longer wanted to live in fear. I go out, I work, I move about." Other journalists report their loved ones have been threatened, such as one reporter from North Kivu who had been forced to flee several times after attacks and direct threats by M23 in 2024 and again in 2025. Now in exile, the journalist receives threatening messages mentioning his loved ones.

A DISPLACED JOURNALIST TELLS HIS STORY:

One Congolese journalist's journey from the DRC to Tanzania via Rwanda

The editorial director of *DeboutRDC.net*, an independent online media outlet based in the city of Bukavu, Jonathan Magoma spent several months in exile in Tanzania.

"In February 2025, when rebels seized the airport of Kavumu, where I lived, which is 30 km north of Bukavu, I fled to Rwanda just before the border between Bukavu and the Rwandan city of Cyangugu closed. Rwanda wasn't safe for me, so I went to Kinshasa. But it's a very expensive city. After a week, I could no longer afford my hotel and had to stay with a host family for over a month. One day, my wife called me: people had broken into our compound and smashed the windows of the house. My wife left with our children for Kigali, so I joined them there in order to travel to Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania. On arrival, I obtained a three-month visa, renewable for another month. As the war continued in the DRC, I applied for — and received — an extension. When I applied for asylum, the authorities told us to go to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to be transferred to a refugee camp with no electricity or internet, and with tents and tarpaulins for shelter. When I refused for security reasons, hoping for "urban refugee" status, my application was rejected. I was told in the clearest terms that refusing the camp could result in my being sent back to my country. So, I temporarily left Tanzania for the DRC border city of Kalemie and returned to Tanzania with a new three-month visa. I went to the DRC embassy and then to the interior ministry to obtain a residence permit, but they couldn't do anything for me. I finally left Tanzania shortly after the protests that shook the country. Now, together with the media outlet's co-founder, we are still posting on our website, *DeboutRDC.net*, but not daily. The team has shrunk from six to three members. And we are not protected from threats."

RSF ACTION IN THE DRC

In response to the security situation in the DRC — which has worsened since the start of 2025 — RSF has stepped up its efforts to meet the needs of journalists forced to flee the region. More than 80 journalists have received the direct financial assistance that RSF provides to media professionals who are threatened due to their journalism. These grants, which amount to 92,000 EUR in total, have mostly been used to cover emergency resettlement and safety measures. Sixty-four of the beneficiaries have relocated within the DRC, while 17 have found refuge in neighbouring countries. Most of them worked for community radio stations.

"Without RSF, I don't know what would have become of me, if I would still be alive or with my family," said an investigative journalist who fled the country. "From afar, I can continue to do my work in peace, even if it is difficult to access sources." With support from the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), RSF has provided not only emergency assistance but also material support and capacity building workshops. RSF notably provides physical and cyber security training sessions to journalists in North Kivu. The first three training sessions were held in Goma in November and December 2024. Nearly 60 journalists have received this training throughout North Kivu province. RSF has also helped equip media outlets and press centres in various parts of the DRC with satellite internet access in order to improve journalists' working conditions. In all, over 250 journalists, mostly from eastern DRC, have received training with RSF support since 2024.

The Congolese Union of Women in the Media (UCOFEM) hosted the training session "Psychological Support and Mental Health Care" for women journalists from North and South Kivu, between 16 and 18 March in Goma. © Florence Kavira Sivihwa

The Congolese Union of Women in the Media (UCOFEM) hosts the training session "Psychological Support and Mental Health Care" for women journalists from North and South Kivu, between 16 and 18 March in Goma. © Florence Kavira Sivihwa

3

THE CHALLENGES AND INNOVATION DEFINING THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION

In the Great Lakes region, journalism is hindered by political pressure, repression and reporters forced into exile. Despite these challenges, journalists and their outlets are mobilising to protect independent news. Through remote reporting, innovative projects to boost media resilience and new forms of regional collaboration, news professionals are striving to adapt so they can keep the public informed, strengthen solidarity among journalists and rebuild public trust.

1. REPORTING DESPITE EXILE AND PERSECUTION

REMOTE JOURNALISM: BYPASSING THE CULTURE OF SILENCE

As conflict continues to spread across the region, journalists are persevering with their work, even in exile. One director of an online news outlet, whose team was initially based in the city of Bukavu in eastern DRC, has been in exile since February 2025. Only two of his journalists have chosen to stay. The editorial team continues to meet twice a week. "We also rely on contributors who are still there," he explains. Certain topics, such as human rights abuses, are no longer covered as extensively. "We continue to document these events, so that they can be made public when the situation allows." Several journalists interviewed by RSF admit that they have to take precautions, as their families are sometimes still in the area. "I stopped signing my articles after leaving the region, and more generally since Goma was taken by the M23," explains one journalist. The same measure is also taken to protect sources, as anonymity is now virtually mandatory to avoid putting them at unnecessary risk. One journalist contacted by RSF added that this vigilance also extends to the timing of publication. "I never publish in real time on the conflict to avoid exposing my sources."

Another Congolese freelance journalist working in exile told RSF that he is able to continue reporting thanks to "a network of reliable local sources, community contacts, humanitarian organisations and fellow journalists on the ground. […] I systematically verify information, despite the difficulty of confirming it without being physically present." Members of another media outlet now based in Kinshasa and Kampala rely on around ten local correspondents in the provinces of North and South Kivu, in eastern DRC, who were trained beforehand. "Even though the number of publications has decreased since the fall of Goma, this method allows us to continue publishing, including breaking news stories," explains the director.

Nairobi is a major hub for foreign correspondents in Africa, particularly those covering East Africa. From the Kenyan capital, it is "easier to access a wide range of sources, with a better communication infrastructure that facilitates journalism," notes Kenyan journalist William Oloo, who is also Secretary General of the African Journalists Congress (CAJ). A foreign journalist based in Nairobi agrees: "In my view, Nairobi is the last place in the region where journalists can more or less do their job without being overly concerned."

SOS MÉDIAS BURUNDI AND *IWACU*: MEDIA RESILIENCE IN ACTION

Between displacement, exile and rebuilding local networks, members of the collective SOS Médias Burundi (SMB) and the news site *Iwacu* persevere in their efforts to keep the public informed. Founded in May 2015 after private media outlets were dismantled during the failed coup attempt, SMB turned social media into a tool to fill the journalism void. Created in 48 hours, this network of journalists working anonymously "is not officially registered due to the constant threat to the press in Burundi. This discretion ensures the safety of its members while enabling critical and independent coverage," explains one of its founders, Éloge Willy Kaneza. SMB publishes daily on social media and on its website, in French, Kirundi, English and Swahili, covering political, environmental and social news. The same motivation fuels *Iwacu*, a newspaper founded by Antoine Kaburahe in 2008 (see page 11), which regularly comes under threat. Yet, "through sheer determination and rigour," *Iwacu* has grown into a weekly publication, publishing in Kirundi and English, and launching a website. Today, the outlet has at least fifty contributors in the country and in exile. "At *Iwacu*, when choosing topics, our constant concern is anticipating the consequences — how far can we go while remaining free and alive? Every Friday, at the editorial meeting, a game of poker takes place: we attempt to produce a strong story while also ensuring that the journalist will survive and that the paper will not be shut down," explains Antoine Kaburahe. He says there is no manual to follow and the red lines remain fluid. "A piece of information can irritate an authority with its own means of retaliating. Violence is not centralised. You have to rely on instinct, sometimes adjust a headline, spend hours on a paragraph to say what needs to be said, report accurately, and remain free — and alive."

One of the founders of SOS Médias Burundi, Éloge Willy Kaneza, interviews lawyer Fabien Segatwa during the trial of the individuals behind the failed 2015 coup d'état, at the Gitega Court of Appeals. © SOS Médias Burundi

GORILLA FM: A PIONEER OF ENVIRONMENTAL RADIO

The idea of creating *Gorilla FM* first emerged in 2016 after Alain Bashizi, head of the *RFI* listeners' club in Bukavu at the time, visited Kahuzi-Biega National Park. There were many stories to be covered there: protecting gorillas, improving the living conditions of the Pygmy communities (forest dwellers driven out of the area when the park was created), raising public awareness about biodiversity, and addressing the illegal extraction of resources. Tensions between the park's authorities, represented by the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN), and neighbouring communities had reached a point of no return, with clashes resulting in several deaths on both sides. The idea of launching a radio station quickly took shape. "We realised there

was a lack of dialogue between the involved parties, which was a major issue," explained the station's founder.

Gorilla FM was officially launched on 20 March 2020, with 22 employees. Located within the park itself, the station became a space for news and dialogue, a valuable tool in a time of high tensions and a fragile press. When the team investigated the funding of armed groups present in the park, the intimidation attempts began. In 2021, several journalists were held inside the radio studio by Mai-Mai militiamen. A few months later, Alain Bashizi was taken hostage for several hours while investigating links between the armed groups operating in the park and various economic actors. Already operating in a sensitive environment, *Gorilla FM* was forced to suspend its broadcasts at the beginning of 2025 due to the advances of the M23. In early 2026, the board is still waiting for the right moment to resume broadcasting. "I remain hopeful. If we reopen, we will place the station within the communities themselves to gain greater independence," emphasises Alain Bashizi, who has been based outside the country since 2025.

Sign in the studio of *Gorilla FM*. © Video screenshot: Les Clubs RFI

2. UNITING TO SURVIVE: LOCAL AND REGIONAL INITIATIVES

CORACON: THE MEDIA NETWORK PROMOTING PEACE

The North Kivu Community Radio and Television Collective (CORACON) is a civil society organisation founded in 2005 by managers from 17 radio stations and one television channel in eastern DRC. According to the collective's coordinator, Jacques Vagheni, the original idea was to create a structure to support the work of non-profit and community media outlets by addressing the numerous challenges they face, including journalists' safety, access to information and training. CORACON's mission is "to support all organisations that share [its] philosophy through professional and continuous training in journalism and media management, and engage in advocacy with the state and other partners to improve the environment for non-profit and community media outlets." Today, 65 radio stations are members of the collective.

CORACON also fosters resilience. The support it provides allows its members to improve the everyday lives of local populations. For example, during the Ebola and COVID-19 health crises, "the focus was on investing in information that would enable the population to adopt proper protective practices, like preventing widespread contamination and understanding how to reach healthcare facilities quickly when feeling unwell," explains Jacques Vagheni. "The aim is for the media to produce content that is useful to the public."

Surrounded by conflict, the organisation promotes a context-sensitive approach to journalism and ensures that partner radio stations do not broadcast messages that could put them at risk. "CORACON even provides awareness-raising messages encouraging social harmony, aimed at eliminating hate speech and prejudice," says Jacques Vagheni. It also puts forward practical solutions: "Our network develops campaigns promoting peaceful coexistence, as well as knowledge-sharing about trauma responses and care […] All these actions help support hard-hit communities."

CORACON also helps radio stations acquire equipment. Thanks to international funding, over the past five years, the organisation has managed to procure more than 100 radio production kits — each consisting of a computer and a digital recorder — for its partner stations.

COLLABORATION: THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND REGIONAL INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

Another initiative that seeks to keep the region's public informed is the Ukweli Coalition Media Hub, a collaborative media centre supporting journalists in the Great Lakes region, founded in Rwanda by investigative journalist Armel-Gilbert Bukeyeneza. After being forced to flee Burundi in 2016 due to threats he received while working for the French media outlet *Jeune Afrique*, and after several years spent in Kenya, he decided to reach out to other journalists working in anglophone areas. "This project is the fruit of a great deal of reflection and personal struggle. We needed to find a way to connect the three countries of the Great Lakes region with the anglophone part of the region." The coalition was launched in the spring of 2024 and based its working model on collaboration between journalists and media outlets across the region. One year later, several members of the Ukweli Coalition Media Hub published an investigation into cocoa trafficking between eastern DRC and Uganda on the French news site *Afrique XXI* and the Kenya-based outlet *Africa Uncensored*, the coalition's main anglophone partner. This investigation was not without difficulties. "There were threats during and after the investigation, particularly when we were asking the sources for comment," explained a member of the coalition who wishes to remain anonymous.

The consortium also regularly organises training sessions for journalists in the region. Armel-Gilbert Bukeyeneza is considering the creation of a training centre for investigative journalism for media professionals in the Great Lakes region by the end of 2026. The goal is straightforward, but essential: to foster a culture of investigative reporting by producing investigations that have a positive impact on communities.

3. REBUILDING PUBLIC TRUST AND TOMORROW'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE

ADDRESSING JOURNALISTS' TRAUMA

After more than thirty years of armed conflict, instability is now entrenched in the Great Lakes region and the areas it borders. Journalists covering these territories are highly exposed to trauma. Many suffer from depression and isolation and live in increasingly precarious conditions. Repeated exposure to the war and its victims creates drastic levels of work-related stress. Addressing the mental health of these journalists is an urgent matter, yet the weight of tradition, the reluctance to talk about personal experiences and the violent situations they have encountered while reporting make it difficult for them to open up about what they have endured. To support their mental health, RSF organised a series of psychological training sessions in Kinshasa and Kampala that brought together over fifty of the region's media professionals. Led by a psychologist and consultant in traumatic stress management, these sessions aim to strengthen participants' understanding of the consequences of professional stress and work-related trauma in war zones, train them to recognise the early signs of trauma, introduce measures for psychological self-protection and create a safe space for discussion, enabling them to share their experiences and learn from one another. "The training highlighted a genuine, urgent need for psychological support for journalists covering crises in the region. Participants were receptive, engaged and enthusiastic about practical solutions," reported the trainer, Henry Kabeya. Similar projects have been organised by local organisations, such as the Congolese Union of Women in the Media (UCOFEM). Its Goma branch, which has been operating since 2013, runs a number of initiatives to combat cybercrime and online violence and promote equal representation of women in the media. RSF partnered with UCOFEM to organise mental health workshops for 50 women journalists from South and North Kivu.

COMBATTING DISINFORMATION WITH FACT-CHECKING NETWORKS

In a region marred by rumours and disinformation campaigns, *Balobaki Check*, a website founded by Ange Kasongo, has emerged as a key player in fact-checking and media literacy. Launched in 2022, the Congolese platform's name means "they said" in Lingala, which directly echoes its mission — verifying statements and misleading content shared in the press and on social media. The website Eleza Fact ("to explain" in Lingala) is another major Congolese initiative to curb disinformation. Its mission is to verify and share reliable content tailored to local contexts and "primarily consumed by local audiences in order to raise awareness among the population of the spread of fake news, which can have harmful consequences for society, democracy and the stability of the DRC and the Great Lakes region." Eleza Fact notably maintains a strict policy of political neutrality. When it was founded in 2021, Eleza Fact began monitoring social media, fuelled by the belief that weakens trust in the news media and

From 10 to 12 February, the fact-checking initiative Eleza Fact organised a training session on fact-checking and digital security, supported by RSF. Twenty-four journalists from three provinces across the country participated.

has direct consequences on the safety and well-being of citizens. Its team of 12 journalists, spread across several provinces of the DRC, was able to debunk — and expose — a fake news story that was leveraged to call for the boycott of insecticide-treated mosquito nets in the east of the country. The team also fact-checked a false rumour about the presence of war munitions in World Food Programme (WFP) convoys in Butembo, a city in North Kivu. Eleza Fact also strengthens the capacity of media outlets by providing training and technical support. Since January 2024, at least 24 journalists from community radio stations in North Kivu and Ituri have been trained in fact-checking techniques. In early 2026, 50 more media professionals received the same training in the cities of Bunia and Kinshasa with the support of RSF.

Headquartered in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, PesaCheck is another pioneer of fact-checking projects in East Africa, particularly in the English-speaking countries of the Great Lakes region. The media outlet was founded in 2016 by Justin Arenstein and Kenyan journalist Catherine Gicheru, and now has around thirty full-time members of staff across 18 countries on the African continent, including Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Striving to be as transparent as possible, PesaCheck makes its sources accessible to readers by clearly identifying the affiliations and expertise of human sources, making source documents available on a dedicated platform and archiving files and web pages on archive.org. Aware that disinformation cannot be tackled by just one organisation, *PesaCheck* also provides the public with the necessary tools to check information themselves. In Kenya, the organisation developed platforms such as *Wajibisha* and *TaxClock*, which enable citizens to verify the promises made by politicians and the government, and check government budget data. The continental organisation *Africa Check*, an RSF partner, is also active in the region through its Kenya office.

PROMOTING RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM WITH THE JTI

Faced with the scale of disinformation in the region, a growing number of news outlets are adopting the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), an international journalism standard launched by RSF in 2019 to strengthen transparency and promote trustworthy reporting. Designed as an ISO-type standard and developed by a committee of 130 experts, the JTI offers a framework for assessing a media outlet's editorial practices, governance, financial transparency and adherence to professional standards — without judging the content it publishes. Media outlets applying for the certification first conduct a self-assessment, then publish a transparency report and, if the criteria are met, are certified by an independent auditing firm. The goal of the JTI is to boost outlets with high professional standards, strengthen public trust in the media and provide advertisers, donors and online information platforms — such as search engines, chatbots and social media — with clear benchmarks for identifying credible sources of information.

A total of 143 media outlets are currently involved in the JTI process in the Great Lakes region, of which:

- 81 are conducting self-assessments;
- 58 have published their transparency reports;
- 4, all in the DRC, are already certified: *Femmes d'Afrique Magazine*, *Journal des Nations*, *Jambo RDC* and *Habari RDC*.

"As the owner of a certified media outlet, JTI has helped me to better structure my operations," says Christelle Mpongo, editor of *Femme d'Afrique Magazine*. "However, since certification is not permanent, I continue to work to comply with international journalistic standards. A monitoring audit is conducted every year." In a region where disinformation campaigns that imitate trustworthy media outlets are particularly active and access to funding is especially difficult, a workshop was held in Kinshasa in December 2025 to present and exchange ideas about the JTI, bringing together some 20 media outlets – some of them JTI certified. The workshop was followed by a capacity-building programme enabling media outlets to improve their information production and dissemination processes in order to obtain certification. For a media outlet, the JTI "badge" signals reliability not only to its readers but also to state actors and donors looking to invest in trustworthy news.

Translation:
"I am Muluba" "I am Muswahili"
"I am Mungala" "I am Mukongo"
"I am…"

Translation:
"We are Habari RDC!"

Habari RDC, a Congolese platform comprising more than 100 bloggers across the country and founded in 2016, is one of four Congolese media outlets to have received JTI certification. "Since its inception, Habari RDC has made diversity one of its core values," reads a statement on their website. © Kalpone / Habari RDC

FOCUS

What it's like to be a *Balobaki Check* fact-checker

Ange Kasongo (Kinshasa): "Since democratic culture has not yet taken hold in the Great Lakes region, governments are strongly tempted to manipulate information in order to sway public opinion. There is a desire to prevent certain individuals, such as activists, journalists and political opponents, from participating or expressing themselves. A fact-checker's daily work involves monitoring social media. We are also sometimes forced to do it manually in WhatsApp groups. This closed social media platform generates a lot of interest and fosters trust, but its intimate nature also facilitates the spread of fake news. The biggest daily challenge remains access to public information and reliable sources."

Dhino Kazadi (Kinshasa): "Being a fact-checker in the DRC and the Great Lakes region means working at the heart of recurrent political and security tensions and on emotionally charged subjects. One of the main challenges is to identify and debunk toxic narratives before they go viral and reach a point of no return. Being a fact-checker in the Great Lakes region also involves taking precautions for one's own safety. This includes attributing the authorship of certain sensitive content to the editorial staff as a whole to minimise the risk of reprisals."

Richard Miviri (Goma): "In the Great Lakes region, the most frequently addressed subjects are those linked to security, politics, religion and health. Fact-checkers work under pressure because misinformation spreads quickly, especially images taken out of context. Their work is not limited to fact-checking. They must ensure that their message has a positive impact on the community and plays an educational role in limiting the spread of misinformation."

A *Balobaki Check* correspondent in the region: "The subjects addressed mainly concern political matters posted by propagandists, including politicians, who want to manipulate public opinion. Other subjects focus on content creators. For example, in Burundi, they try to attract an audience by posting provocative content to get the public's attention."

4 | RSF REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS APPEALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Regional instability and the complex management of the conflict in eastern DRC do not justify violations of press freedom and the right to information. In order to address the various issues raised in this report and ensure the right to inform citizens about matters of public interest, RSF calls for the following recommendations to be implemented.

To the authorities of Great Lakes countries:

- **guarantee the safety of journalists nationwide**, particularly in conflict areas, by establishing an independent protection framework for journalists that includes a rapid alert system;
- **put an end to threats** and physical attacks against journalists, including those made by political figures;
- **systematically open investigations** into attacks on journalists and prosecute those responsible;
- **refrain from obstructing journalists' access** to conflict zones so that they may do their work, which is to report on the situation on the ground;
- **facilitate the work of international and independent correspondents** by making accreditation procedures transparent and affordable;
- **end abusive prosecutions**, arrest warrants and convictions in absentia targeting journalists who have been forced into exile;
- **guarantee the right of exiled journalists** and their families to return safely and without reprisals;
- **put an end to internet shutdowns**, particularly during election periods and public demonstrations;
- **ensure that media regulatory bodies are independent**, transparent and impartial and that they do not issue arbitrary sanctions against journalists and media outlets;
- **revise criminal laws** and press regulations to ensure that journalists can carry out their work without the risk of arbitrary prosecution or custodial sentences;
- **for the DRC: organise national workshops** for law enforcement officials throughout the country to ensure better implementation of Ordinance-Law No. 23/009 of 13 March 2023 on press freedom;
- **for Tanzania**: establish **independent investigations** to shed light on the press freedom violations that occurred during the October 2025 electoral demonstrations;
- **provide targeted economic support** (grants, training, access to advertising) to media outlets to ensure their viability and editorial independence;
- **support the diversity and sustainability of reliable news media by using the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI)** in the creation and allocation of grant programmes.

To the authorities and institutions in host countries:

- **ensure the safety of exiled journalists** in the host territory;
- **facilitate the ability to grant humanitarian visas**, refugee status and temporary protections to journalists at risk;
- **foster the professional integration** of exiled journalists.

To the East African Community (EAC) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD):

- **play a proactive role in conflict mitigation** and peacebuilding measures, while working closely with the media and civil society organisations to assess the situation, communicate findings and maintain a transparent approach in the Great Lakes region;
- **recognise and guarantee the right to information** as set out by the Partnership for Information and Democracy;
- **promote and facilitate the adoption of the JTI** standard as a reference for developing public policies that boost the viability of member states' media landscapes.

To the African Union (AU) and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR):

- **work to ensure the implementation of the above recommendations** by states in the region, notably alongside the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression;
- **recognise and guarantee the right to information** as set out by the Partnership for Information and Democracy;
- **promote and facilitate the adoption of the JTI** standard as a reference for developing public policies that boost the long-term viablity of member states' media landscapes.

To technical and international partners:

- **establish special funds for the reconstruction of destroyed media outlets;**
- **finance and sponsor training sessions** on journalist safety, particularly for women journalists;
- **help media organisations establish safety protocols**;
- **create emergency funds dedicated to supporting journalists in exile** (housing, legal assistance, digital security, psychological support);
- **support exiled media outlets** through funding that ensures the sustainability of their editorial independence;
- **support the development of a diverse, trustworthy media landscape on the continent** by helping media organisations adhere to stringent transparency and professional standards via JTI certification, and by integrating the JTI as an eligibility or bonus criterion in funding and capacity-building programmes.

For 40 years, REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS (RSF) has defended media freedom, independence and pluralism all over the world. Headquartered in Paris with 14 bureaus and sections and more than 150 correspondents worldwide, it has consultative status with the United Nations and UNESCO.

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