

November 9, 2023

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Secretary Antony Blinken
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
301 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20024

RE: 131 NATIONAL, STATE, AND LOCAL FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND LEADERS CALL FOR DESIGNATION OF TEMPORARY PROTECTED STATUS FOR THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Dear President Biden, Secretary Mayorkas, and Secretary Blinken,

The undersigned 131 faith-based organizations write to urge Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Mayorkas to **designate the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for Temporary Protected Status (TPS)**. Escalating armed conflicts have further aggravated a dire humanitarian crisis, endangering millions nationwide. The United Nations estimates that over 6.9 million people in the DRC are internally displaced and has called the emergency in the country “one of the largest internal displacement and humanitarian crises in the world.”¹ The United States must act without delay to ensure that our Congolese neighbors, friends, and family members can safely remain in their communities where they belong.

The DHS Secretary, in consultation with the Secretary of State and others, may designate a country for TPS if conditions in a country (as a whole or in part) meet statutory requirements for such designation,² including ongoing armed conflict, natural disasters, or other extraordinary and temporary conditions that temporarily prevent safe return. TPS is a life-saving protection that allows people from a designated country to remain in the United States while conditions in their home country make safe return impossible.

Through advocacy, many faith-based organizations emphasize the gospel teaching, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” identifying the needs, embracing humanity, and protecting the rights of immigrants. This important legal and moral tool provides eligible individuals protection from deportation and work authorization. Our faith-based organizations and leaders strongly believe that the DRC clearly meets the statutory requirements for a TPS designation—which would extend

¹ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Record High Displacement in DRC at Nearly 7 Million* (Oct. 30, 2023), <https://www.iom.int/news/record-high-displacement-drc-nearly-7-million>.

² 8 U.S.C. § 1254a(b)(1); *see also* Homeland Security Act of 2002, Public Law 107-296, 116 Stat. 2135 (Congress delegating authority for TPS designation from U.S. Attorney General to DHS Secretary).

much needed grace to nationals from the DRC currently living in our communities and worshipping in our congregations.

I. The DRC has faced alarming levels of armed conflict for decades, with disturbing levels of violence leading to killings, sexual violence, and mass displacement over the past year.

Within the past year, the DRC has seen a dramatic increase of violence and armed conflict that has resulted in widespread sexual violence, displacement and killings. As recently as August 2023, more than 40 civilians were gunned down in Goma, North Kivu, as the persistent violence continues to escalate³. For nearly three decades, conflict and its resulting humanitarian crisis have claimed over 5.4 million lives, making it one of the deadliest conflicts in world history.⁴ Multiple active armed forces, funded by foreign nations have battled one another in this mineral-rich nation, causing devastating harm and instability among civilian populations.⁵ To date, more than 100 non-state armed groups are active in the DRC, and are subjecting civilians to widespread human rights violations.⁶

Since 2022, armed conflict in the eastern DRC has brought horrific levels of violence and “carnage,” as the resurgence of the armed group March 23 Movement (“M23”), which the UN confirms that the government of Rwanda strongly supports, has invaded the North Kivu province.⁷ The M23 group has massacred civilians with impunity, and captured large parts of the DRC’s eastern province.⁸ In the North Kivu capital Goma, Doctors without Borders/Médecins sans frontières (MSF) has been treating nearly 50 new sexual violence survivors each day.⁹

³ Andres Schipani, *UN ‘alarmed’ by deaths during protest against its DRC peacekeeping force*, Financial Times (Sep. 1, 2023), <https://www.ft.com/content/16690c3a-1e36-46c2-8af0-4dbe53fd5a8b>

⁴ International Rescue Committee (IRC), *IRC study shows Congo's neglected crisis leaves 5.4 million dead* (Jan 22, 2008), <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/irc-study-shows-congos-neglected-crisis-leaves-54-million-dead>.

⁵ The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, Actor Profile: The March 23 Movement* (April 11, 2023), <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/actor-profile-march-23-movement> (“Amidst the myriad conflicts across DRC, the M23 became the second most active non-state armed group in 2022, behind the Allied Democratic Forces, and the most active non-state armed group in Nord Kivu province.”); Amnesty International, *DRC: M23 armed group must stop killing civilians and respect international law* (Dec. 2, 2022), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/m23/> (explaining Rwanda’s support for M23 forces); Eromo Egbejule, *What is the Allied Democratic Forces armed group?*, Al Jazeera (Nov. 30, 2021), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/30/what-lies-behind-the-allied-democratic-forces-armed-group> (explaining Ugandan support for Allied Democratic Forces)

⁶ FWD.us, *Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)* (last accessed Aug. 28, 2023), <https://www.fwd.us/news/tps-drc/>.

⁷ Nellie Peyton and Hereward Holland, *U.N. experts: Rwanda has intervened militarily in eastern Congo*, Reuters (Aug. 4, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-experts-say-rwanda-has-intervened-militarily-eastern-congo-2022-08-04/>; Erin Cunningham, *Rebels killed hundreds in Democratic Republic of Congo, officials say*, Washington Post (Dec. 5, 2022); International Crisis Group, *Regional Powers Should Drive Diplomacy in DR Congo as M23 Surrounds Goma* (Nov. 30, 2022), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/great-lakes/democratic-republic-congo/regional-powers-should-drive-diplomacy-dr-congo-m23>.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, *DR Congo: Killings, Rapes by Rwanda-backed M23 Rebels* (June 13, 2023), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/13/dr-congo-killings-rapes-rwanda-backed-m23-rebels>.

⁹ James Rizzo, *The Democratic Republic of the Congo’s Unheard Humanitarian Crisis*, Just Security (Aug. 16, 2023), <https://www.justsecurity.org/87532/the-democratic-republic-of-the-congos-unheard-humanitarian-crisis/>

North Kivu is not alone in the recent rise of armed conflict. Kwamouth, a territory in the Mai-Ndombe province, has also seen a series of deadly attacks killing hundreds of people and leading to over 50,000 displaced people.¹⁰ The eastern Ituri province has seen armed violence against civilians at the hands of multiple armed groups as these forces fight over gold mining sites.¹¹ Predictably, these widespread atrocities have led to record levels of displacements and as of October 2023 the total number of displaced people in the DRC had surpassed 6.9 million.¹² A majority of these displacements are due to attacks and armed conflict.¹³ No human being should have to face such dangerous and deadly circumstances and the Biden Administration has a moral obligation to protect people from being returned to these devastating conditions through a designation of TPS for the DRC.

Armed and sexual violence of such magnitude have already caught the attention of the United States. Secretary Blinken has contacted the DRC's President Tshisekedi regarding those "killed, injured, displaced, or left vulnerable by the ongoing violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo."¹⁴ The United States has issued sanctions on senior members of the armed groups, stating that "[a]ll sides in the conflict are responsible for serious human rights abuses including, but not limited to, intentional targeting of civilian populations through sexual violence."¹⁵ The Department of State has further issued its highest level of warning against travel in the eastern provinces, citing ongoing "crime, civil unrest, terrorism, armed conflict, and kidnapping."¹⁶ We are calling on this administration to provide TPS protections without delay to ensure the safety of our Congolese neighbors, friends and family members in the U.S.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *DR Congo: Rampant Intercommunal Violence in West* (March. 30, 2023), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/30/dr-congo-rampant-intercommunal-violence-west>.

¹¹ UN Security Council, *Options for adapting the configuration of MONUSCO and the future United Nations configuration in the country beyond the current mandate of the Mission - Report of the Secretary-General (S/2023/574)* [EN/AR/RU/ZH] (Aug. 13, 2023), https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4017644/files/S_2023_574-EN.pdf.

¹² UNHCR, *DR Congo emergency* (last accessed Aug. 28, 2023), <https://www.unhcr.org/us/emergencies/dr-congo-emergency>; UNHCR, *Refugees in the DRC* (last accessed on Sep, 1, 2023), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/cod#idp>

¹³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Democratic Republic of the Congo: Nord Kivu, Sud Kivu et Ituri: Internally displaced persons and returnees, July 2023* (Aug. 22, 2023), <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/democratic-republic-congo/democratic-republic-congo-nord-kivu-sud-kivu-et-ituri-internally-displaced-persons-and-returnees-july-2023>.

¹⁴ U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken (@SecBlinken), Twitter (May 24, 2023, 4:21 PM), <https://twitter.com/SecBlinken/status/1661467353849249794>.

¹⁵ Reuters, *US sanctions six for alleged role in Congo's eastern conflict* (Aug. 24, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-sanctions-six-alleged-role-congos-eastern-conflict-2023-08-24/>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs, *Democratic Republic of the Congo Travel Advisory* (last accessed Aug. 28, 2023), <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-travel-advisory.html>.

II. Ongoing conflict has led to extraordinary and temporary conditions, with cholera, food insecurity, and water shortages.

Human rights advocates¹⁷ Members of Congress¹⁸ and faith leaders¹⁹ have long called for action in light of the urgent and extraordinary situation facing the DRC. The DRC suffers from the “largest food crisis in the world,” with over 25.8 million people living in food insecurity.²⁰ The food crisis spans nationwide, although it is more acute in the eastern side of the DRC.²¹ In 2023, MSF has treated more than 20,500 children at nutritional centers across the region.²² Food insecurity also aggravates vulnerability to gender-based violence, as MSF has reported that women and girls searching for food and firewood have been attacked and raped.²³

Food insecurity is but one of the many ripple effects of the armed conflict in the eastern region, which has led to crises in health, education, access to water, and shelter.²⁴ The United Nations just declared that the DRC is suffering its worst cholera epidemic since 2017, with over 8,000 children under the age of 5 already infected throughout the first half of the year in North Kivu alone—a six-fold increase compared to the same timeframe in 2022.²⁵ This is particularly alarming since in 2017, the cholera epidemic spread nationwide, including the capital city of Kinshasa leading to 55,000 infections and over 1,100 deaths. Millions of displaced people are at acute risk, as many live in overcrowded camps with water shortages and lack of sanitary facilities.

III. Designating the DRC for TPS is in the U.S. national interest.

The United States has long recognized that admitting DRC nationals comports with the U.S. national interest. The DRC has been the top country of origin for refugee admissions in the United States for years, underscoring the widespread character of the DRC crisis.²⁶ **Yet, it is the only nation among**

¹⁷ TPS-DED Administrative Advocacy Coalition, *Amid Ongoing Armed Conflict and a Humanitarian Crisis*, Congolese Community in the U.S. Launches Demand for TPS and SSR (Feb. 1, 2023), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60b79f3630f94f1039bd0125/t/63daa4ed7d85e82f89e70002/1675273454125/Release_+DRC+Campaign+Launch.docx.pdf; FWD.us, *supra* n. 5.

¹⁸ Booker Leads Colleagues in Urging Trump to Address Democratic Republic of Congo’s Political, Humanitarian Crisis (Oct. 3, 2017), <https://www.booker.senate.gov/news/press/booker-leads-colleagues-in-urging-trump-to-address-democratic-republic-of-congo-and-rsquo-political-humanitarian-crisis>.

¹⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Letter to Secretary of State Blinken Regarding Situation in Democratic Republic of the Congo*, August 8, 2023 (Aug. 8, 2023), <https://www.usccb.org/resources/letter-secretary-state-blinken-regarding-situation-democratic-republic-congo-august-8>

²⁰ United Nations (ONU Info), *RDC : des millions de personnes menacées par la faim alors que les financements se tarissent (PAM)* (Aug. 23, 2023), <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2023/08/1137812>

²¹ *Id.* (44% of the population in the North and South Kivu provinces on the eastern side of the DRC are impacted by the food crisis).

²² Rizzo, *supra* n. 6.

²³ Human Rights Watch, *supra* n. 5.

²⁴ ONU Info, *supra* n.18 (“Le conflit dans l’est de la RDC est une crise interdépendante qui affecte l’insécurité alimentaire, la malnutrition, la santé, l’éducation, l’accès à l’eau potable et les abris”).

²⁵ ONU Info, *RDC : les enfants confrontés à la pire épidémie de choléra en six ans* (Aug. 18, 2023), <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2023/08/1137762>

²⁶ Ryan Baugh, *Fiscal Year 2020 Refugees and Asylees Annual Flow Report*, DHS Office of Immigration Statistics (March 8, 2022), https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2022-03/22_0308_plcy_refugees_and_asylees_fy2020_1.pdf (“A total of 11,840 persons were admitted to the United States as refugees during 2020, including 5,142 as principal refugees and 6,698 as derivative refugees.4 The leading countries of nationality for refugees admitted during this period were the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo), Burma, and Ukraine.”).

the top five countries of origin for the U.S. refugee program that has yet to receive TPS designation.²⁷

A TPS designation would not only shield important members of our communities and congregations from deportation to unsafe or dangerous conditions, it would also boost their unique contributions to our society. As we write, 2,000 DRC nationals, who live with 6,000 U.S. citizens, would benefit from a TPS designation. Those same individuals contribute \$30 million to the economy annually, and have a workforce participation rate of 93%, providing essential services at a time of worker shortages and high inflation.²⁸ Designating TPS for the DRC would ensure that their contributions to our economy and communities continue, as well as keep thousands of American families safe and together.

Last but not least, we firmly believe that a TPS designation brings our moral values in alignment with our laws. Across our diverse faith traditions, we are called by our sacred texts to the practices of welcoming the sojourner and acting in solidarity with the vulnerable. Not deporting people to harm at this juncture should be a moral imperative. The conditions described in this letter are the latest manifestation of unsafe and dangerous conditions the DRC has suffered, as it continues to reel from decades of instability and cascading harms—where external influence frequently often undermined, rather than reinforced, its quest to become a stable, democratic, and peaceful nation.²⁹ With this TPS designation, the United States would finally recognize and protect vulnerable DRC nationals.

We thus urge you, President Biden, Secretary Mayorkas, and Secretary Blinken, to review country conditions and immediately designate TPS for the DRC. We request that an initial designation of 18 months is granted, along with a prompt publication of the Federal Register Notice, a minimum 180-day registration period for eligible applicants to submit their applications, and a community-driven outreach campaign for awareness about the relief. As people of faith, we know such a response is supported by the values, laws, and ideals that this country holds dear.

Sincerely,

²⁷ Nils Kinuani, *Temporary protected status could save Congolese lives*, Afro News (July 27, 2023), <https://afro.com/temporary-protected-status-could-save-congolese-lives/> (“Of the five countries with the highest number of refugees resettled in the U.S. in 2022, the DRC is the only country without a TPS designation.”).

²⁸ FWD.us, *supra* n. 16.

²⁹ Kasper Hoffmann, *How DRC’s colonial legacy forged a nexus between ethnicity, territory and conflict*, The Conversation (Feb. 1, 2021), <https://theconversation.com/how-drcs-colonial-legacy-forged-a-nexus-between-ethnicity-territory-and-conflict-153469> (explaining that ethnic character of DRC conflict finds its roots in decades of Belgian colonialism); Lily Meyer, *CIA Role In Africa Expanded As U.S. Cold War Worries Grew, 'White Malice' Details*, NPR (Aug. 21, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/12/1027183677/cia-role-in-africa-expanded-as-u-s-cold-war-worries-grew-white-malice-details> (outlining U.S. Central Intelligence Agency’s role in undermining democratic leader Patrice Lumumba prior to his assassination); Nik Stoop, Marijke Verpoorten & Peter van der Windt, *More legislation, more violence? The impact of Dodd-Frank in the DRC*, PLoS ONE 13(8): e0201783 (Aug. 9, 2018), <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0201783> (highlighting adverse, unintended impact of section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, which “increased the incidence of battles with 44%; looting with 51% and violence against civilians with 28%” while intending to ensure that minerals sourced from the DRC were conflict-free).

National

Adrian Dominican Sisters Immigration Assistance
Adrian Dominican Sisters
Adrian Dominican Sisters
Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN)
American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)
Asian American Christian Collaborative
Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace
Catholic Charities USA
Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office, Wash DC
Church of the Brethren, Office of Peacebuilding and Policy
Church World Service
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
Disciples Home Missions
Dominican Sisters of Sparkill
Dominicans of the Roman Congregation
Felician Sisters of North America
Franciscan Action Network
God is Good Assembly
Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart
Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, USA-JPIC
Immigrant Connection at City Life
Immigrant Connection- Blue Ridge
Internationally syndicated Catholic social justice and peace columnist (National Catholic Reporter)
Justice & Advocacy Ministries at Disciples Home Missions
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Medical Mission Sisters, Justice Office
Missionary Sister of the Sacred Heart of Mary
Muslim Institute for Education & Religion
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Council of Churches
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
New Jerusalem Dream Center Church of God

New Wineskins Missionary Network
Parity
Pax Christi USA
Prayer Pioneers
Presbyterian Church (USA)
Provincial Council Clerics of St. Viator
Redemption Rehoboth Tabernacle
School Sisters of Notre Dame, Milwaukee, WI
School Sisters of Notre Dame
Sisters of Charity
Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati
Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Western Province Leadership
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Justice Team
Sisters of Mercy
Sisters of St Joseph of Peace
Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia
Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God
Sisters of St. Francis, Clinton, Iowa
Sojourners
Sisters of St. Francis, Oldenburg, Indiana
Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam
Union For Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice
UNITED SIKHS
World Relief

State

Capuchin Province of St. Joseph
Catholic Charities of SW Kansas
Catholic Coalition for Migrant Justice
Catholic Coalition for Migrant Justice
Catholic Social Services
Church Women United in New York State
Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose

East Bay Sanctuary Covenant
Franciscan Peace Center, Clinton, Iowa
Interfaith Council for Peace & Justice-Immigration Justice Caucus
Jesus for All Evangelistic Ministry
Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation Committee, Springfield Dominicans
Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (LSSNCA)
Missionary Center Salvation Ark
Nazareth Church Not Ethnic Ministries Inc.
Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada
Sanctuary Working Group UCC
Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati

Local

Archdiocese of Miami
Archdiocese of Seattle
Ascension Lutheran Church
Carmelite Sisters, Vedruna
Catholic Charities of Central and Northern Missouri
Catholic Charities of North Louisiana
Catholic Charities of Southern Colorado
Catholic Coalition for Migrant Justice
CIJPIC Carmelite Sisters, Vedruna
Community of the Holy Spirit
Compass Immigration Legal Services
Dominican Sisters of Houston
Dorothy Day Catholic Worker House
Faith & Justice committee, St. Joseph Parish
Friends of St. Francis
Haitian Christian United Church
HIAS Pennsylvania
Immigrant Connection at Sent Church
Immigrant Hope Gainesville
Immigrant Hope-Wyoming/Idaho
Interfaith Initiative for Social Justice

Interfaith Welcome Coalition - San Antonio
Jewish Coalition for Immigrant Justice NW
Long Island Immigration Clinic
Multicultural Family Center
New Hope Office of Immigration services
Northeast Ohio Friends of Immigrants
Outreach Coordinator, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami
Pedro Arrupe Jesuit Institute
Rehoboth Tabernacle
Restoration Community Church
San Bernardino Diocese
Sanctuary Working Group
Sayuni Pentecostal Church
Sherman Street Christian Reformed Church
Sisters and Brothers of Immigrants, Inc.
Sisters of St. Dominic of Blauvelt, New York
Sisters of St. Dominic
Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia, Kansas
Sisters of St. Joseph
SOLACE
St. Aloysius Parish Charity and Social Justice Commission Committee
St. Cronan Catholic Church
St. Elizabeth Catholic Church
St. Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church
St. Pius V Parish
Uncage & Reunite Families Coalition
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hidalgo County Texas
United Church in University Place
University Mennonite Church
Wesley United Methodist Church
West Hills Friends Church