Nonviolent Peaceforce

NONVIOLENT PEACEFORCE IN DRC

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Who we are

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo protects civilians in the midst of conflict without weapons. Our approach, Unarmed Civilian Protection, relies on trusted relationships, a protective presence, and direct engagement with communities and armed actors to prevent violence and reduce harm.

Wherever we go, our work is guided by principles of solidarity, people's agency, and humility. In practice, that means we listen, and through listening we build trust. Communities know best what threatens them and what keeps them safe. Our role is to stand alongside them.

What communities in South Kivu are telling us

Since 2025, we have been working with communities in South Kivu, including Kalehe and Kalonge. We have heard, and witnessed, what people are living through when it comes to their safety. Between April and September 2026, this is what they told us.

They're telling us that the conflict reaches them even far from the frontlines. Villages in the Kalehe Highlands change hands as armed groups fight for territory and strategic routes. Heavy artillery and, increasingly, combat drones threaten populated areas. Homes, schools and health facilities are damaged, leaving people without services long after the fighting stops. Away from the front, civilians face looting, extortion and restrictions on movement. In September, travellers between Bunyakiri and Kalonge pass six checkpoints on a single journey, paying around CDF 1,000 (US$0.44); or CDF 6,000 (US$2.64) in total, a heavy burden for households already struggling to eat and meet other basic needs. They also increase the cost of transporting goods, further driving up prices in communities where food is already increasingly unaffordable. Under armed control, people are arrested for missing compulsory community labour, pressured to attend political demonstrations or intimidated for questioning armed authority. Accusations of collaboration with an opposing group, sometimes after nothing more than visiting relatives, can lead to detention, torture or disappearance. They're telling us that the conflict isn't just visible in the gunfire but that is has disrupted civilian life entirely. Reports of torture, disappearance and killings reinforce the fear that even ordinary activities may attract suspicion.

They're telling us that their livelihoods are collapsing. Insecurity keeps families from their fields, livestock and markets, cuts trade routes and drives up prices. A trader in Tchofi described how fighting in the Kalehe Highlands had transformed commerce along Lake Kivu. Where people once came down from the hills with gold, milk and produce to trade for fish and manufactured goods. Now many arrive empty-handed, displaced by the fighting. In Kasheke, residents told us that CDF 10,000 (US$4.40) now buys half the flour it once did. Families go into debt, sell part of their food rations, or carry sacks at distribution sites for a measure of rice or beans. Children break stones at extraction sites or miss school because their families cannot afford the costs of public education. This loss of sustainable livelihoods

has made people increasingly dependent on humanitarian assistance, while they grapple with the acknowledgment that humanitarian assistance cannot replace a functioning local economy. All in all, people are telling us that war is steadily removing the very means people have to escape poverty.

They're telling us that fleeing the fighting does not end their struggle. The International Organization for Migration estimated 1.09 million internally displaced people in South Kivu in mid-2026, nearly 336,000 of them in Kalehe territory. Many have moved to the lakeshore, where host families with little to spare are taking in thousands of new arrivals. Prolonged displacement makes recovery increasingly difficult for both groups, especially as displaced people arrive without harvests, livestock, savings or secure employment. In September, displaced families in Bulengo village in Kasheke, told us they had initially sought refuge near a military position, but moved again because they feared being perceived as associated with government soldiers and face potential reprisals. They described not having received any assistance in their displacement journey, leading two children among them to pass away in the previous three months for lack of medical care. In Katashola, more than 800 displaced households depend on a single standpipe, and women and children queue from five in the morning to collect as little as 20 litres of water. Meanwhile, makeshift shelters offer little protection against the rains, and schools and health facilities struggle to accommodate the growing population.

They're telling us that scarcity and fear are turning neighbours against each other. Disputes over land, water, debts and aid are harder to resolve when poverty is deepening and credible justice is out of reach. In Amani, a dispute between two women over just CDF 20,000 (US$8.80) escalated into accusations of witchcraft. At humanitarian distributions, we have seen families bring gravely ill children rather than risk smaller rations, and the pressure has turned deadly. In August, an eight-month-old child, already ill, died after being brought to a distribution site in Mushonezo. In July, a fight between two women at a distribution site resulted in one losing her unborn child. In Kalonge and Kasheke, unverified reports of impending attacks have prompted families to flee, abandoning possessions and exposing themselves to theft, while accusations of collaboration with armed groups lead to denunciations and threats of revenge. Such accusations can carry deadly consequences, particularly where mob violence goes unchecked. In September, a young man accused of stealing a radio was reportedly beaten to death by a crowd in Idjwi, before his body was burned; children were among those present. These forms of violence are not new, nor can every incident be attributed to the war but what people are telling us is that the widespread vailability of weapons armed actors' involvement in civilian affairs and limited access to credible justice make it easier for disputes that might otherwise be resolved through community mechanisms to become lethal.

They are telling us that women and girls bear a particular share of the danger. In Kalonge, members of NP-supported protection teams describe sexual violence as a daily reality, yet many survivors stay silent for fear of stigma, retaliation or rejection by their husbands and families. The threat of rape shapes everyday life and restricts not only

women's freedom of movement, but also their ability to earn a living and feed their families. In Kaboneke, women told us they avoid the most fertile fields because of the risk of assault, cultivating poorer land closer to home or travelling in groups. Community members also raised alarm about the sexual exploitation of adolescent girls, early pregnancies and interrupted schooling. Between April and September 2026, NP teams accompanied survivors, including young children, to access urgent medical care and specialised services. In one village alone, we accompanied more than seven survivors to appropriate services in just three months. Even where assistance is available, fear, insecurity and the difficulty of reaching health facilities can prevent survivors from obtaining timely care.

They are telling us that they are dealing with more than physical insecurity. Cholera, floods and the Ebola outbreak add to the strain. Cholera has claimed lives in lakeshore communities like Ishovu, where safe drinking water remains scarce. Bushfires, storms and flooding have destroyed homes and crops, while the Ebola outbreak has disrupted movement and strained health services. Such crises would be serious under any circumstances. Prolonged conflict makes them harder to withstand: household resources are depleted, public services overstretched and humanitarian access constrained. Beneath it all lies an unspoken burden of trauma and grief. We have met people expressing suicidal thoughts, in places where psychosocial support is scarce. Communities are showing us that years of violence, bereavement, displacement and uncertainty have left many people struggling with deep trauma and distress.



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They're also showing us that they're not waiting to be rescued. For civilians in South Kivu, the cost of this war is measured not only in lives lost and people displaced, but in fields left uncultivated, children missing school and the daily struggle to avoid harm. A political settlement remains essential, but its prospects are uncertain, and peace negotiations alone cannot address the immediate threats civilians face today. In the meantime, communities are protecting one another. Women travel together to reduce their exposure to violence. Families shelter displaced neighbours despite having little to spare. People share warnings, mediate disputes and, on rare occasions, risk engaging with armed actors directly to keep themselves and others safe. Their capacity to withstand further shocks is under growing pressure, but it has not disappeared. This is the strength that NP's approach - Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) - builds on. It lies in understanding local threats and working with communities to develop practical responses. Working with Community Protection Teams and Women's Protection Teams, we use trusted relationships and direct engagement rather than weapons to prevent violence and reduce harm. **Your support helps us stand alongside communities as they protect themselves, and invest in a more peaceful future.**

Unarmed Civilian Protection in Practice

What does civilian protection without weapons look like on the ground? In South Kivu, NP works alongside communities to identify threats, prevent violence and resolve conflicts through a range of practical, nonviolent methods. The following examples illustrate some of these approaches: protective presence, early warning and rumour control, and mediation and dialogue – showing how they work, why they can be effective, and what they have achieved in practice.

Protective Presence Patrols: How Presence Prevents Violence

In Muhongoza, South Kivu, tensions between displaced families and host communities had escalated into repeated incidents, including verbal threats and the burning of shelters. Fear increasingly restricted everyday life: displaced people were afraid to enter the town marketplace, while some host-community members feared crossing the IDP camps to reach their fields.

We began targeted protective presence patrols in the places and at the times where tensions were highest. The patrols were deliberately sporadic, meaning potential perpetrators could not predict when NP would be present. This visible but unpredictable presence contributed to a decrease in incidents of violence. Conversations during patrols helped us track changing risks and build relationships with both host and displaced communities. As violence fell, trust in NP's nonviolent approach grew and so did people's confidence that the underlying tensions could be resolved peacefully. This opened the way for us to facilitate dialogue between the two communities, who identified shared concerns and agreed practical steps to address sources of tension and improve their relationship.

How this works

Protective presence patrols are a core Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) strategy. They involve the deliberate presence of trained, nonpartisan civilian protection personnel in places and at times where civilians face heightened risks. Conducted on foot or by vehicle, patrols may respond to a specific threat or early warning, or proactively monitor changing protection dynamics and maintain presence in communities. Their protective effect works through several mutually reinforcing mechanisms:

1. **Raising the cost of perpetrating violence:** Violence and abuse are often easier to perpetrate when they are unseen and carry few perceived consequences. The presence of a recognised, independent third party means potential perpetrators know their actions may be witnessed, reported or raised with authorities and other influential actors. This can reduce the space in which violence can occur.
2. **Creating safer space for civilians:** Presence can reduce immediate exposure to threats and hence, help people do what they might otherwise avoid - travelling along a particular

route, accessing markets or services, collecting water, or participating in community life. It does not replace people's own protection strategies, but it creates space in which civilian can exercise greater agency over their own safety.

3. **Seeing, listening and detecting risks early:** Patrols are interactive. NP teams speak with women, men, young people, community leaders and others they encounter, allowing us to understand how people are experiencing security in real time. Regular presence can reveal emerging threats, rumours, tensions and changes in armed-actor behaviour that may not appear through formal reporting channels.
4. **Building the relationships that make protection possible:** UCP depends on trust and acceptance. Regular presence allows us to build relationships not only with communities, but with authorities, security actors, armed actors and other stakeholders whose behaviour can affect civilian safety. Over time, these relationships create access, information and channels of influence that can be mobilised when a protection threat emerges.

What we have learned through protective presence

Protection does not require the threat of force. Strategic, visible presence can directly reduce opportunities for violence and change the calculations of potential perpetrators. Then, the relationships and trust built alongside that presence reinforce its protective effect, while creating pathways towards longer-term, community-led solutions to conflict.



Early Warning, Early Response and Rumour Control: Protecting by Anticipating Threats

In Kasheke, South Kivu, communities face recurring threats of armed incursions from the surrounding Highlands. When warnings of approaching fighters spread, families have often fled in haste towards Lake Kivu, hoping to cross to safety. These sudden movements carry important risks for those on the move: children can become separated from caregivers, people may be exposed to violence while fleeing, and transport across the lake is not always available or affordable. False warnings have also been deliberately spread to drive residents from their homes, allowing thieves to loot the property left behind.

Working with NP, the Kasheke Community Protection Team have come together to develop a community-led Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) system, organising protection at the household and neighbourhood level. During evacuations, adults have agreed to take responsibility for nearby children rather than delaying departure to search for their own, trusting that neighbours will do the same. The community has identified safer evacuation routes and negotiated advance arrangements with boat operators, reducing delays and the risk of exploitation. Families have also prepared essential documents, money and supplies, and considered how to safeguard possessions left behind.

In this process, members in the community have also strengthened their ability to distinguish credible threats from rumours. Through trusted contacts in neighbouring areas, they cross-check warnings before deciding whether to flee. Between April and September 2026, this helped the community avoid unnecessary displacement on at least two occasions when warnings proved unfounded. The result is a community better prepared to respond when danger is real, and less vulnerable to fear and manipulation when it is not.

How this works

Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) systems allow communities to anticipate threats and take protective action before violence occurs. Their effectiveness rests on three interconnected functions:

1. **Early detection:** Community monitors track warning signs and changes in the security environment against pre-set, context-specific indicators that the community has defined for itself, drawing on local knowledge and trusted networks. This creates time to prepare before violence reaches them.
2. **Information verification and rumour control:** Communities cross-check warnings to assess their credibility. This is critical in contexts where false rumours can themselves trigger displacement, panic or retaliatory violence. Careful verification and communication help prevent harmful reactions to misinformation without dismissing genuine threats.

3. **Coordinated early response:** Communities establish plans, responsibilities and communication channels in advance, enabling households to act quickly and collectively when danger arises. Even where an attack cannot be prevented, preparation can reduce exposure to violence, family separation and other harms.

Unlike systems that depend on state authorities or security forces to respond to alerts, community-led EWER places these capacities directly in the hands of civilians. Households and neighbours organise their own protection using local relationships, knowledge and resources, making effective responses possible even when external protection is unavailable.

What we have learned through EWER and rumour control

Early warning is only protective when people can act on it. Equally, unchecked rumours can create danger. Kesheke demonstrates how communities can prepare for genuine threats while preventing unnecessary displacement caused by false warnings. By placing the capacity to assess risks and respond within communities themselves, these approaches make protection more immediate, locally grounded and less dependent on external actors.

Mediation and Dialogue: Transforming Conflict Through Trust

In Muhongoza, South Kivu, tensions between displaced families living on the Katashola plantation and the host community had escalated into threats, arson and restrictions on movement. Disputes over land and livelihoods, compounded by mistrust and the breakdown of local conflict-resolution mechanisms, had left the two communities unwilling to even speak to one another.

In the immediate term, NP's protective presence patrols helped reduce violence and keep people safe. This early effort, along with the confidence and relationships built through it, allowed NP teams to work toward a deeper resolution of the conflict. Our teams undertook more than ten rounds of shuttle diplomacy, meeting the parties separately, listening to their grievances and gradually building the trust needed for dialogue. Rather than appointing external mediators, NP invited both communities to nominate people they trusted. We then worked alongside these locally chosen mediators, providing mentoring, coordination, facilitation support and protective accompaniment to create the conditions for a constructive dialogue.

The communities eventually reached a signed agreement which restored freedom of movement, access to markets and farmland, and crucially, local mechanisms for resolving disputes. Formerly displaced households are now recognised as village members in their own right, with Katashola camp renamed Katashola Avenue. Women from both communities have established themselves as a joint Women's Peace Team. And no further incidents of intercommunal violence have occured since January 2026.

How this works

Within UCP, mediation and dialogue are not standalone activities. They form part of a broader approach that combines immediate violence prevention, strategic engagement and the strengthening of local capacities to transform conflict.



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Three elements are particularly important:

1. **Creating the conditions for dialogue through complementary UCP methods:** Dialogue cannot be effective while parties remain under threat or fear engaging with one another. UCP draws on different tools at different stages of a conflict to reduce immediate risks and create space for constructive engagement. Depending on the circumstances, this might involve protective presence, interpositioning, rumour control, de-escalation or shuttle diplomacy. These methods can also be used after an agreement to prevent renewed violence and support its implementation.
2. **Using relationships as a means of protection and influence:** UCP relies on sustained, nonpartisan engagement with the actors involved in a conflict. By building acceptance and understanding their interests, fears and motivations, NP creates channels of communication and opportunities to influence behaviour that might otherwise be closed. This deep investment in human relationships enables engagement even between deeply divided parties, gradually shifting what they consider possible.
3. **Grounding legitimacy and ownership in communities:** Rather than imposing external mediators or solutions, NP works with communities to identify and strengthen the people and mechanisms they already trust. Through mentoring, facilitation support and accompaniment, NP helps local actors lead the process, negotiate their own agreements and develop the capacities to manage future disputes. This local legitimacy makes agreements more credible and gives communities a direct stake in sustaining them.

What we have learned through mediation and dialogue

In Muhongoza, protective presence created the space for dialogue, while sustained engagement and community ownership made reconciliation possible. By combining immediate protection with investment in locally led conflict resolution, UCP can do more than interrupt violence: it can help transform the relationships and dynamics that sustain it.

Why your support matters

Communities in South Kivu are not waiting to be rescued. They are already protecting one another, and the dangers they face today cannot wait for a political settlement. UCP builds on these community capacities. Through trusted relationships, practical protection strategies and direct engagement, communities can reduce immediate threats while addressing the tensions and behaviours that sustain violence. The examples in this booklet show what is possible when civilians have the support and space to organise their own protection.

The opportunity now is to take these approaches further: investing in community-led protection, expanding access to UCP skills and methods, and integrating them more systematically into wider protection and peacebuilding efforts. With sustained support, more communities can protect themselves today while helping to build the conditions for lasting peace.