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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 May 2025]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Systematic Violence Against the Banyamulenge in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Banyamulenge are an ethnic minority living mainly in the Hauts Plateaux region of South Kivu, particularly in Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga. Their historical presence in the region dates back to the 17th century. Nevertheless, they continue to face exclusion and delegitimization to this day, as they are portrayed as ‘Tutsi’ and, thus, ‘Rwandan’, ‘foreigners’ or ‘invaders’. These portrayals have their origins in colonial ethnic misclassifications that arbitrarily divided the population into ‘natives’ and ‘immigrants’.

Through hate speech and incitement to violence on the internet, the Banyamulenge are regularly portrayed as collective aggressors, further fuelling their demonisation and dehumanisation in local media and social networks. Such rhetoric exacerbates public hostility and contributes to the normalisation and continuation of mass violence against the Banyamulenge. For decades, campaigns have been waged to portray the Banyamulenge as the perpetrators of massacres in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These narratives were already reinforced by the Simba uprising of 1960. Since the 1990s, the Banyamulenge have been subjected to escalating and diverse forms of violence amounting to persecution. For many years, killings of Banyamulenge were preceded by political mobilisations in which state officials called for their elimination or violent expulsion. This rhetoric remains the driving force behind attacks by local militias on the Banyamulenge.

Actors Involved

The persecution of the Banyamulenge is neither random nor limited to specific areas. It is ideologically motivated and based on a false representation that denies their Congolese identity. This ideology is the basis for demands for their expulsion, extermination, or ‘repatriation’ to neighbouring countries, namely Rwanda and Burundi. This portrayal is reinforced by political elites at the national and regional levels and by armed groups. The patterns of violence in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo are multi-layered and take place in a complex environment involving local, regional, and international actors. There are hundreds of armed groups active in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Those attacking the Banyamulenge include the Mai-Mai militias, Burundian rebel groups, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s army (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo; FARCD).

The Democratic Republic of the Congo also plays a role in the conflict, with its elite claiming that the Banyamulenge are not Congolese. High-ranking figures have publicly called for the expulsion of the Banyamulenge population. State institutions fail to protect the Banyamulenge and are actively involved in some cases of violence. This attitude supports the Mai-Mai militias’ willingness to drive out ‘invaders’.

The M23 militia, in turn, exploits this narrative for its own interests and justifies its attacks by claiming that the Banyamulenge need protection. The Rwandan state also played the Banyamulenge against the Democratic Republic of the Congo and staged an intervention, supposedly to protect the Banyamulenge, but actually to expand their own political power in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Regional conflicts, in particular the current disputes between Rwanda and Burundi, have contributed to the deterioration of the security situation of the Banyamulenge. Through direct or proxy confrontations, both countries are fighting in South Kivu.

There is documented evidence that units of the Congolese army FARDC (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo), did not intervene in attacks and have rather actively collaborated with the attacking militias. Mai-Mai fighters have been supported by foreign militias, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo security forces have also played an important role in these attacks and killings. The United Nations Group of Experts documented that Rwandan security services have supported Burundian rebels that ended up allying with Mai-Mai militias to attack Banyamulenge. Despite the presence of MONUSCO peacekeepers in the affected regions, there have been repeated failures to prevent attacks or respond effectively to them.

Recent Escalation of the Conflict

The most recent outbreaks of violence in 2017 and 2025 were a continuation of the previous pattern, which was characterised by murder and total destruction. The Banyamulenge in South Kivu have been largely besieged, regularly attacked, and deprived of their livelihoods.

From Ituri over North and South Kivu to Tanganyika, thousands of civilians have already been killed since 2017 in an outbreak of violence. The plateaus of Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga have been ravaged by massive destruction in full view of UN peacekeeping forces. Local communities, including the Banyamulenge, have been affected by the increasing violence, which has forced thousands to flee their homes. Previous waves of violence in Bukavu, Uvira, Kamituga and other towns were marked by mass arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings.

Since January 2025, there have been increasing attacks on Banyamulenge villages in the Minembwe region, resulting in the deaths of numerous civilians and destruction of social infrastructures such as schools and homes. The security situation in 2025 has imposed a total armed siege of the Banyamulenge civilians in the plateaus of Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga. The situation of the local population is extremely precarious, with basic foodstuffs no longer available on local markets. As the Banyamulenge are portrayed as ‘non-Congolese’ or ‘Rwandan,’ they are collectively suspected of having links to armed groups such as the M23 militia. After some Banyamulenge individuals recently joined the M23 / Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC), attacks on civilians have been legitimised. This is even more so since Twirwaneho, a Banyamulenge self-defence group, recently claimed to have joined the M23/AFC. Most leaders of the Banyamulenge community believe that Twirwaneho was forced to make this official statement. The current situation is marked by a worrying proliferation of weapons distributed to local militias and armed combatants referred to as ‘Wazalendo’ by the Congolese government and the Congolese army. Since they are officially opposed to the advance of the M23, the local militias are not prevented from using their weapons and attacking those they consider ‘invaders’.

Forced Displacement

In addition to physical attacks, entire villages were increasingly burned down to drive out the Banyamulenge. The attacks have destroyed almost all rural settlements, social infrastructure, livestock and crops. Many have fled to neighbouring countries, while most have remained in the country and became internally displaced persons. The Banyamulenge's freedom of movement is increasingly restricted throughout eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Thousands have been forcibly held in isolated enclaves such as Minembwe, where they live under constant siege by armed groups such as Mai-Mai militias. History shows that the Banyamulenge have already been forced to flee other places in recent decades. In the places where they used to live, they are now considered ‘strangers’.

Economic Destruction Through Cattle Theft

Throughout the history of the Banyamulenge, attacks and killings have been accompanied by cattle theft, as cattle are a source of livelihood and part of their culture. The targeted looting of cattle has led to deep impoverishment. The recent violence against the Banyamulenge once again resorts to such strategies. The stolen cattle are used, among other things, to reward fighters or sold to acquire military equipment.

Sexual Violence

Documented reports point to the systematic use of ethnically motivated rape and sexual assault against women and girls as a means of humiliation, traumatising and social division. Survivors report that they were ‘shared’ among the perpetrators or forced to watch atrocities being committed against their family members.

Lack of Recognition and Remembrance

In the past, evidence has often been destroyed and the vulnerability of the Banyamulenge has been denied. The failure to properly contextualise this human tragedy is linked to the powerful personal, political and economic interests and/or prejudices of the actors involved. Despite repeated mass killings and systematic persecution, the Banyamulenge remain unmentioned in national and international commemorative narratives. Victims are often referred to as ‘combatants’ rather than civilians, contributing to their marginalisation and the erasure of their suffering. This lack of recognition not only exacerbates the trauma but also encourages the continuation of violence without punishment. Failure to respond to this pattern of systematic violence risks further legitimising impunity and deepening ethnic divisions in the Great Lakes region. A rights-based, justice-oriented approach is urgently needed to uphold the dignity, citizenship and security of the Banyamulenge.

Recommendations

In light of the ongoing human rights violations against the Banyamulenge community and following our statement to the UN Human Rights Council in September 2022, Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms to take the following urgent measures:

- Urge the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to provide adequate protection for the Banyamulenge.
 - Urge the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to officially recognise the Banyamulenge as full and equal Congolese citizens.
 - Urge the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to refrain from attacking the Banyamulenge and from supporting militias in doing so.
 - Impose targeted sanctions against individuals from the military, the political leadership of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and foreign and local armed groups involved in human rights violations against the Banyamulenge.
 - Establish an independent international commission of inquiry to investigate the systematic violence against the Banyamulenge since the 1990s, including the role of state and non-state actors.
 - Ensure the effective protection of civilians by MONUSCO and protect vulnerable Banyamulenge communities in the Hauts Plateaux.
 - Extend MONUSCO's mandate to include the protection of minorities.
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