

Secretary John Kerry
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

March 2, 2015

Dear Secretary Kerry:

We write to highlight the urgent and critical importance of appointing another prominent, high-level Special Envoy For the Great Lakes Region and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Since the appointment of Senator Russell Feingold as Special Envoy less than two years ago, the United States (U.S.) has played an increasingly central role in addressing one of the most enduring and serious humanitarian and human rights crises in the world in the DRC. The United States' engagement was critical to the effective removal of the rebel group M23, elevating accountability as an essential element of a durable peace, and taking the lead in calling for timely and transparent democratic elections.

Much, however, remains to be done. We are pleased to hear that the Administration plans to appoint a successor to Senator Feingold. We believe a dynamic, high-profile, well-resourced US Special Envoy reporting directly to the Secretary of State, and working with the DRC and other regional governments, is critical to addressing the challenges in Congo and promoting wider stability in the Great Lakes region.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2.7 million people remain displaced in Congo. Thousands of civilians have been killed in massacres, and women and girls have suffered horrific levels of rape and sexual violence. Around fifty armed groups continue to threaten and terrorize the populations in eastern Congo, including the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). DRC's national demobilization program, which was tailored to disarm, demobilize, rehabilitate, and reintegrate these armed groups, has been stalled for the past 14 months. While the Congolese government is gradually restoring its presence in parts of eastern Congo, exploitation and abuse by both state actors and armed groups are widespread. Furthermore, a poorly regulated trade in minerals—a trade that links the Congo to consumers in the United States—allows armed groups to extort funds and abuse civilians.

Congo is heading into a period of great uncertainty. While the Independent National Electoral Commission has now set the timetable for national elections, it remains unclear if President Kabila will step down after the completion of his second term, as is stipulated by the Congolese constitution. While there have been some significant steps forward in the democratic process in DRC, the next 21 months will be pivotal to the outcome. One key issue at stake is years of international efforts to help the Congolese build more accountable and effective government institutions. This is a moment that requires strong, uninterrupted support from the United States and other international actors, alongside a vibrant and engaged Congolese civil society. A new Special Envoy should build on the openings created by Special Envoy Feingold's engagement with political actors and civil society groups and deepen that role.

As Special Envoy Feingold steps down, we urge the Administration to continue the good work of that office and to build on its achievements through the rapid appointment of a new high-profile Envoy with a strong staff (and financial support) who reports directly to the Secretary of State. With such an envoy in place, the U.S. will continue to be uniquely positioned to work with the Congolese, their government, and regional governments including Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, South Africa, Uganda, and Angola to ensure that peace, stability, respect for human rights and rule of law take hold in this strategic and vital region.

We thank you for your dedication and commitment on this issue and are eager to work with you and the new Special Envoy to achieve our shared goals.

Sincerely,

Africa Faith and Justice Network
American Jewish World Service
Anthony W. Gambino (Former USAID Mission Director to the DRC)
Eastern Congo Initiative
Enough Project
Free the Slaves
Human Rights Watch
Humanity United
Jason Stearns, Congo Research Group
Jewish World Watch
Mark Schneider, Senior Vice President, International Crisis Group
Mercy Corps
Mvemba Phezo Dizolele, Hoover Institution
Oxfam
Open Society Institute
Open Square Charitable Gift Fund
Refugees International
Stephen R. Weissman, Former Staff Director, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Africa
United to End Genocide
Walk Free
World Relief
World Vision US

Cc: Samantha Power, Susan Rice, Linda Thomas-Greenfield