

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE GREAT LAKES REGION

June 2020

- ◆ Since the first COVID-19 case was confirmed on 8 March in South Africa, the Great Lakes region has experienced a moderate but steady spread of the virus. As of 8 June 2020 (WHO), the 13 signatory countries of the Peace, Security and Cooperation (PSC) Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the region reported a total of 67,803 confirmed cases and 1,601 fatalities.<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ Most countries implemented lockdowns and key public health measures early on, which helped slow the spread of the virus. In addition to movement restrictions, social distancing, curfews and quarantines, most countries suspended international flights and closed their borders for all movements except cargo. Almost all countries recently started to (partially) ease restrictions, despite a continued, steady rise in confirmed cases of infection.

## INITIAL IMPACT

- ◆ **Political:** COVID-19 has slowed down efforts to implement the PSC Framework and to capitalize on the recent positive momentum to advance regional cooperation to address peace, security and development issues. Two major events - the tenth Summit of the Regional Oversight Mechanism of the PSC Framework and the Great Lakes Investment and Trade Conference, had to be postponed, with key initiatives on regional security cooperation and economic development pending as a result. The meetings of the quadripartite process on the normalization of Rwanda-Uganda relations, facilitated by Angola and the DRC, were delayed from March and resumed in June via teleconference. Meanwhile, Burundi proceeded with general elections on 20 May despite concerns raised over the risks associated with the pandemic.
- ◆ **Security:** So far, the impact of the pandemic and the measures put in place to contain its spread have not had a notable effect on the activities of armed groups in eastern DRC. Attacks against the civilian population have continued, and slightly increased in North Kivu and Ituri provinces in eastern DRC. Operations by the Congolese Armed Forces, with the support of the MONUSCO Force Intervention Brigade, have continued.
- ◆ **Human rights:** In many countries, the pandemic has put a spotlight on persisting inequalities, including with regard

to health care access, labour rights and social protections. In some instances, national police have used excessive force to enforce containment measures.

- ◆ **Humanitarian:** The pandemic and associated movement and border restrictions have affected the mobility of refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons. Access by humanitarian workers has been limited in some areas.
- ◆ **Economy:** Measures taken to contain the outbreak have come at great socio-economic cost, significantly eroding progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Countless livelihoods, especially of the most vulnerable, have already been upended. The number of people living in (extreme) poverty is expected to increase. Rising prices of basic foods, unemployment and falling exports further increase pressures on already fragile economies.
- ◆ **The region's growth prospects are expected to slow down for years to come.** While the extent and effect across countries by shrinking Gross Domestic Product will differ depending on the degree of economic diversification and dependence on tourism, exports, among other factors, its impact is felt across all countries. In addition to tourism, export of minerals and other primary products, key sectors such as transport, construction, manufacturing and agriculture have been particularly hard hit.
- ◆ **Some countries in the region face multiple shocks, which present additional challenges during the COVID-19 crisis.** The DRC faces the 11<sup>th</sup> Ebola outbreak, while Kenya, South Sudan and Sudan are contending with locust infestation. A sharp decline in oil export revenues is also impacting the economies of Angola, Republic of Congo and South Sudan.

## OUTLOOK

- ◆ The reallocation of funds and means towards the COVID-19 response may impact progress on reforms and projects that are key for regional peace and development, notably the demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) of former non-state armed group combatants and cross-border economic and infrastructure projects.
- ◆ A comprehensive and coordinated effort by all partners is critical to respond effectively to this crisis and to support national and regional efforts in ensuring that recent gains in regional cooperation are sustained and advanced.
- ◆ Women and youth, as key agents of change, should be given priority consideration in the design of medium- to long-term post-COVID-19 recovery efforts.
- ◆ The time for solidarity is now.

<sup>1</sup> The PSC Framework was signed on 24 February 2013 by Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Congo, the DRC, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. In 2014, Kenya and Sudan became the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> signatories of the Framework. The United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) are acting as Framework Guarantors. The PSC Framework encompasses national, regional and international commitments geared towards addressing the root causes of conflict and ending the recurring cycles of violence in eastern DRC and the Great Lakes region.