



# PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE OF UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN

Red Cross of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Photo of a volunteer of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.  
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## Background

The Red Cross of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (CRRDC), supported by the ICRC, works to reunite members of families separated or missing as part of its Restoring Family Links (RFL) interventions. The organization is actively committed to clarifying the fate of missing persons, facilitating the exchange of family messages, and reuniting separated families.

The security situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has remained concerning for over three decades. As a continental country sharing borders with nine other nations, the DRC is a crossroads for refugees and displaced persons, with millions of people forced to flee violence and insecurity. This instability is exacerbated by a complex combination of historical grievances, disputes over natural resources, ethnic tensions, and geopolitical rivalries.

Among the causes of ongoing instability are the intensification of the conflict with the M23, as well as the activism of armed groups such as the ADF, ZAIRE, CODECO, MAI-MAI, and others. In the east of the country, clashes between the Mobondos, Tendes, and Nunus in the west, the Bakata Katanga and Mai-Mai Bitonto in the Kalemie-Katibiri region, as well as the emergence of the "Seigneurs 5 sur 5" in the southeast of Katanga, have inflicted significant suffering on civilian populations.

In particular, in North Kivu, clashes between the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) and the M23 around Sake have forced more than one million people to flee to Goma, worsening an already colossal humanitarian crisis. Humanitarian needs, particularly for food, water, healthcare and protection, continue to rise, while access to these services remains limited. This contributes to the deepening suffering of vulnerable populations, especially those facing sexual and gender-based violence, which disproportionately affects women, girls, and boys.

Mass displacement also leads to the separation of many families. The lack of news from missing loved ones during these periods of flight causes a profound sense of loss and despair.

In this context, the work of the CRRDC and the ICRC is essential to bring some hope. By searching for the missing and facilitating reunifications, these actions not only help restore family links but also restore the dignity of the affected individuals.

## Who was Supported and How

The CRRDC, in partnership with the ICRC, implements the following activities for refugees and displaced persons:

- Restoring and maintaining family links through the collection and distribution of Red Cross Messages (RCM), as well as organizing telephone calls;
- Search for family members, identification and registration of unaccompanied minors, and family reunification.

## Successes

Here is a sample of the results achieved between 2020 and 2023. It should be noted that prior to this period, the statistics were even higher than those mentioned below.

- Restoring and maintaining family links:  
From 2020 to 2023, 204,490 Red Cross Messages (RCM) were exchanged. These messages allowed many separated families to reconnect, providing essential moral support in a context marked by war and massive displacement.

- **Family reunification**  
From 2020 to 2023, 892 children were reunited with their families, including both girls and boys. This reunification was facilitated through specific procedures to identify unaccompanied children and their relatives, as well as through rigorous case monitoring. These results were made possible by the continuous commitment and training of Red Cross volunteers.
- **Addressing specific needs:**  
The particular needs of children, including albino children and children living with disabilities, were systematically addressed. Tailored measures were implemented to ensure their safety, well-being, and family reintegration, including access to specialized care and psychosocial support to meet the unique challenges faced by these children.

## Challenges and Difficulties

The DRC is a vast country with multiple conflict zones, making access difficult in many regions. Limited funding is another major challenge, as it does not allow for coverage of all problem areas. Geographical inaccessibility, particularly in remote regions, is also a significant obstacle.

To overcome these difficulties, practical solutions have been implemented. Our volunteers have been equipped with bicycles to facilitate the distribution and collection of Red Cross Messages (RCM) in hard-to-reach areas. In regions where land mobility is even more restricted, canoes are used to access isolated locations, particularly along lakes and rivers. These logistical adjustments have improved the efficiency of operations and helped maintain the vital connection between separated families, despite geographical constraints and financial challenges.

## Lessons Learned

- **Proven expertise in family links protection:** Since 1997, the CRRDC has gained valuable experience in the field of Restoring Family Links (RFL). This program has become a major pillar of the Red Cross's humanitarian efforts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the CRRDC is now a leading actor in this field. The commitment and expertise accumulated over the years allow for an effective response to the needs of populations affected by conflict and displacement. The organization has developed strong competencies in searching for the missing, maintaining family links, and family reunification, while adapting to the specific challenges of the Congolese context.
- **Raising awareness and engaging communities and authorities:** However, despite these successes, there is still work to be done to strengthen awareness among communities and local authorities. Many families are still not sufficiently aware of the family links restoration services offered by the CRRDC and the ICRC, which sometimes limits the impact of interventions.
- **Institutional ownership of the program by the National Society (NS):** The CRRDC must also prioritize strengthening institutional ownership of the program within its structure. This involves ensuring that the program is fully integrated into the organization's core operations, with clear responsibility and commitment from its leadership. Institutional ownership is crucial for ensuring the continuity, sustainability, and long-term impact of the actions undertaken.

In conclusion, while significant progress has been made, sustained efforts in these areas will further enhance the effectiveness of the program and its impact on vulnerable populations.

## Tips and Tools

If we could start over, here are the key recommendations and tools to share:

- **Strengthening local capacities and expanding the program:**  
It is essential to strengthen local capacities and extend the CRRDC's experience across the entire country, particularly in remote areas. Ongoing training of volunteers and support for local actors are crucial to ensuring effective intervention everywhere.
- **Expanding partnerships:**  
Having multiple partners helps maximize the impact of the program. Collaborating with various local and international stakeholders enriches approaches and increases the reach of actions.
- **Communication and monitoring tools:**
  - » Fixed telephone and RCM: To maintain communication in under-equipped areas.
  - » Divas Magic: An application to quickly manage messages and search forms.
  - » Aspera: To securely send sensitive information between countries.
  - » Search request form: To standardize and track search requests in a structured manner.

These tools and strategies help improve the effectiveness, responsiveness, and coverage of the program.