

JOINT BULLETIN

Making justice work: **Connecting Congolese** **communities to** **European courts**

*BRIDGING FORMAL AND INFORMAL JUSTICE
IN THE LANDMARK ROGER LUMBALA TRIAL*



**Global Initiative
Against Impunity**

Making Justice Work

Presented by:



TRIAL
International



**Impunity
Watch**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

About the Global Initiative Against Impunity

The Global Initiative Against Impunity for International Crimes and Serious Human Rights Violations (GIAI) is a civil society-led initiative of eight organisations, the Secretariat of the Coalition for the International Criminal Court (CICC) and two associate partners. Co-funded by the European Union, the Consortium endeavours to strengthen the global response to serious crimes and human rights violations, ultimately promoting a culture of accountability and respect for human rights worldwide. [Find out more.](#)



[Watch: What does 'making justice work' mean to our partners?](#)

About TRIAL International

TRIAL International is a non-governmental organisation fighting impunity for international crimes and supporting victims in their quest for justice. [Find out more.](#)

About Impunity Watch

Impunity Watch is an international non-profit organisation working with victims, survivors and communities affected by violence to transform deeply ingrained structures of impunity, deliver redress for grave human rights violations, and promote justice and peace. [Find out more.](#)

Disclaimer

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FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:
INFO@TRIALINTERNATIONAL.ORG
INFO@IMPUNITYWATCH.ORG

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TIMELINE

1996-1997
FIRST CONGO WAR

JUNE 2003
THE UNITED NATIONS PUBLISHES A REPORT IMPLICATING THE RCD-N IN THE PERPETRATION OF CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY.

APR 2003 - JAN 2005
LUMBALA BECOMES MINISTER OF FOREIGN TRADE.

2005 - 2013
LUMBALA BECOMES A MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT AND SENATOR.

2 JAN 2021
LUMBALA IS ARRESTED IN PARIS, AND CHARGED WHILE UNDER INVESTIGATION.

OCT 2023
THE PARIS COURT OF APPEAL REJECTS A MOTION FILED BY LUMBALA'S COUNSEL SEEKING THE DISMISSAL OF THE PROCEEDINGS.

28 FEB 2024
THE PARIS COURT OF APPEAL CONFIRMS ALL CHARGES.

12 NOV 2025
LUMBALA'S TRIAL OPENS BEFORE THE PARIS ASSIZE COURT; THE ACCUSED LARGELY REFUSES TO PARTICIPATE IN THE HEARINGS AND CHALLENGES FRENCH JURISDICTION.

15 DEC 2025
THE COURT FINDS LUMBALA GUILTY OF COMPLICITY IN AND CONSPIRACY TO COMMIT CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY, AND SENTENCES HIM TO 30 YEARS' IMPRISONMENT AND A PERMANENT BAN FROM FRENCH TERRITORY.

1998-2003
CONGOLESE FORCES FIGHT A VARIETY OF REBEL ARMED GROUPS IN THE SECOND CONGO WAR. IN THIS CONTEXT, THE ARMED GROUP RCD-N IS CREATED TO FIGHT CONGOLESE GOVERNMENT FORCES, IN AN ATTEMPT TO TAKE CONTROL OF RESOURCE-RICH AREAS IN THE EASTERN PART OF THE DRC.

JUL 2002 - DEC 2003
ROGER LUMBALA TSHITENGA LEADS THE RCD-N, PARTICIPATING IN AN OFFENSIVE MILITARY OPERATION (OPERATION ERASING THE BOARD / "EFFACER LE TABLEAU") AGAINST THE CIVILIAN POPULATION IN NORTHEASTERN DRC.

2016
FRANCE'S SPECIALISED UNIT FOR THE PROSECUTION OF INTERNATIONAL CRIMES OPENS AN INVESTIGATION INTO LUMBALA.

2021-2023
30+ VICTIMS AND WITNESSES ARE HEARD BY JUDICIAL AUTHORITIES IN PARIS.

6 NOV 2023
INVESTIGATING JUDGES INDICT LUMBALA FOR ALLEGED COMPLICITY IN AND CONSPIRACY TO COMMIT CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY.

SEP 2025
TWO JOURNALISTS ARE SELECTED TO TRAVEL TO PARIS AND REPORT DIRECTLY ON THE TRIAL, HELPING FACILITATE ACCESS TO INFORMATION FOR AFFECTED CONGOLESE COMMUNITIES.

21 NOV 2025
COURT CONFIRMS IT HAS JURISDICTION TO TRY THE CASE UNDER THE PRINCIPLE OF UNIVERSAL JURISDICTION.

NOV - DEC 2025
OVER FIVE WEEKS OF HEARINGS, THE COURT EXAMINES THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONING OF THE RCD-N, LUMBALA'S ALLEGED ROLE IN PREPARING AND CARRYING OUT MILITARY OPERATIONS, AND CRIMES COMMITTED AGAINST CIVILIANS IN 2002-2003.

22-24 DEC 2025
JOURNALISTS CONDUCT FOCUS GROUPS WITH AFFECTED CONGOLESE COMMUNITIES TO GATHER REFLECTIONS ON THE TRIAL AND ITS OUTCOME.

1ST

trial related to the
Second Congo War

23

years between the trial
and the crimes

30

years of imprisonment
for Lumbala

4,000+

kilometres from Ituri to Paris

AT A GLANCE

The Congo wars devastated the country from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. In eastern DRC, the collapse of state authority, the intervention of foreign powers, and the proliferation of armed groups led to massive violence against civilian populations, against a backdrop of competition for control over territory and natural resources. It was in this context that numerous politico-military movements emerged or were reconfigured, including the RCD-N.

WHO IS ROGER LUMBALA?

Roger Lumbala Tshitenga is a Congolese national and former leader of the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la démocratie – National (RCD-N)* armed group. He later became Minister of Foreign Trade and a Member of Parliament in the DRC.

WHAT WAS HE CHARGED WITH?

Roger Lumbala was charged with complicity in crimes against humanity committed during the 2002 '*Effacer le tableau*' (*Erasing the Board*) military operation in north-eastern DRC, during the Second Congo War. The charges concerned acts of murder, torture, rape, sexual slavery, enslavement through forced labour, pillage and other inhuman acts committed against civilians. **On 15 December 2025, the Paris Assize Court found Roger Lumbala guilty and sentenced him to 30 years' imprisonment.**

The Court held that, as leader of the RCD-N armed group, Lumbala knowingly supported and facilitated the military operation during which crimes against humanity were committed by forces under his authority and by allied armed groups.



Second Congo War (1998–2003)

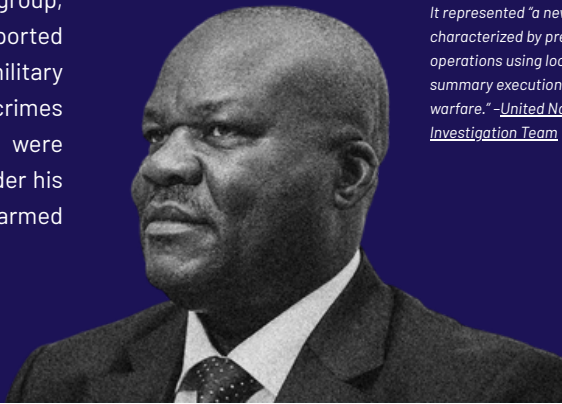
The Second Congo War resulted in over 1 million deaths and displaced millions more. It remains one of the most violent and destructive conflicts in the continent's recent history. At its peak, nine African nations and more than 25 armed groups were involved.



Operation Erasing the Board ("*Effacer le tableau*")

In 2002, the RCD-N and allied armed groups carried out a campaign of systematic attacks against the civilian population residing in the two provinces of Ituri and North Kivu, in Eastern DRC.

It represented "a new scale of violence characterized by premeditated operations using looting, rape, and summary execution as tools of warfare." –[United Nations Special Investigation Team](#)



Many of the attacks were perpetrated in the Mambasa, Beni, Epulu, and Mandima regions (in the provinces of Ituri and North Kivu). This is a region heavily scarred by conflict, where most of the identified victims still live today. A majority of attacks targeted specific ethnic communities, including the minority Nande and the indigenous Bambuti peoples. Exceptional levels of human, psychological, and material destruction were also noted; their consequences remain deeply felt today.

Recognised acts of
crimes against humanity

14

Cases of summary
executions

15

Cases of torture

16

Cases of rape
constituting torture

14

Cases of pillage
considered as
inhuman acts

8

Cases of
enslavement in the
form of forced labour

2

Cases of sexual slavery

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“THE INDIGENOUS BAMBUTI SURVIVORS ROSE ABOVE DAILY DISCRIMINATION AND, WITH STRENGTH AND COURAGE, GAVE DETAILED AND CONVINCING TESTIMONIES AT PARTICULARLY GREAT PERSONAL RISK.

FOR MORE THAN 20 YEARS, LUMBALA HAS ENJOYED IMPUNITY FOR HIS ATTEMPTED CAMPAIGN OF EXTERMINATION AGAINST THE BAMBUTI. THAT ENDS TODAY.”

–Claire Thomas, Executive Director, Minority Rights Group



SIGNIFICANCE OF THE VERDICT

The verdict against Lumbala is historic as it challenges over two decades of impunity.

Roger Lumbala is the first Congolese national to be tried before a national court for crimes against humanity committed during the Second Congo War (1998-2003).

It is the first universal jurisdiction (UJ) case in France related to events in the DRC.

By convicting Lumbala, the French court reaffirmed a fundamental principle: **the gravest crimes know no borders.**



What is universal jurisdiction?

Universal jurisdiction is a legal principle allowing a state to investigate and prosecute offenders of exceptionally grave crimes, regardless of where they were committed or the nationality of the perpetrator or victim.

“FOR THE FIRST TIME, A NATIONAL COURT HAS DARED TO CONFRONT THE ATROCITIES OF THE SECOND CONGO WAR AND SHOW THAT JUSTICE CAN BREAK THROUGH EVEN AFTER DECADES OF IMPUNITY.”

—Daniele Perissi, Legal Advisor and Head of DRC Program, TRIAL International

New avenues for future legal jurisprudence

The judgment sets a major jurisprudential precedent that could strengthen the tools available for future prosecutions in the DRC and globally. By affirming that systematic attacks on property – pillage, destruction of essential goods, deprivation of food and livelihoods – may constitute crimes against humanity, the Court broadened legal recognition of the ways that mass violence destroys entire communities.

For legal observers, the conviction demonstrates the importance of accountability in the fight against impunity and why survivors' voices remain important even decades after violence.

**Survivors
break
decades
of silence**

The trial was especially significant for minority communities targeted during the military operation, and for the women and girl survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence whose testimonies broke decades of silence.

Despite Lumbala's refusal to be present in the courtroom, survivors' voices stood at the heart of the proceedings. Nine civil society organisations joined the proceedings as civil parties, and dozens of victims and survivors testified during the five-week trial. Many traveled to Paris even as they faced intimidation, logistical barriers, and personal risks. Their testimony constituted an essential act of courage, determination, and proof.

5

Weeks of
hearings

65

Testimonies
Including 20+
Congolesse survivors
and victims, and
representatives of
NGOs

30

Witnesses
Including United
Nations investigators,
journalists, experts,
and former members
of the RCD-N

35

Civil parties
Including civil
society
organisations,
including TRIAL
International

"WE WERE SCARED BUT CAME ALL THE WAY HERE BECAUSE THE TRUTH MATTERS. FOR YEARS, NO ONE HEARD US. TODAY, THE COURT DID."

WE WOULD HAVE PREFERRED TO FACE ROGER LUMBALA, TO LOOK HIM IN THE EYES. BUT THIS VERDICT MARKS A FIRST STEP TOWARD RECLAIMING PIECES OF OURSELVES THAT WERE TAKEN FROM US."

*—David Karamay Kasereka and Pisco Sirikivuya Paluku,
survivors who testified during the trial*

"A DEFINING FEATURE OF THE TRIAL WAS THE CENTRAL PLACE GIVEN TO THE VICTIMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE. WOMEN WHO SURVIVED RAPE AND SEXUAL SLAVERY BROKE DECADES OF SILENCE AND STIGMA TO TESTIFY. THEIR VOICES WERE CENTRAL TO THE PURSUIT OF ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE CRIMES, WHICH REMAIN WIDELY UNDER-PROSECUTED IN CONFLICT SETTINGS."

—Yasmine Chubin, Legal Director, Clooney Foundation for Justice

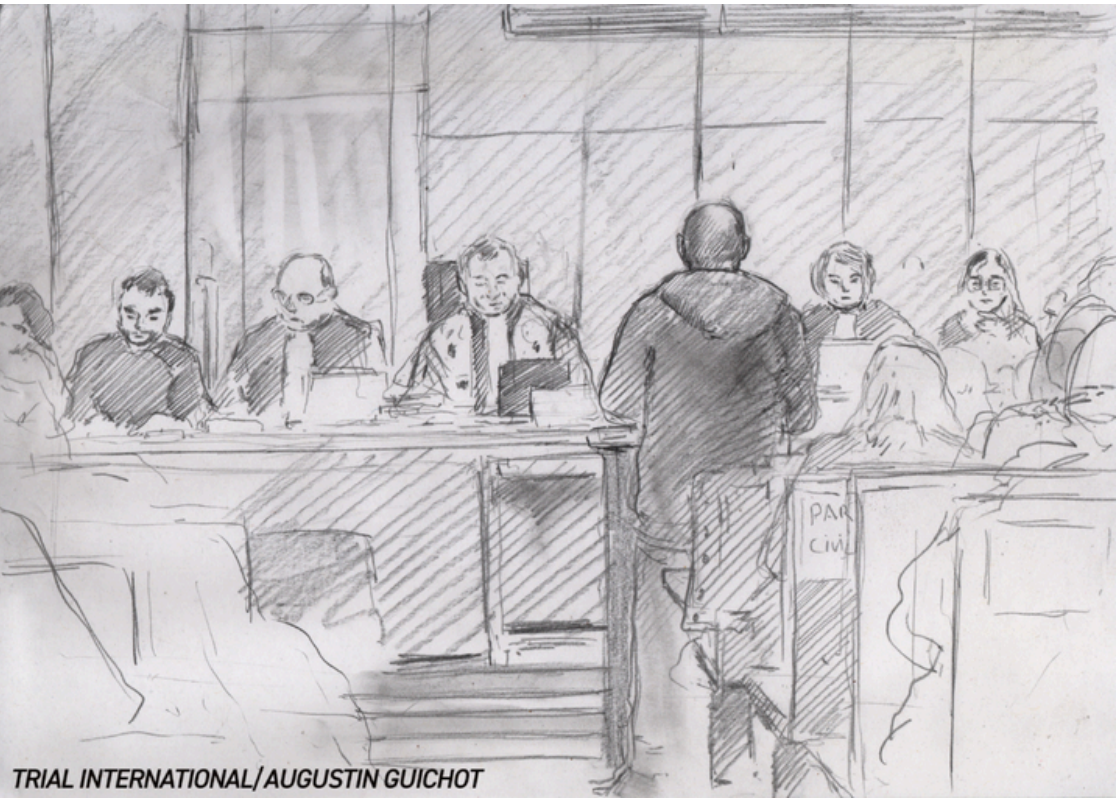
Crucial role of civil society

Civil society played a decisive and coordinated role throughout the proceedings. NGOs admitted as civil parties – including TRIAL International – pooled their expertise to facilitate the participation of victims and survivors' communities, submit evidence, and request expert analyses.

Their combined efforts helped to collect important information and ensure survivors received the logistical and psychological support needed to testify safely, demonstrating the power of coordinated action in pursuing accountability.

Holding high-ranking political and military leaders, such as Lumbala, responsible for organising and enabling atrocities is essential to dismantling entrenched impunity and preventing cycles of violence that persist to this day.

It sends a powerful message: ***crimes committed in the shadows of armed conflicts must not go unpunished.***



BRINGING THE TRIAL CLOSER TO COMMUNITIES

Justice is not only about convictions. It is also about ensuring that affected communities understand, access, and participate in accountability processes. Experience shows that the true impact of such high-profile proceedings on affected communities depends largely on their visibility and accessibility.

However, in eastern DRC, **access to information on international justice mechanisms remains very limited**, and few local media outlets are able to cover this type of proceeding adequately.

Between August and December 2025, Impunity Watch and TRIAL International collaborated on a joint initiative to improve access to information for Congolese communities affected by the crimes judged in the Lumbala trial and assess its impact on the dynamics surrounding transitional justice in the DRC and their legal and social implications. Through community reporting, media engagement, and dialogue with survivors, this initiative sought to bridge the gap between a courtroom in Paris and communities in eastern DRC.



Impunity Watch and TRIAL International supported media coverage of the trial in Paris, with two Congolese journalists, Blaise-Pascal Makandi and Claude Segenya reporting from inside the courtroom to bridge the gap between Paris and the DRC. Their work was also shared through digital platforms, including TikTok and WhatsApp.

17

pieces produced
for online press,
print media, and
radio broadcasts

51,000

listeners and
unique audience
visits reached

Data collected for media coverage published
between 12 Nov - 17 Dec 2025.

Later, they facilitated focus group sessions in Beni (a city in the North Kivu province) and Bunia (a city in the Ituri province) in French and Swahili with diverse participants to understand first-hand the perspectives of the communities for whom justice was being delivered.

***i** For example, the Beni territory received many displaced persons from Mambasa who were fleeing the atrocities. Among the participants included a woman who was a direct victim of the 'Effacer le tableau'. Only a primary school student at the time, she found refuge in Beni with her family.*

Facilitating affected Congolese communities' access to extraterritorial justice, rigorously documenting the impact of a landmark trial, and promoting critical analysis of its repercussions through a survivor-centred perspective – these steps embody an innovative approach to combating impunity.

By strengthening access to information and fostering informed participation, this initiative helps bridge the gap between affected communities and justice processes, ensuring that survivors' voices are heard and considered in broader discussions on accountability and transitional justice.



REFLECTIONS FROM AFFECTED CONGOLESE COMMUNITIES

A welcome verdict, from afar:

Community members followed the trial through the multiple radio broadcasts, WhatsApp groups, and online media including those produced by the dedicated journalists. Many heard of the conviction and expressed cautious relief.

“THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE TRIAL’S
OUTCOME HAS GIVEN US HOPE THAT WE,
THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT VICTIMS,
CAN HAVE OUR RIGHTS RESTORED.”

—Community leader



Justice seen is justice felt:

Survivors could not watch the proceedings unfold, unlike the trials of Thomas Lubanga and Germain Katanga at the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Community members repeatedly expressed their preference for mobile courts, local hearings, and live transmissions. They spoke of the ICC's outreach model employing satellite broadcasts and listening clubs in villages as a benchmark for more direct engagement with affected communities that the Paris proceedings could not replicate.

“COMPARED TO THE ICC, THE FRENCH JUSTICE SYSTEM DOES NOT APPEAR TO HAVE MADE AVAILABLE THE NECESSARY RESOURCES TO ALLOW AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IN ITURI TO PROPERLY FOLLOW THE LUMBALA TRIAL.”

—Religious and community leader, Bunia

Justice understood is justice trusted:

Detachment from court proceedings was also fuelled by misunderstanding, with participants voicing confusion about why Lumbala was tried in France, and not in the DRC. UJ principles were not adequately explained to affected communities, either before or during the trial.

This gap has critical political implications. The Congolese state's reaction to the Lumbala trial was described by participants as “almost hostile”, revealing – at best – ambiguous political will to prioritise accountability at home.



LESSONS LEARNED

Access to information related to justice processes for affected communities is the basis for informed participation, engagement, and mobilisation around their rights.

When a trial is conducted in a courtroom on another continent with no live feed and limited explanation of legal procedures, justice risks becoming something that happens to victims and communities rather than something that happens *for* them.



WE THEREFORE DRAW SEVERAL LESSONS FROM THIS PROCESS:



Courts exercising UJ must make exceptional arrangements for live or recorded transmission of key hearings



Media coverage of future UJ trials must be accompanied by explanations of legal procedures, rationale, and the rights of victims



Local actors play an important role in supporting victims' access to information and informed participation in legal proceedings, especially those taking place far away



Reforms of the Congolese justice system must intensify so that communities are not dependent on courts thousands of kilometres away to see accountability for crimes committed on their soil

CONCLUSION

The dominant observation is that the Lumbala trial and subsequent conviction abroad has raised hope in the possibility of fighting against impunity for crimes and serious human rights violations perpetrated in the DRC.

Congolese victims and survivors made their voices heard through the community reporting initiative, which also documented international justice in action, and contributed to the collective memory of the serious crimes committed in the DRC. Survivors' voices were centred throughout the trial, and their testimonies made available online; which were also heard and valued by community participants.

The media coverage and subsequent discussions on social media have also helped spark debate about the challenges of combating impunity in the country. The trial represents a major step forward in this fight in the DRC, at a time when the national transitional justice strategy is being revived.



READ: [VICTIM EXPECTATIONS OF TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN THE DRC – POLICY BRIEF](#)

READ: [SURVIVORS SPEAK UP FROM THE DRC - "TO REPAIR THE PAST, WE ALL NEED TO BE INVOLVED."](#)

Congolese communities largely welcomed the Lumbala verdict as a landmark step in the fight against impunity. At the same time, the consultations revealed that justice is not only measured by a conviction, but also by communities' ability to understand, follow, and engage with the process, and by the prospect of broader accountability for crimes committed during the conflict.

The Lumbala judgment demonstrates that accountability remains possible decades after atrocities. Participants saw the case as evidence that truth-seeking, prosecutions, reparations, and institutional reform remain necessary components of the national transitional justice process currently under discussion in the DRC.

UJ can provide an important avenue for justice when national systems fail, but sustainable accountability ultimately depends on strengthening Congolese justice institutions, ensuring meaningful victim participation, and expanding access to information for affected communities. Justice must not only be delivered – it must be seen, understood, and owned by those on whose behalf it is pursued.

**“THIS SHOULD NOT REMAIN AN
ISOLATED CASE. THERE ARE MANY
OTHER WARLORDS WHO ARE FREE
AND CONTINUE TO COMMIT
ATROCITIES.”**

–Resident of Beni



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