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SUBMISSION

TO THE 146th SESSION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

RWANDA

Forced recruitment, use of children in armed conflict, conscientious objection to military service, and related issues

September 2026

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Introduction

This submission highlights strong indications emerged in recent years, from UN sources, about the possible responsibility of the State party for the forced recruitment and the use of children in the armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo by the armed group M23.

This submission also presents the related issue of the right to conscientious objection to military service, inherent to the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (art. 18), including in relation to volunteers / professional members of the armed forces, as well as individuals required to perform forms of armed service like the armed night patrols, including Jehovah's Witnesses who are reportedly subjected to arbitrary detention for refusing such armed service and related "security fees", for reasons of conscience.

This report also seeks follow-up to the recommendation of the Committee concerning the prevention of military courts from exercising jurisdiction over civilians.

The last part of this submission provides suggested recommendations, based, mainly, on previous concluding observations and other international human rights standards.

Forced recruitment and use of children in armed conflict

Background

The issues of recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, including by armed groups -and specifically by the M23-, and the concerned responsibility of the State party, have been repeatedly raised in the context of the consideration of periodic reports of Rwanda by treaty bodies. A non-exhaustive compilation of relevant observations and recommendations follows.

In **2013**, in its concluding observations, on the initial report of Rwanda submitted under article 8 of the **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the involvement of children in armed conflict**, the **Committee on the Rights of the Child** has stated, *inter alia*, the following:

> "**V. Prohibition and related matters**
>
> **Criminal legislation and regulations in force**
>
> 13. While welcoming that several national laws establish the age of voluntary recruitment into the Armed Forces as 18 years, including in the National Police Force and the Local Defence Forces, the Committee is concerned about the absence of explicit criminalization in the domestic legislation of the recruitment and use in hostilities of children by the State Armed Forces and by the non-State armed groups.
>
> 14. The Committee recommends that the State party enact in its domestic legislation explicit criminalization of the recruitment and use in hostilities of children under 18 years by the national Armed Forces and non-State armed groups.
>
> **Recruitment and use of children by non-State armed groups**
>
> 15. The Committee is gravely concerned about the situation on the Rwandan- Democratic Republic of the Congo border where several reports, including the United Nations Group of Experts on the arms embargo against the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2012, indicate that the armed groups operating in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, particularly the militia the March 23 Movement (M23) and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) continue to recruit Rwandan children and refugee children in the territory of Rwanda and use them in hostilities. While the Committee notes the establishment and expansion of the Joint Verification Mechanism (JVM) in September 2012, it is concerned that it lacks a child protection mechanism within its structure to respond to the specific risks and needs of children who may have been recruited or used in hostilities.
>
> 16. The Committee urges the State party to take immediate actions to end such practices

occurring within its jurisdiction. The Committee specifically recommends that the State party:

(a) Adopt and implement, as a matter of urgency, a comprehensive time-bound plan of action to halt the use and recruitment of Rwandan and refugees children by non-State armed groups operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, including by closely controlling its borders and mobilizing communities. In this regard, the State party is encouraged to seek assistance from the United Nations, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), to protect children from unlawful recruitment within Rwanda;

(b) Strengthen cross-border frameworks of cooperation and exchange of information with the Democratic Republic of the Congo to repatriate children involved in armed conflict from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the State party, and to ensure that children, particularly those living in areas closer to the border with that country and in refugee camps are not re-recruited by the non-State armed groups;

(c) Independently and promptly investigate serious allegations of facilitating recruitment and use in hostilities of children for M23;

(d) Ensure that individuals found responsible for supporting and facilitating the recruitment and use of children in hostilities by armed groups, including M23, are apprehended and prosecuted;

(e) Encourage and advocate the establishment of a mechanism for child protection within the Joint Verification Mechanism, in collaboration with the other members of the mechanism, to respond to the specific risks and protection concerns of children who are or may have been recruited or used in hostilities; and

(f) Provide information in its next periodic report on the specific measures taken to implement these recommendations."[i]

In **2016**, in its concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Rwanda, the **Human Rights Committee** stated:

"**Cooperation with armed groups**

25. The Committee notes the State party's position (see S/2014/42, annex 109) contesting the findings of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which established that the disbanded armed group Mouvement du 23 mars (M23), which was responsible for various human rights abuses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2013 received support from the Rwanda Defence Force and from individuals who recruited men and children in the State party for M23. The Committee is concerned, however, at the lack of information on measures taken to open an official investigation into the findings of the Group of Experts and its response to the State party's position (see S/2014/42, annex 110) (arts. 2 and 6-7).

26. The State party should undertake prompt, impartial and effective investigations into the reported cooperation with M23 by members of the Rwanda Defence Force and other persons within its jurisdiction with a view to bringing those responsible to justice or extraditing them to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It should also ensure that children who have been recruited in the State party to be used by M23 in hostilities receive adequate assistance and reintegration."[ii]

In **2020**, in its concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Rwanda, the **Committee on the Rights of the Child** has reiterated:

"Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict

51. Recalling its previous concluding observations on the Optional Protocol (CRC/C/OPAC/RWA/CO/1), the Committee urges the State party to:

(a) Explicitly criminalize the compulsory recruitment and use in hostilities of children under

18 years of age by the national armed forces and non-State armed groups and promptly investigate and prosecute suspects and bring perpetrators to justice;

(b) Establish an identification mechanism for children, including refugee and asylum-seeking children and children in migrant situations, who may have been or are at risk of being involved in armed conflict abroad."[iii]

The position of the concerned State

In its fifth periodic report the State party claimed:

"J. Cooperation with armed groups

Information on paragraph 26 of the concluding observations

125. With regard to its alleged support for the M23, Rwanda's position has always been clear and unambiguous: The M23 is a Congolese problem that must be dealt with by the Congolese themselves. The Congolese government never ceases to accuse Rwanda of supporting the M23, yet behind these accusations, the Congolese government has never given any importance to the root causes that led to the existence of the M23. Namely, the violence perpetrated against the Congolese Tutsi community, resulting in a large flow of Congolese refugees to neighbouring countries, including Rwanda.

126. The Rwandan government is concerned by the persistent flow of refugees into its territory over the past 25 years, fleeing the atrocities of illegal armed groups, mainly the genocidal militia (FDLR), which is supported by the Congolese government. The Rwandan government is also concerned about its security due to the proliferation of pro-government armed groups, including the FDLR, on its borders. Rwanda also won't allow the hate speech which has proliferated in the Eastern DRC to spread across its borders, threatening the unity the country has worked so hard to create.

127. The government of Rwanda is committed to working with the region on a political solution to the crisis in the DRC."[iv]

Relevant point in the List of issues

In the List of issues in relation to the fifth periodic report of Rwanda, the Human Rights Committee stated:

"Cooperation with armed groups (arts. 2, 6 and 7)

10. With reference to the Committee's previous concluding observations and the State Party's report, **please respond to reports about forced recruitment, including of children, in the armed conflict by the M23 armed group and about the support and involvement of the Rwandan armed forces in such recruitment**. Please respond to reports, including by United Nations mechanisms, concerning alleged Rwandan military, logistical or other forms of support of the M23 armed group reportedly responsible for summary executions, sexual violence, looting and forcible transfers of populations. Have there been any finalized or ongoing investigations into possible involvement of members of the Rwandan armed forces in violations of international human rights or humanitarian law committed in the context of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?"[v] (emphasis added)

By the time of drafting this submission, no response by the State party appears to be available.

UN reports 2025 - 2026

Reports and statements by UN mechanisms in the past two years (2025 – 2026) indicate the continuous forced recruitment and use of children, as well as adults, in the armed conflict by M23, the continuous

support to M23 by Rwanda and its armed forces (RDF), or even the direct involvement of RDF and possibly other nationals of Rwanda in relevant crimes and human rights violations.
A non-exhaustive compilation of information from UN sources, especially since the escalation of the conflict in the beginning of 2025, follows.

- Forced recruitment by M23 (with possible involvement of Rwandan nationals, including RDF members)

In February 2025, the **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk** stated:

> "Hundreds of human rights defenders, journalists and members of civil society have reported to my Office that they have been threatened or are being pursued by the **M23 and Rwandan forces**. We have also facilitated the protection of judicial authorities who were in danger.
> I am also very concerned about the proliferation of weapons and the **high risk of forced recruitment and conscription of children**."[vi] (emphasis added)

In June 2025, then, the High Commissioner stated:

> "After capturing cities and villages, the M23 arbitrarily arrested police officers and large numbers of other civilians, including children. **M23 fighters also captured DRC soldiers and forced some to join the M23.**
> Witnesses told my team that those captured were – and still are – held in inhumane conditions at military camps, including Rumangabo, and in informal places of detention. **Many were forcibly recruited into the ranks of the M23.**
> […] My office is investigating reports of **M23** and various Wazalendo militias **recruiting teenage children to use them in armed conflict**."[vii] (emphasis added)

In September 2025, the High Commissioner stated:

> "My team confirmed that the M23 committed widespread torture and other mistreatment, including sexual violence, against detainees. Some people were beaten to death or died from injuries, suffocation or from starvation and dehydration. **Accounts indicate that some guards were Rwandans**.
> Thousands of civilians – including children – were then sent to so-called training camps where they were subjected to forced labour, **military servitude** and other forms of torture and ill-treatment. The fate of hundreds of men, women and children who were forcibly taken remains unknown."[viii] (emphasis added)

Indeed, in the **Report of the fact-finding mission on the situation in North Kivu and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo**, (the final version of which was distributed in November 2025), forced recruitment of children is documented being committed both by the M23 (Rwanda supported) as well as by Wazalendo groups.[ix]

Because of the links between the State party and its official armed forces with M23, this submission concentrates on the forced recruitment and use of children, as well as of adults, by M23 in the armed conflict:

> "38. M23 detained thousands of civilians, primarily during cordon and search operations conducted almost daily since January. Initially presented as 'security measures' to locate remaining FARDC soldiers and allies, those operations evolved into a systematic campaign of detention that also targeted people with family or other real or perceived ties to FARDC, members of civil society and people accused of offences or generally associated with criminality. In at least four incidents in Goma, M23 entered hospitals to locate suspected FARDC, Wazalendo and FDLR members being treated or hiding there, detaining hundreds of people, including patients, medical personnel and accompanying family members.
> 39. Many of those detained, mostly physically fit men and boys around 15 and older, were loaded into trucks and taken away. Relatives of detainees recounted searching for their loved

ones, going from one place of detention to another, but being chased away, threatened or beaten. Many families had to pay ransoms or bribes for the release of or to obtain information on their family members.

40. **The mission confirmed that many of those detained were initially taken to "training" camps for the purpose of forced recruitment.**[x] However, the fate and whereabouts of hundreds of other men, women and children forcibly taken remain unknown."[xi] (emphasis added)

"E. Forced recruitment, including recruitment of children

45. Thousands of civilians, including adolescent girls and boys, were forcibly recruited after being detained during search operations. Many were coerced into joining M23, fearing for their lives or retaliation against their families, with witnesses reporting that some recruits had to enlist after seeing others being brutally beaten, sometimes to death. Others were recruited with false promises of employment. Adolescent boys, reported to be around 15 and older, and young men were particularly targeted to bolster M23 ranks, with no age verification conducted.

46. Individuals forcibly recruited or otherwise detained were transported to former FARDC camps in Rumangabo and Tshanzu, Rutshuru territory, [Note in the original: The mission received information on other possible camps.] to undergo "re-education" and military "training" for three or four months, before reportedly being deployed to the front line. Survivors and witnesses reported thousands of men and some women and children forced to carry out intensive labour, including digging and clearing roads, cutting and transporting wood and carrying water over long distances.

47. Survivors described receiving only minimal food and water, being denied medical assistance and having limited access to hygiene facilities. Detainees were severely beaten, including to death, and others died from exhaustion, dehydration or hunger. Guards from Tshanzu removed women from their compounds at night and many women detainees, unable to endure the hunger, were subjected to sexual exploitation, forced to exchange sex for food. Detainees who attempted to escape were executed in front of the other detainees and their bodies displayed as a warning. One survivor reported, 'Tshanzu was hell'.

48. Survivors' accounts, corroborated by M23-released video footage, identified high-ranking M23 officers present in the camps. **Recruits stated that most of their instructors and guards were Rwandan nationals, including uniformed RDF members.**"[xii] (emphasis added)

"77. The mission collected reliable information that, since January, M23 had detained thousands of civilians, mostly men and boys, in large-scale and well-coordinated operations, imprisoned them in concealed places of detention and/or sent them for forced re-education, forced labour and military 'training' in dedicated camps, often under threat of death or physical violence and in inhumane conditions."[xiii]

In June 2026, in an Oral update to the Human Rights Council, the Chair of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the human rights situation in North and South Kivu – Democratic Republic of the Congo, Arnauld Akodjenou, confirmed, once more, the accounts about forced recruitment:

"We received deeply troubling accounts concerning children, conflict-related sexual violence, including sexual slavery, **forced recruitment**, unlawful killings, arbitrary arrests, attacks against schools and health facilities, ill-treatment, and detention practices outside appropriate rule-of-law safeguards."[xiv] (emphasis added)

In July 2026, UN experts "warned that M23 has established a de facto system of authority in territories under its control in which arbitrary arrest and detention, torture (including sexual

torture), forced labour, and **forced armed recruitment** are being used to exercise control over the civilian population. […] The experts are in contact with the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and **have brought their concerns to the attention of the Government of Rwanda**."[xv] (emphasis added)

- Military cooperation between M23 and Rwanda / RDF

The fact-finding mission has described the military cooperation between M23 and Rwanda:

> "8. Since 2022, several United Nations reports[xvi] have pointed to Rwanda actively supporting M23 through recruitment, training and the provision of equipment as a means to protect what it perceives as its national security – particularly against the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), an armed group partly composed of former Rwandan soldiers and Hutu militias, and its economic interests. The Government of Rwanda has consistently denied allegations of direct involvement with M23,[xvii] including in its response to the present report."[xviii]

The fact-finding mission has further described in detail the **direct involvement of the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) in the armed conflict** inside the DRC since the beginning of 2025:

> "12. From late 2024, M23, **with training, material, intelligence and operational support from the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF),** captured strategic areas around Goma, the capital of North Kivu. On 23 January, M23 and **RDF** launched a coordinated offensive on Sake, 25 km west of Goma, eventually overwhelming FARDC troops supported by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the Southern African Development Community Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and private military companies contracted by the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.[xix] On 27 January, M23 and **RDF** troops entered Goma via multiple fronts, sparking intense clashes and heavy artillery exchanges.[xx] Many civilians were killed, while hundreds of civilians and disarmed FARDC members received protection in MONUSCO bases. Amid the clashes, over 4,500 detainees escaped from Munzenze central prison in Goma, including 1,497 who were being held for serious crimes, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law violations.
>
> 13. The spontaneous withdrawal of some FARDC troops from their positions, the killing of the military governor of North Kivu and the desertion of senior FARDC officers further accelerated the breakdown of Congolese defences. By 29 January, M23 and **RDF** had taken full control of the city.
>
> 14. In early February, **with RDF support**, M23 advanced into South Kivu. On 14 February, it seized Kavumu airport and two days later entered the provincial capital Bukavu without resistance, as government forces had withdrawn toward the Ruzizi Plain and Uvira.[xxi] Two additional prison breaks in Bukavu and Kabare on 14 February resulted in the escape of prisoners, including some convicted for crimes under international law. [Note in the original: According to UNJHRO, 2,285 and 221 inmates escaped from the central prison in Bukavu and Kabare prison, respectively.] […]
>
> 16. While **the presence of RDF troops was instrumental** in the rapid M23 takeover of Goma and Bukavu, [Note in the original: **The fact-finding mission's findings reaffirmed Group of Experts' findings (S/2025/446, paras. 35–36) on active and decisive involvement of RDF alongside M23 during the capture of Goma. Rwanda denied** that claim in its response.] **the extent of their continued presence in North Kivu and South Kivu Provinces after February remains difficult to verify. However, multiple sources reported that new appointees included Rwandan nationals. Similarly, many residents**

reported that Rwandan police officers regularly crossed the border to manage traffic in Goma." [xxii] (emphasis added)

In March 2026, the **UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Nada Al-Nashif** cited in her statement "foreign interference", and specifically and repeatedly referred to M23 as "Rwandan-backed". In her recommendations, she also explicitly stated that: "Rwanda must withdraw its forces from the DRC and respect its territorial integrity. It must also cease its support to the M23."[xxiii]

In July 2026, the **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk**, "urged Rwanda to cease its support for M23 and to withdraw its troops from the DRC".[xxiv]

- Legal framework and the responsibility of Rwanda

The fact-finding mission has elaborated in detail the legal framework and the responsibility of Rwanda:

"20. The situation in North Kivu and South Kivu is characterized by several non-international armed conflicts between FARDC and multiple armed groups, **between RDF and armed groups** and between different armed groups. The conflicts come under common article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, customary rules of international humanitarian law and, where relevant, the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), to which the Democratic Republic of the Congo is party. In parallel, **the international armed conflict opposing the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda** triggered the application of the Geneva Conventions and the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), to which both States are Parties, and customary rules of international humanitarian law. **The extensive support of Rwanda to M23, which may amount to overall control of that armed group, raises the possibility that hostilities between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and M23 are part of that international armed conflict.** […]

22. **In addition to the obligations of Rwanda under international humanitarian law as a party to armed conflict**, [Note in the original: In its response, Rwanda refuted being part of the conflict.] the presence of RDF elements on the territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and their support of M23 raise **the question of whether Rwanda assumed additional obligations as an occupying Power under international humanitarian law**. Occupation existed if Rwanda exercised the requisite degree of control over parts of North Kivu and South Kivu during the period under review, through either the effective control of territory by RDF or overall control over M23 as a proxy force. [Note in the original: See Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo conclusion that Rwanda has exercised overall control over M23 at least since January 2024 (S/2024/432, para. 45; and S/2025/446, para. 44).] **In addition, Rwanda has extraterritorial obligations under international human rights law** to persons outside its territory but within its power or effective control, including the protection of the local population and the fulfilment of the full range of their human rights."[xxv] (emphasis added)

In the part about "State responsibility" the fact-finding mission has stated:

"81. Rwanda is likewise responsible for violations directly committed by its armed forces on the territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, including its own personnel deployed to M23 'training' camps. The mission has received credible allegations concerning the covert presence of RDF personnel within M23. Numerous victims and witnesses identified perpetrators as 'Rwandans', citing the language they spoke (Kinyarwanda or English), accents or other distinguishing features, such as uniforms, indicating that RDF

personnel may have directly participated in other M23 violations.

82. While further investigation is necessary to assess the degree of control Rwanda exercised over M23, the mission found evidence that Rwanda has provided, at a minimum, consistent and significant military, logistical and material support. The direct involvement of RDF played a pivotal role in M23 territorial expansion, specifically the takeover of Goma. That support, coupled with multiple reports of serious violations committed by M23, should have prompted Rwanda to exercise its influence to stop and prevent further violations. Rwanda appears, however, to have **failed to use its leverage**, as required by its **obligations under common article 1 of the Geneva Conventions,** to ensure respect for international humanitarian law.[xxvi] **Rwanda also appears to have violated its obligations under article 4 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict to take all feasible measures to prevent the recruitment and use of children under 18 by M23.**"[xxvii] (emphasis added)

It is worth noting that during the 4th Cycle of the **Universal Periodic Review**, Rwanda received a recommendation to: "Acknowledge and address extraterritorial human rights and international humanitarian law obligations, including through cooperation with international mechanisms in relation to the situation in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo."[xxviii] The State also received a recommendation to: "Prevent the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, investigate allegations and punish members of armed groups responsible for using sexual violence as a weapon of war in cross-border conflicts".[xxix] Neither of them were accepted by Rwanda.[xxx]

- Relevant recommendations of the fact-finding mission

The fact-finding mission recommended that "all parties to conflict", *inter alia*:

"Immediately halt the recruitment of boys and girls, release all persons under 18 recruited and withdraw from schools occupied or used for military purposes".[xxxi]

The fact-finding mission also recommended that:

"the authorities of Rwanda:

(a) Cease all forms of support to M23 facilitating or otherwise materially contributing to its operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo;

(b) Conduct prompt, transparent, independent and impartial investigations into all alleged human rights violations and abuses and violations of international humanitarian law committed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo by RDF, M23 and other armed groups supported by Rwanda, and ensure those responsible are held accountable;

(c) Facilitate the safe, voluntary and dignified repatriation of civilians forcibly transferred or deported from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Rwanda in the course of the armed conflicts."[xxxii]

The right to conscientious objection to military service

Background

As it has been recognised by the Human Rights Committee: "The right to conscientious objection to military service inheres in the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It entitles any individual to an exemption from compulsory military service if this cannot be reconciled with that individual's religion or beliefs. The right must not be impaired by coercion." [xxxiii]

Issues of freedom of conscience and religious belief, including conscientious objection to military service, have been raised in the context of monitoring the implementation of the Covenant.

In **2015**, the following paragraph was included in the ***list of issues*** in relation to the **fourth** periodic report of Rwanda,:

> "Freedom of conscience and religious belief (art. 18)
>
> 19. In light of article 18 of the Covenant, please comment on reports that Jehovah's Witnesses have been expelled from schools or dismissed from their jobs on the basis of their conscientious objection to singing the national anthem, participating in religious ceremonies in schools, paying church taxes or taking an oath while holding the national flag. **Please also report on the progress made in guaranteeing conscientious objectors the opportunity to perform alternative civilian service in lieu of military service.**"[xxxiv] (emphasis added)

The issue was raised again during the dialogue at the review:

> "25. Mr. Ben Achour said that he wished to know what measures the State party was envisaging to prevent discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses on the basis of, for example, their refusal to sing the national anthem or participate in certain religious ceremonies on grounds of conscientious objection. **He would also like to know whether consideration might be given to allowing conscientious objectors to refrain from performing military service**."[xxxv] (emphasis added)

Despite some comments on other issues concerning Jehovah's Witnesses,[xxxvi] no explicit response of the State party's delegation about conscientious objectors to military service could be traced.

In the concluding observations, while broader issues of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including of Jehovah's Witnesses, were raised, however, the specific issue of conscientious objection to military service was not explicitly mentioned.[xxxvii]

Consequently, the relevant part of the State party's fifth periodic report does not provide explicit information on the specific issue of conscientious objection to military service.[xxxviii]

Nevertheless, recent developments (see further below) rendered even more important to include the issue of conscientious objection to military service in the *list of issues*.

- Relevant points in the List of issues

In the List of issues, related to the fifth periodic report of Rwanda, the Human Rights Committee stated:

> "Freedom of thought, conscience and religion (arts. 2, 18, 23, 24, 26 and 27)
>
> 16. […] Please clarify whether the right to conscientious objection to military service is guaranteed in law and protected in practice, and what the rules are governing the alternative service. Please provide more specific information about the legal reform addressing enjoyment of freedom of conscience and religion of Jehovah's Witnesses and respond to allegations of arbitrary detentions of Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to take part in the armed night patrols."[xxxix]

By the time of drafting this submission, no response by the State party appears to be available.

- Armed night patrols and related "security fees"

There is no information that the State party implements conscription, however it has been reported that there is "requirement to perform armed night patrols, or in lieu to pay 'security fees' to those who do the patrol and accept militaristic training".[xl]

There is no information that the State party has recognised the right to conscientious objection to military service as such. Nonetheless, according to the submission of Jehovah's Witnesses: "Alternatives to certain obligations violating religious conscience, such as the requirement to perform armed night patrol, or in lieu to pay 'security fees' to those who do the patrol and accept militaristic training, have been provided for Witnesses in many places. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses may make payments that do not violate their conscience such as meeting the cost of health insurance for the needy."[xli]

Nevertheless, we are profoundly concerned by the account that "since September 2024, four adult Witnesses have been arrested for not participating in night patrol paying so-called 'security fees'. In each case, and following representations, they were released after a few days but had been subjected to arbitrary detention and the associated indignity. This violates article 9 of the Covenant, which provides:

'No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention.'"[xlii]
Indeed, such cases, besides violation of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (art. 18), and the right to freedom from discrimination (art. 26), constitute also arbitrary detention in violation of the right to liberty (art. 9). According to the jurisprudence of the Committee "just as detention as punishment for the legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression, as guaranteed by article 19 of the Covenant, is arbitrary, so too is detention as punishment for the legitimate exercise of freedom of religion and conscience, as guaranteed by article 18 of the Covenant".[xliii]
The State party should provide victims of such violations with full reparation, including compensation, and should guarantee the right to conscientious objection to military service for the Jehovah's Witnesses and any other conscientious objector.

- The right to conscientious objection to military service for volunteers / professional members of the armed forces

Besides the issue of night patrols and related "security fees", there is the issue of the right to conscientious objection to military service for volunteers / professional members of the armed forces which, in the case of the State party, acquires even greater importance in view of the reported involvement of its armed forces in violations of international humanitarian law or human rights violations, because of which members of the armed forces might refuse to participate.
The **OHCHR,** in its **minimum** criteria in order for the provisions for conscientious objection to military service to be in line with international human rights norms and standards, has explicitly and repeatedly stated that: "The right to conscientious objection should be recognized for conscripts, for **professional members of the armed forces** and for reservists."[xliv]
Consistently, the OHCHR has recently stated that exclusion of individuals such as "**active service members, volunteers** or reservists" from "the protection of the right to conscientious objection in domestic law" "could be tantamount to a failure to take the measures necessary to give effect to the right to conscientious objection to military service and, depending on the circumstances, could also constitute discriminatory treatment on the basis of persons' thought, conscience and religion or other grounds of discrimination, including status".[xlv] And, additionally, that to "align with international human rights laws and standards on the right to conscientious objection to military service, States should: […] Ensure that the right to conscientious objection is not restricted to conscription and is applicable to all forms of military service, including **voluntary** and reservist military service, and that alternatives are genuine, non-punitive and non-discriminatory"[xlvi]. (emphasis added)
The **Human Rights Committee** has advocated as well for the right to conscientious objection to military service for serving / professional members of the armed forces. In the case of another State party, Latvia, the Committee has recently recommended in its Concluding Observations: "**Consider revising the legislative framework to provide for honourable discharges on grounds of conscience, and to ensure that individuals who receive early termination from military service on those grounds do not face financial or other penalties.**"[xlvii] I**n recent years,** the Committee has **included the issue of conscientious objection to military service for serving members of the armed forces in the Lists of issues prior to reporting** of further State parties.[xlviii] The issue was raised also during the examination of Moldova.[xlix]
The **Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the OSCE**, has also explicitly mentioned in its recommendations that "Conscientious objection should be available both for conscripts and for professional soldiers both prior to and during military service, in line with the recommendations of international bodies".[l]
The **UN Human Rights Council** has moved along this direction by stating that it "acknowledges that an increasing number of States recognize conscientious objection to military service **not only for conscripts but also for those serving voluntarily** and encourages States to allow applications for

conscientious objection prior to, during and after military service, including reserve duties".[li] (emphasis added)

Finally, in the context of the **Universal Periodic Review**, there have also been recent recommendations to other States to recognise the right to conscientious objection to military service for professional members of the armed forces (e.g. to Albania,[lii] which has accepted the recommendation,[liii] to Norway[liv], not accepted[lv], and to Italy[lvi], which has accepted the recommendation[lvii]).

Trials of civilians by military courts

The possibility of trials of civilians by military courts is very concerning.

In its concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Rwanda, the Committee noted "with concern that military courts are competent to try civilians in certain circumstances (art. 14)" and recommended that "The State party should take the legislative and other measures necessary to ensure that […] Military courts are prevented from exercising jurisdiction over civilians".[lviii]

In its fifth periodic report, the State party, stated:

> "Information on paragraph 34 (d) of the concluding observations
>
> 168. In principle, military courts do not exercise jurisdiction over civilians. However, Military Courts try civilians on the basis of Law No. 30/2018/ of 02/06/2018 determining the jurisdiction of courts, particularly articles 83, 84, 85, and 96. These articles empower the Military Court and Military High Courts to try all offences committed by soldiers, their co-perpetrators, and accomplices."[lix]

This does not appear to be in line with the Committee's recommendation and other international human rights standards.

- Relevant point in the List of issues

In the List of issues related to the fifth periodic report of Rwanda, the Human Rights Committee stated:

> "Independence of the judiciary, fair trial and military courts (art. 14)
>
> 14. Please specify measures taken to strengthen judicial independence and prevent influence from the executive branch over the judiciary. Please inform the Committee about the implementation of the Legal Aid Policy, including the establishment of a legal aid fund, and eligibility criteria for accessing services. **What measures have been taken to make sure that military courts do not conduct trials of civilians**?"[lx] (emphasis added)

By the time of drafting this submission, no response by the State party appears to be available.

- International standards

Besides the Committee that has recommended also in other cases: "that the Criminal Code be amended so as to prohibit the trial of civilians by military tribunals in any circumstances",[lxi] there is an abundance of further international standards indicating that civilians should not be tried by military courts.

Principles

The Principle No. 5 of the "Draft principles governing the administration of justice through military tribunals" requires that: "Military courts should, in principle, have no jurisdiction to try civilians. In all circumstances, the State shall ensure that civilians accused of a criminal offence of any nature are tried by civilian courts".[lxii] This Principle has been cited also by the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, pointing out that, according to it, "military courts should have no jurisdiction to try civilians".[lxiii] It has also been cited by the European Court of Human Rights.[lxiv]

It should also be stressed that Principle 29 of the "Updated Set of principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity" requires explicitly that: "The jurisdiction of military tribunals must be restricted solely to specifically military offences committed by military

personnel…".[lxv]
Similarly, in the "Principles and guidelines on the right to a fair trial and legal assistance in Africa", the section L, titled "Right of civilians not to be tried by military courts", para. (a) requires that: "The only purpose of Military Courts shall be to determine offences of a purely military nature committed by military personnel." And para (c) requires that: "Military courts should not in any circumstances whatsoever have jurisdiction over civilians".[lxvi]

Regional Courts

Similarly, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has ruled that "The State must align the domestic legal system to the international standards regarding criminal military jurisdiction within a reasonable period of time, so that in case it considers the existence of a military criminal jurisdiction to be necessary, this must be restricted only to crimes committed by military personnel in active service. Therefore, the State shall set limits to the material and personal jurisdiction of the military courts through its legislation, so that under no circumstances may a civilian be subjected to the jurisdiction of military criminal courts […]".[lxvii]

The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly ruled against the trial of civilians by military courts or courts with even some participation of military judges ("composed, even if only in part, of members of the armed forces") finding a violation of article 6.1 of the ECHR, equivalent to Article 14.1 of the ICCPR.[lxviii]

The European Court of Human Rights has stated that it "has attached importance in numerous previous judgments to the fact that a civilian has had to appear before a court composed, if only in part, of members of the armed forces (see, most recently, Öcalan v. Turkey [GC], no. 46221/99, § 116, ECHR 2005-..., and Şahiner v. Turkey, no. 29279/95, § 45, ECHR 2001-IX). It has held that such a situation seriously undermined the confidence that courts ought to inspire in a democratic society".[lxix]
It is also worth noting that such concern "is all the more valid when a court is composed solely of military judges".[lxx]
Furthermore: "Lastly, situations in which a military court has jurisdiction to try a civilian for acts against the armed forces may give rise to reasonable doubts about such a court's objective impartiality. A judicial system in which a military court is empowered to try a person who is not a member of the armed forces may easily be perceived as reducing to nothing the distance which should exist between the court and the parties to criminal proceedings, even if there are sufficient safeguards to guarantee that court's independence".[lxxi]

Suggested recommendations

The State party should:

- Terminate any form of involvement in the armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo:
  (a) cease all forms of its reported support to the armed group M23;
  (b) undertake prompt, impartial and effective investigations into the reported cooperation of members of the Rwanda Defence Force and/or other persons within its jurisdiction with M23 with a view to bringing those responsible for violations of international humanitarian law and human rights violations, including forced recruitment and use in hostilities of children and/or adults, to justice or extraditing them to the Democratic Republic of the Congo;
- Ensure the full protection of children's rights in the context of armed conflict:
  (c) explicitly criminalize the compulsory recruitment and use in hostilities of children under 18 years of age by the national armed forces and non-State armed groups, promptly investigate and prosecute suspects and bring perpetrators to justice, and ensure that any children who might

have been forcibly recruited to be used in hostilities, and are in its jurisdiction, receive adequate assistance and reintegration;

(d) establish an identification mechanism for children, including refugee and asylum-seeking children and children in migrant situations, who may have been or are at risk of being involved in armed conflict abroad;

- Facilitate the safe, voluntary and dignified repatriation of any civilians who might have been forcibly transferred or deported from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Rwanda in the course of the armed conflicts. (arts. 2, 7, 8, 9, 24)
- Take all necessary measures in order to ensure (a) full reparation, including adequate compensation, for those individuals who have suffered such violations, (b) as well as no repetition – in view of reports about arbitrary detentions of Jehovah's Witnesses, for refusing the armed night patrols and related "security fees". (arts. 2 (3) (a), 9, 18 and 26)
- Take all necessary measures to ensure that the right to conscientious objection to military service is guaranteed in law and protected in practice according to international human rights standards (e.g. A/HRC/41/23, para. 60; A/HRC/50/43, para. 57; A/HRC/56/30, paras. 54-58) for *all* persons who might be possibly affected by any kind of armed / military service, including people required to perform armed night patrols or pay related "security fees", potential conscripts, volunteers / professional members of the armed forces and reservists, and at any time, before the commencement of military service, or at any stage during or after military service – following up on previous questions of the Committee (CCPR/C/RWA/Q/4, para. 19; CCPR/C/SR.3251, para. 25, CCPR/C/RWA/Q/5, para. 16). (arts. 18 and 26)
- Take all the legislative and other measures necessary to ensure that military courts are prevented from exercising jurisdiction over civilians under any circumstances. (art. 14)

[i] CRC/C/OPAC/RWA/CO/1, 8 July 2013, paras. 13-16.
https://docs.un.org/en/CRC/C/OPAC/RWA/CO/1
[ii] CCPR/C/RWA/CO/4, 2 May 2016, paras. 25-26. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/RWA/CO/4
[iii] CRC/C/RWA/CO/5-6, 28 February 2020, para. 51. https://docs.un.org/en/CRC/C/RWA/CO/5-6
[iv] CCPR/C/RWA/5, 31 July 2025, paras. 125-127. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/RWA/5
[v] CCPR/C/RWA/Q/5, 27 March 2026, para. 10. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/RWA/Q/5
[vi] "HC Türk on DRC: 'The risk of escalation throughout the sub-region has never been higher.'", 7 February 2025.
https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2025/02/hc-turk-drc-risk-escalation-throughout-sub-region-has-never-been
[vii] "HC Türk updates Council on the situation in North and South Kivu provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo", 16 June 2025.
https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2025/06/hc-turk-updates-council-situation-north-and-south-kivu-provinces
[viii] "HC Türk on the Democratic Republic of the Congo: "A genuine ceasefire is needed urgently."", 9 September 2025.
https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2025/09/hc-turk-democratic-republic-congo-genuine-ceasefire-needed-urgently
[ix] E.g. A/HRC/60/80, 21 November 2025, paras. 60-62 and 75. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/80
[x] [Note in the original] See paras. 45–48 below.
[xi] A/HRC/60/80, 21 November 2025, paras. 38-40. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/80
[xii] A/HRC/60/80, 21 November 2025, paras. 45-48. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/80
[xiii] A/HRC/60/80, 21 November 2025, para. 77. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/80
[xiv] "Oral Update to the Human Rights Council – Enhanced Interactive Dialogue (IED) Independent Commission of Inquiry on the human rights situation in North and South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo", 29 June 2026.
https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2026/06/oral-update-human-rights-council-enhanced-interactive-dialogue-ied
[xv] "M23's reign of terror by torture in eastern DR Congo must end: UN experts", 21 July 2026.
https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/07/m23s-reign-terror-torture-eastern-dr-congo-must-end-un-experts
[xvi] [Note in the original] S/2022/479, para. 67; S/2024/432, paras. 40–45; and S/2025/446, paras. 34–56.
[xvii] [Note in the original] S/2022/479, annex 39.
[xviii] A/HRC/60/80, 21 November 2025, para. 8. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/80
[xix] [Note in the original] S/2025/446, para. 74.
[xx] [Note in the original] See annexes I and II.
[xxi] [Note in the original] See annex III.
[xxii] A/HRC/60/80, 21 November 2025, paras. 12-14 and 16. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/80
[xxiii] "Deputy High Commissioner Al-Nashif on the Democratic Republic of the Congo: As peace negotiations continue, people cannot wait", 25 March 2026.
https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2026/03/deputy-high-commissioner-al-nashif-democratic-republic-congo-peace
[xxiv] "DRC: Türk deplores continued clashes in South Kivu, urges immediate de-escalation", 9 July 2026.
https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/07/drc-turk-deplores-continued-clashes-south-kivu-urges-immediate-de-escalation
[xxv] A/HRC/60/80, 21 November 2025, paras. 20 and 22. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/80
[xxvi] [Note in the original] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, rule 144.
[xxvii] A/HRC/60/80, 21 November 2025, paras. 81-82. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/80
[xxviii] A/HRC/62/8, 20 April 2026, recommendation 134.24 (Portugal). https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/62/8
[xxix] A/HRC/62/8, 20 April 2026, recommendation 134.79 (Chile). https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/62/8
[xxx] A/HRC/62/8/Add.1, 12 June 2026, p. 10. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/62/8/Add.1
[xxxi] A/HRC/60/80, 21 November 2025, para. 94(c). https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/80
[xxxii] A/HRC/60/80, 21 November 2025, para. 96. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/80
[xxxiii] See, *Min-Kyu Jeong et al. v. Republic of Korea* (CCPR/C/101/D/1642-1741/2007), para. 7.3.
https://undocs.org/CCPR/C/101/D/1642-1741/2007
See also: *Jong-nam Kim et al. v. Republic of Korea*, para. 7.4; *Abdullayev v. Turkmenistan*, para. 7.7; *Mahmud Hudaybergenov v. Turkmenistan*, para. 7.5; *Ahmet Hudaybergenov v. Turkmenistan*, para. 7.5; *Sunnet Japparow v. Turkmenistan*, para. 7.6; *Akmurad Nurjanov v. Turkmenistan*, para. 9.3; *Shadurdy Uchetov v. Turkmenistan*, para. 7.6; *Dawletow v. Turkmenistan*, para. 6.3 and others.
[xxxiv] CCPR/C/RWA/Q/4, 21 August 2015, para. 19. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/RWA/Q/4
[xxxv] CCPR/C/SR.3251, 23 March 2016, para. 25. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/SR.3251
[xxxvi] CCPR/C/SR.3251, 23 March 2016, para. 39. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/SR.3251
[xxxvii] CCPR/C/RWA/CO/4, 2 May 2016, paras. 37-38. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/RWA/CO/4
[xxxviii] CCPR/C/RWA/5, 31 July 2025, paras. 180-183. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/RWA/5
[xxxix] CCPR/C/RWA/Q/5, 27 March 2026, para. 16. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/RWA/Q/5
[xl] African Association of Jehovah's Witnesses and The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, Joint Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Committee Prior to the Adoption of the List of Issues 144th session (23 June–25 July 2025) Rwanda, 28 April 2025, para. 4.
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[xlii] African Association of Jehovah's Witnesses and The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, Joint Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Committee Prior to the Adoption of the List of Issues 144th session (23 June–25 July 2025) Rwanda", 28 April 2025, para. 10.
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[xliii] *Young-kwan Kim et al. v. Republic of Korea*, para. 7.5; *Petromelidis v. Greece*, para. 9.8.
[xliv] A/HRC/41/23, 24 May 2019, para. 60(c). https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/23
See also: A/HRC/50/43, 11 May 2022, para. 57(d). https://undocs.org/A/HRC/50/43
[xlv] A/HRC/56/30, 23 April 2024, para. 16. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/30
[xlvi] A/HRC/62/24, 21 April 2026, para. 41(b). https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/62/24
[xlvii] CCPR/C/LVA/CO/4, 3 September 2025, paras. 37-38(b). https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/LVA/CO/4
[xlviii] E.g. Austria: CCPR/C/AUT/QPR/6, 30 August 2024, para. 21(b). https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/AUT/QPR/6

Barbados: CCPR/C/BRB/QPR/4, 22 April 2025, para. 21(b). https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/BRB/QPR/4
[xlix] CCPR/C/SR.4273, 27 May 2026, para. 16. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/SR.4273
See also "the Committee remains concerned that, according to information received, conscientious objection may be recognized only prior to enlistment in the armed forces" in CCPR/C/MDA/CO/4, 2 April 2026, para. 39. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/MDA/CO/4
[l] OSCE, ODIHR, *Handbook on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Armed Forces Personnel*, 2008, Chapter 10 Conscientious Objection to Military Conscription and Service, 4. Best Practices and Recommendations, p. 85 [second point].
https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/c/31393.pdf
[li] UN Human Rights Council, Resolution 24/17 (A/HRC/RES/24/17), 8 October 2013, para. 5.
http://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/24/17
[lii] A/HRC/58/5, 20 December 2024, recommendation 124.89 (Costa Rica). https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/58/5
[liii] A/HRC/58/5/Add.1, 12 February 2025, para 3a. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/58/5/Add.1
[liv] A/HRC/58/4, 20 December 2024, recommendation 132.90 (Costa Rica). https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/58/4
[lv] A/HRC/58/4/Add.1, 25 February 2025, para. 260 referring to Recommendation number 132.90.
https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/58/4/Add.1.
And Annex to Norway's Addendum to A/HRC/58/4, para. 260.
https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session48/nrw/a-hrc-58-4-add-1-norway-annex-e.docx
[lvi] A/HRC/59/4, 18 March 2025, recommendation 34.95 (Costa Rica). https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/59/4
[lvii] A/HRC/59/4/Add.1, 7 April 2025, para. 4. https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/59/4/Add.1
[lviii] CCPR/C/RWA/CO/4, 2 May 2016, paras. 33-34(d). https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/RWA/CO/4
[lix] CCPR/C/RWA/5, 31 July 2025, para. 168. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/RWA/5
[lx] CCPR/C/RWA/Q/5, 27 March 2026, para. 14. https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/RWA/Q/5
[lxi] CCPR/C/79/Add.79, 4 August 1997, para. 20. https://undocs.org/en/CCPR/C/79/Add.79
See also: CCPR/C/COD/CO/4, 30 November 2017, paras. 37-38(e). https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/COD/CO/4
[lxii] UN Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, Civil and political rights, including the question of independence of the judiciary, administration of justice, impunity, Issue of the administration of justice through military tribunals, Report submitted by the Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, Emmanuel Decaux, (E/CN.4/2006/58), 13 January 2006, Draft principles governing the administration of justice through military tribunals, Principle No. 5 "Jurisdiction of military courts to try civilians".
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[lxiii] Report of the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, (A/HRC/11/41) 24 March 2009, para. 36.
https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/11/41
[lxiv] ECtHR, *Ergin v Turkey (No.6)* (47533/99), 4 May 2006, para. 24. https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-75327
[lxv] UN Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, Report of the independent expert to update the Set of principles to combat impunity, Diane Orentlicher, Addendum, Updated Set of principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity, (E/CN.4/2005/102/Add.1), 8 February 2005, Principle 29.
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[lxvii] Inter-American Court: *Palamara-Iribarne v Chile* (2005), para. 269(14).
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[lxviii] E.g. *Onaran v. Turkey* (65344/01), 5 June 2007; *Düzgören v. Turkey, (56827/00),* 9 November 2006; *Ergin v Turkey (No.6)* (47533/99), 4 May 2006; *Öcalan v. Turkey* [GC], (46221/99), 12 May 2005; *Canevi and Others v. Turkey*, (40395/98), 10 November 2004; *Şahiner v. Turkey*, (29279/95), 25 September 2001.
[lxix] *Ergin v Turkey (No.6)* (47533/99), 4 May 2006, para. 43. https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-75327
[lxx] Ibid. para. 44.
[lxxi] Ibid. para. 49.