

Rwanda has called for the creation of a special group to combat hate speech, warning that unchecked harmful messages, especially on social media, threaten security in the Great Lakes region.

Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Minister Olivier Nduhungirehe addressed the “Durban 25” conference in Geneva on Feb. 23, which focused on how failure to address hate speech can fuel violence and destabilize communities.

“Hate speech is not a message. When it goes unchallenged or is treated as politically acceptable, it becomes a tool for abuse,” Nduhungirehe said.

He noted that while the Durban conference provides international guidelines against racism, xenophobia, and incitement to violence, these problems persist worldwide, more than 20 years after the framework was adopted. “At times, such speech is tolerated or exploited by politicians for their own ends,” he said.

Highlighting ongoing threats in the region, Nduhungirehe cited the FDLR, an armed group sanctioned by the U.N. and composed of perpetrators of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. “Their continued existence shows how unaddressed hate speech allows violent ideologies to survive and be passed on,” he said.

He warned that unchecked hate speech normalizes discrimination, and groups may be treated as foreigners in their own countries. “Discrimination becomes institutionalized, rooted in politics and security structures, and violence can erupt in the future,” he said.

Nduhungirehe cited East Congo, particularly South Kivu, where the Banyamulenge community faces severe attacks and blocked humanitarian aid. “These are clear signs of ethnic targeting and crimes against humanity,” he said.

Rwanda proposed creating a “group of friends” to prevent, monitor, and respond to hate speech early. The minister emphasized tackling cross-border and evolving forms of hate speech, particularly on social media.

U.N. Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide Alice Wairimu Nderitu noted that the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi began not with weapons, but with words spread through radio, media, and propaganda campaigns that dehumanized the Tutsi over time.