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DR Congo/Angola: Forced repatriation leaves thousands destitute and facing human rights abuses

Although the Angolan President has suspended the expulsion of Congolese living in Angola, tens of thousands of those recently expelled remain under threat in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) because the DRC authorities have failed to make necessary provision for their protection.

The UN estimates that up to 100,000 Congolese have been expelled from Angola to the Bandundu and Kasai Occidental provinces of the DRC over the last few weeks. Most have arrived exhausted and in many cases entirely stripped of their possessions and clothes. Some were in an extremely poor medical state due to diseases, dehydration, hunger and having spent many nights without shelters. Many others have also reportedly been subjected to serious human rights violations on both sides of the border.

Congolese NGOs and international humanitarian organizations are trying to respond to the needs of those people arriving in their areas by providing them with shelter, food, health and hygiene supplies. However, their resources are limited and they are not receiving adequate support from the DRC government or local authorities.

The manager of a Congolese NGO working in Kasai Occidental, told Amnesty International: "*In the course of their expulsion, some had to walk for 14 days to arrive in Tshikapa. We are trying to help as they have no food and no clothes, and have nowhere to go.*"

Those expelled to the DRC told international and local NGOs that Angolan security forces subjected them to appalling human rights violations before expulsion. People were reportedly held in transit camps for up to a week, where the Angolan security forces stole anything valuable.

While searching for hidden diamonds or money, the security forces, after separating families, reportedly conducted public and unhygienic internal body searches, including vaginal and rectum searches, on adults and children. Those who resisted searches were reportedly severely beaten. Many women and girls, under the pretext of being searched, were reportedly raped and sometimes gang-raped even when pregnant. A number of refugees were also reportedly drowned as they attempted to cross rivers in their journey to DRC.

Information received by Amnesty International also suggests that some refugees have been detained by DRC security forces and accused of being infiltrators ("*infiltrés*") with a view to extorting money and diamonds from them. If the detainees pay they are allowed to go free, if not they may be subjected to beatings or other abuses, including sexual violence.

Amnesty International urges both the DRC and Angolan governments to ensure that such abuses are brought to an immediate end, and that the reports are investigated and the alleged perpetrators brought to justice.

Amnesty International is also calling on the DRC government to address the humanitarian needs of those expelled.

"The DRC authorities have so far made very little practical effort to assist these people, either at the governmental or the local level. The government must urgently establish and implement a strategy to assist the returnees, facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid, and promote the integration of returnees into local communities," the organization said. "Local authorities should give every assistance to NGOs working in their zones, and work to ensure good relations between the returnees and communities."

Background

Since December 2003 Angolan authorities have been expelling thousands of Congolese they accuse of illegally mining diamonds in the country. Foreigners of 15 different nationalities, including from Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Sierra Leone are among those expelled. Most of them saw their houses destroyed by the Angolan security forces before being forced to flee.

The expulsions that took place in April, from the Malange, Lunda Norte, Lunda Sul and Kwanza Sul provinces of Angola, have been the third and largest wave of forced repatriation. Many of the people expelled from Angola were born there, and have no place to which they can return.

The returnees were suspected by Angolan and DRC security forces of having hidden money or packets of diamonds on their persons, including by swallowing.