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Democratic Republic of Congo: Peace process at risk if political and military rivalries in North-Kivu province are not addressed

Amnesty International today warned that the political, military and ethnic tensions building in the North-Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) signal the possibility of a renewal of widespread armed conflict that could destabilize the country's fragile peace process and further erode the already poor human rights and humanitarian situation.

In a comprehensive report published today, *North-Kivu: Civilians pay the price for political and military rivalry*, Amnesty International documents how supposed partners in the DRC's transitional power-sharing government have contributed to a deterioration in the situation in North-Kivu -- including the inflammation of ethnic tensions -- in order to advance their own factional political, economic or military interests. The neighbouring powers of Rwanda and Uganda have also continued to have a detrimental effect on events in the province.

"North-Kivu is currently the stage on which national and regional political and military antagonisms are being played out -- and the end result is looking increasingly tragic for the people of the region," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

The DRC's transitional government is tasked with improving security and leading the country to national elections, now delayed until at least early 2006. However, major reforms are still needed to move the country forward to a position of stability where elections can take place in a free and safe environment. One of these key reforms is the formation of an integrated national army, composed of former armed groups and the former government army. After much delay the integration process is now underway, including in North-Kivu, but is seriously hampered by a lack of full political commitment to the process.

"In reality, former belligerents are showing extreme reluctance to dismantle their military structures in favour of a unified national army, as these structures are the basis of their power," said Kolawole Olaniyan. "However, real unification of the armed forces is a prerequisite for elections that are free of human rights abuses, and for the success of future peace-building in the country."

Amnesty International is especially concerned that no effort has been made to exclude individuals suspected of committing grave human rights abuses from the unified national army.

"The DRC's diverse ethnic communities can only be reassured that the unified army will act as an

impartial force if suspected perpetrators of human rights abuses are excluded from its ranks and brought to justice," said Kolawole Olaniyan.

The uncertain outcome of military integration is adding considerably to the dangerous mix of tensions in the east. As Amnesty International's report documents, failure to integrate was one of the causes of a large-scale military confrontation in December 2004, in which hundreds of civilians were victims of killings, torture, rape and other abuses -- many of which were ethnically-motivated. The alleged perpetrators of the abuses have not been brought to justice and some are being integrated into the new national army.

The organization is calling on the DRC authorities and the international community urgently to address the causes of the underlying crisis in North-Kivu, including by bringing to justice individuals responsible for crimes under international human rights and humanitarian law, curbing the proliferation of arms, and defusing ethnic tensions in the province.

Amnesty International laid special stress on the role of the international community as it accompanies the DRC to its first national democratic elections.

"The international community has a vital role to play in ensuring that the human rights and safety of the Congolese people are not further compromised as elections approach. It needs to insist, both now and in the post-election period, on accountability and justice for human rights abuses committed in the DRC," said Kolawole Olaniyan.

The organization also called on the UN peace-keeping force in the DRC, MONUC, to implement its mandate robustly.

"Despite the clarity of its protection mandate in the Kivu provinces, MONUC has failed on several occasions to protect civilians, often intervening too late to prevent human rights abuses. MONUC must reinforce its presence in regions at risk of escalation of violence, including North-Kivu, and ensure that it acts promptly to protect civilians."

Key recommendations:

- The military integration process should include an independent vetting mechanism to ensure that individuals reasonably suspected of committing human rights abuses are excluded from the national army and are investigated;
- The DRC authorities and international community need to make the rehabilitation of the DRC's shattered justice system a priority;
- Action must be taken to prevent incitement to ethnic discrimination, hostility or violence, including by removing from their post any official found to have incited such hostility;
- Arms distributed to civilians in North-Kivu must be recovered and destroyed;
- MONUC must be reinforced in the regions at risk of escalation of violence, and must fulfil its mandate to protect civilians.

Background

North-Kivu is among the most strategic of the DRC's provinces, situated on the DRC's border with Uganda and Rwanda, whose security concerns, as well as economic and political interests, have twice tipped the DRC into disastrous armed conflicts since 1996. The province contains the intersecting zones of control of different, largely ethnic-based, Congolese armed political groups, each sponsored at one time or another by the three governments and their national armies. The province is home to a mix of ethnic groups with historically troubled relations, focused particularly on the issue of land tenure. North-Kivu also is of prime economic importance, with lucrative customs revenues from the Uganda and Rwanda border-crossings, substantial mineral deposits and valuable agricultural and cattle-rearing concerns.

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