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## **ZAIRE: GOVERNMENT TROOPS CONTINUE TO CARRY OUT GROSS HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS**

Zairian soldiers retreating from the country's Kivu region have pillaged, raped and killed with virtual impunity in recent months, with people in many towns and villages living in constant fear that they will become the next victims of such human rights violations, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

The fears have escalated in the past month, after the government launched a military counter-offensive to recapture territory lost to the *L'Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaire* (AFDL), Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire.

"As evidence of brutal human rights violations mounts and military actions are stepped up, we are calling on the international community to put pressure on the Zairian government now to stop further human rights violations by its security forces," Amnesty International said.

Since the mass exodus of refugees at the end of last year, the human rights situation in Zaire has fallen off the international agenda. Other governments have appeared unwilling or unable to take action to help people suffering gross human rights abuses in Zaire and plans for a humanitarian intervention force foundered after the forced repatriation of refugees to Rwanda.

Women, members of religious groups and non-Zairians, many of Rwandese or Burundian origin, have been among those specifically targeted by Zairian troops.

On 5 or 6 December, according to several local sources, soldiers of the *Forces armées zairoises* (FAZ), Zairian Armed Forces, brutally raped school girls at the Lycée Likovi secondary school in Bunia. The soldiers are alleged to have raped the young girls savagely and systematically, leaving seven of them dead. In a similar event, a witness reporting that FAZ soldiers who went to Bunia raped and kidnapped young girls in late November, said: "This has turned disgust with FAZ to bitter hatred".

Church workers have come under sustained attack, with local officials in Kisangani accusing the church of collaborating with the rebellion. Church buildings have been repeatedly searched or looted, and church personnel have been harassed and intimidated.

Since the start of the conflict in eastern Zaire, the Zairian authorities have detained Zairians of Tutsi ethnic origin, refugees, journalists and human rights activists who have tried to investigate abuses against Tutsi or speak out against government policies in the conflict zone.

In Kisangani, capital of Haut Zaire region, at least 80 Rwandese and Burundian prisoners were being held 'for their own safety' since November 1996 in detention centres run by the *Service national d'intelligence et de protection* (SNIP), National Intelligence and Protection Service. Unconfirmed reports say that they may have been transferred to the remote Osio prison, 17 km from Kisangani, where conditions are appalling.

Amnesty International has appealed directly to the Zairian Prime Minister to release these people immediately if they have not been charged with recognizable criminal offences.

In early January, the Minister of Defence, General Likulia Bolongo, announced that the armed forces have to rid themselves of "criminals, runaways, pillagers and vagabonds". This announcement led to the arrest of scores of soldiers on charges of looting and desertion. On 21 January, 14 soldiers were sentenced to death by court martial in Kisangani.

The organization believes that the death penalty is an inhumane violation of the fundamental right to life and has therefore appealed to the Zairian Government to have these death sentences commuted.

Amnesty International calls on the Zairian Government to ensure that its forces respect the human rights of the unarmed civilians -- including the displaced and refugees -- in the conflict zones and elsewhere. The organization is also asking both the Zairian Government and the AFDL to allow full access to territories under their control to human rights activists and others investigating reports of human rights violations in Zaire.

"Government around the world should also prevent further transfers of light weapons and associated military equipment, as well as military personnel, to the government forces and to the armed groups in the region," the organization said.

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