

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 62/057/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 269
27 November 2003

Embargo Date: 27 November 2003 00:01 GMT

DRC: Summit on the Democratic Republic of the Congo should give priority to protection of human rights

As a Heads of State summit focusing on the peace agreement between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda begins in Pretoria today, Amnesty International urges the Heads of State to give promotion and protection of human rights priority on their agenda.

"In Kinshasa, the transitional government speaks of political progress, regional harmony, and democratic elections. The governments of Rwanda and Uganda have also asserted their support for, and willingness to cooperate with, the DRC transitional government. But in eastern DRC, human rights abuses, including mass killings, rape, torture, and the extensive use of child soldiers, continue to be perpetrated with impunity," Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan said today as the day the organization publishes a new memorandum titled *Democratic Republic of Congo - addressing the present and building a future*.

"The DRC transitional government and neighbouring countries must bridge the dangerous gap between their stated aspirations for reconciliation, justice and security and the devastating cycle of violence and human rights abuses, which continues daily in eastern DRC," she urged.

As a priority, Amnesty International calls on the participants to the Pretoria summit to take immediate measures to protect civilian populations and halt the horrendous pattern of human rights abuse in eastern DRC. Furthermore:

the DRC, Rwandese and Ugandan governments must immediately end all political and military support to armed groups responsible for human rights abuses in eastern DRC, and exert their influence over the armed groups to cease human rights abuses;

the DRC, Rwandese and Ugandan governments, with support from MONUC and the international community must fully cooperate with efforts to disarm, demobilise, and repatriate foreign armed insurgent groups based in DRC; and

MONUC should deploy sufficient troops as rapidly as possible throughout eastern DRC to ensure the protection of civilian populations in fulfilment of its Chapter VII mandate to use all necessary means to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence in Ituri and the Kivu regions of eastern DRC.

As part of these immediate measures, participants must also consider ways to counter vigorously and comprehensively economic exploitation and arms trafficking. The desire to control and plunder the natural resources of DRC has been the driving force of the conflict and continues to fuel massive human rights abuses.

The arms embargo on eastern DRC, instituted by the UN Security Council in July 2003 should be respected by regional governments and enforced by MONUC in the strictest manner possible.

The Memorandum also addresses specifically the DRC government on transitional reforms needed for the protection of human rights, with the support of the international community, including, the DRC government,

supported by MONUC and other UN agencies, should establish a coherent plan for the creation of the new DRC army which ensures that all integrated forces are placed under a clear chain of command;

supported by the donor governments and the UN, should urgently establish a systematic and adequately resourced programs for the disarmament and demobilisation of forces that are not to be integrated into the army;

and donor governments who will be funding and supporting transitional institutions must ensure that the leaders of the new army, police and members of civilian human rights institutions do not include those suspected of committing or ordering human rights abuses.

The Memorandum also addresses the pressing need for justice and for an end to impunity. The widespread nature of abuses in the DRC implicates a large number of people, including some who currently occupy positions of power. The Memorandum sets out various possible options for delivering justice at the national and international levels for crimes that fall outside the scope of the International Criminal Court.

"The DRC, Rwandese, Ugandan governments must take vigorous measures to ensure that those who are suspected of having perpetrated war crimes, and other serious human rights abuses in the course of the DRC conflict are investigated and brought to justice," Irene Khan urged.

"The critical test of the political process in the DRC does not lie in the planned elections two years down the road, but in the willingness and ability of the DRC, Rwandese and Ugandan governments to take immediate measures to rein in the armed elements, end human rights abuses in eastern DRC," Irene Khan concluded.

Background

In October 2003 an Amnesty International delegation, led by its Secretary General, Irene Khan, visited the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Uganda to meet human rights defenders and humanitarian actors and hold high-level talks with the governments of these countries and the United Nations. As well as the three capitals, the delegation also visited Goma, North-Kivu province, and Bunia, the capital of Ituri district, Oriental Province.

Amnesty International's mission was timed to coincide with the new political developments in Kinshasa that followed the official withdrawal of Rwandese and Ugandan government forces from DRC and the installation, in June 2003, of a transitional government composed of representatives of the former government, armed political groups, opposition political parties and Congolese civil society. The mission was designed to highlight the role and responsibilities of the new government, armed political groups and the Rwandese and Ugandan governments for the promotion and protection of human rights in DRC, with a particular focus on Ituri and Kivu regions of eastern DRC - regions that remain mired in violence and human rights abuse.

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