

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Democratic Republic of Congo: A neglected human rights tragedy in Ituri province**

The Ugandan authorities should bring suspected perpetrators of the serious human rights abuses committed in Ituri to justice before Uganda's courts, Amnesty International said today in a new report on the deteriorating situation in Ituri province in north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

"There must be no hiding place for those who are alleged to have committed serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in Ituri or elsewhere in DRC", Amnesty International said. "Suspected perpetrators, of whatever nationality, found on Ugandan territory or in areas of the DRC under Ugandan control should be investigated and brought to justice."

Amnesty International's report - *Democratic Republic of Congo: On the precipice: the deepening human rights and humanitarian crisis in Ituri* - documents some of the recent grave human rights abuses in Ituri, where an estimated 50,000 people have died and more than 500,000 displaced since 1999 as a result of fighting in the region. Much of the violence stems from armed conflict between the Hema and Lendu ethnic groups. This conflict has been manipulated and exacerbated by leaders of armed political groups fighting for political and economic control in the region.

Armed political groups and ethnic-based militias have committed unlawful killings, acts of torture, including rape, and other serious human rights abuses in Ituri, frequently on a mass scale. The majority of victims are civilians targeted solely because of their ethnic identity. Such abuses have accelerated in recent months. "Amnesty International calls on these groups and militia to stop immediately unlawful killings and other human rights abuses against civilians and combatants who have ceased to take part in hostilities."

### **Robust international action needed to protect civilians**

As the crisis in Ituri deepens, Amnesty International repeats its call to the UN Security Council to urgently reinforce the MONUC (UN Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo) presence in the region, to implement its mandate to "protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence" and to help create conditions for the safe delivery of humanitarian supplies, desperately needed by Ituri's civilian population.

Amnesty International also calls on the Ugandan People's Defence Forces (UPDF) present in Ituri to fulfill the Ugandan government's obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law to protect civilian life in the region. The UPDF have themselves committed numerous human rights violations

in the province, including unlawful killings of unarmed civilians. UPDF personnel have reportedly sold arms to warring ethnic groups and have trained militias, including child soldiers. Repeated shifts in Ugandan political backing to the rival armed political groups in Ituri have also deepened and prolonged the crisis.

"Uganda has claimed to act for peace and reconciliation in the region, and the UPDF has occasionally intervened to halt fighting between opposing forces. However, the conduct of the UPDF and the Ugandan government generally with regard to Ituri has been a major factor in the chaos and violence that has engulfed the region, sowing further discord among ethnic groups and contributing to the pervasive insecurity."

### **Justice essential to resolving the crisis**

Alleged perpetrators of gross human rights abuses in Ituri have not been brought to justice, although in some cases they have been publicly identified. "Those committing and ordering these crimes have drawn power, wealth and encouragement from their impunity, reinforcing the cycle of lawlessness and violence in the region," Amnesty International said.

The organization urges the Ugandan government and the international community to end this impunity by investigating abuses committed in Ituri and bringing the alleged perpetrators, whether from armed political groups or the UPDF, to justice. The Ugandan government is obliged under Article 146 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 "to search for persons alleged to have committed or to have ordered to be committed... grave breaches [of the Convention] and... bring such persons, regardless of their nationality, before its own courts". Such "grave breaches" include wilful killing, torture or inhuman treatment.

Amnesty International also urges the UN Security Council to establish an international commission of inquiry to investigate violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in the DRC, including in Ituri. The commission should also make recommendations for bringing perpetrators of violations to justice, including before national courts.

### **A lengthening list of mass human rights abuses**

Recently, five armed political groups and allied militia vying for control of Ituri region have allegedly committed grave human rights abuses. These include:

The *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie - Mouvement de libération* (RCD-ML), Congolese Rally for Democracy - Liberation Movement, often allied to Lendu ethnic militias. Hundreds of civilians from the Hema and Bira ethnic groups were reportedly unlawfully killed during an RCD-ML and Lendu militia attack on the town of Nyankunde in September 2002.

The *Mouvement pour la libération du Congo* (MLC), Movement for the Liberation of Congo.

The *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie - National* (RCD-N), Congolese Rally for Democracy - National.

Between October and December 2002 MLC and RCD-N forces reportedly committed unlawful killings of more than 100 civilians and other serious human rights abuses, including rape, in and around the town of Mambasa.

The *Union des Patriotes Congolais* (UPC), Union of Congolese Patriots soldiers and allied Hema militia, were reportedly responsible for a spate of unlawful killings of and acts of torture or ill-treatment against non-Hema or prominent Hema who were suspected of dissidence during the UPC's rule in Bunia and other towns, between August 2002 and March 2003.

The *Front pour l'intégration et la paix en Ituri* (FIPI), an offshoot of the UPC and the latest armed political group to have emerged in February 2003 with Ugandan support.

The UPDF have also committed grave human rights abuses in Ituri. For example, in February 2002 a UPDF unit was reported to have unlawfully killed up to 80 mainly Lendu civilians in the region of Gety. In addition, the UPDF have failed to protect civilians from killings and other human rights abuses by armed political groups or militias, by not intervening or intervening only tardily, despite the UPDF's clear military authority in the areas where these abuses took place.

## **Background**

Ituri has been under the direct or proxy control of the UPDF since the outset of the current conflict in DRC in August 1998. The five armed political groups operating in Ituri are all, in one respect or another, protégés of the Ugandan government. Ugandan backing for the groups, however, has shifted constantly, exacerbating instability in the region.

Time and again, the provincial capital, Bunia, and other key towns have fallen under the control of different armed political groups. Most recently on 6 March 2003, the UPC, which had taken Bunia with UPDF assistance from the RCD-ML in August 2002, was itself forced out of Bunia by the UPDF. The latest fighting for Bunia caused loss of civilian life and extensive damage to property, including to offices of several humanitarian organizations which were reportedly looted by combatants.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566  
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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