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Democratic Republic of Congo: escalating repression of critics

The activities of peaceful political opponents, journalists, human rights defenders and trade union activists are being severely and brutally curtailed by the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Amnesty International said in a new report launched today.

"By systematically seeking to silence its critics the government is denying the Congolese people the opportunity to help bring about an end to the armed conflict, human rights abuses and the pervasive plundering of the country's resources by local and foreign political, economic and military elites," Amnesty International said.

The report -- based in part on a visit by Amnesty International to the country in August 1999 -- focuses on the violations of the rights to freedom of expression and association that have taken place since sections of the DRC Government's *Forces armées congolaises* (FAC), supported by the armies of Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, began a military offensive in August 1998 to overthrow President Laurent-Désire Kabila.

"Although the armed conflict has exacerbated the situation, the government is using the war against armed opposition groups and foreign military forces as a pretext to subject the Congolese to unwarranted repression, despite the fact that most of the victims are themselves opposed to the insurgency," the human rights organization added.

"Most of the human rights violations by the security forces are taking place in areas far away from the armed conflict zones. These violations started long before the armed conflict broke out in August 1998."

Any form of real or suspected dissent is severely repressed by the security forces through intimidation, harassment or imprisonment. Most perceived critics of the government are held without charge or trial, while some are tried and sentenced often by the special Military Order Court (COM), to long prison terms. Beatings and torture, including rape, of detainees is widespread.

Amnesty International is extremely concerned that the President has failed to prevent human rights violations by the plethora of security forces in the DRC -- including the National Intelligence Agency (ANR) and the Military Detection of Unpatriotic Activities (DEMIAP) -- which are directly responsible to him and have no legal powers of arrest.

The repression of journalists has drastically increased since August 1998. Dozens have been arrested because of articles they have written or newspapers they publish which have been critical of the government. Clovis Kadda, director of *L'Alarme* newspaper was arrested on 22 September 1999 by the military and was reportedly severely beaten -- including receiving 57 lashes -- for being a relative of an armed opposition commander.

Other journalists working on the newspaper have also been targeted, including the editor, Bonsange Yema, who has been forced into hiding fearing re-arrest and whose relatives have been tortured to reveal his whereabouts.

The government has also used the Military Order Court to punish journalists and frighten others into self-censorship. Thierry Kyalumba, editor of *La Vision* newspaper, was tried by the Military Order Court and sentenced to four years' imprisonment simply because his newspaper published an article that refuted a government claim that an armed opposition leader was dead.

"The use of military courts -- whose rulings cannot be challenged and whose military judges are appointed by the President -- is further evidence of a concerted campaign by the government to suppress all signs of dissent."

Prominent opposition political leaders or supporters have also been targeted by the security forces. Often they are barred from travelling inside and outside of the country or their passports are confiscated.

Stéphane Ibanga and Mutua Ngwefa were arrested on 17 May 1999 in Kinshasa, together with five others, accused of being sympathisers of the opposition party Unified Lumumbiste Party (PALU). Taken to a detention centre they were held in cramped dirty cells and subjected to a daily regime of beatings with rifle butts and belts. When they were released two weeks later without ever being charged Stéphane Ibanga claimed that he was so severely tortured that at the time of his release he could not walk and had to crawl out of the detention centre. At least 76 other members of PALU were arrested during July.

Although about 156 PALU and other political detainees were released in December, Amnesty International remains concerned that others remain in custody and restrictions on peaceful political activity remain in force

Human rights defenders, including trade unionists have also been subjected to death threats, violence, intimidation and detention. Thirteen members of the student union at the University of Lubumbashi were arrested on 5 November 1998 detained for several days by the National Intelligence Agency (ANR). They were reportedly tortured so severely that one woman, Manuunga, suffered a miscarriage as a result of being raped.

"On coming to power in May 1997, President Kabila promised to end 32 years of dictatorship and human rights violations. In reality, fundamental human rights have been systematically and deliberately further eroded," the organization stressed.

Amnesty International calls on the government to end its brutal crackdown on freedom of expression and association and ensure that members of its security forces who commit human rights violations are brought to justice.

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For more information or to receive a copy of the report *DRC: Government terrorises critics*, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on + 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>