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Republic of Congo: a human rights crisis rooted in power struggles

Government and armed opposition forces in the Republic of Congo are conducting a deliberate campaign of killing, wounding and "disappearing" or abducting civilians, Amnesty International said today in a new report. Hundreds of unarmed civilians have been killed between late 1998 and the start of 1999 alone, according to the organization.

Since the multi-party elections in 1992, more than 10,000 unarmed civilians have been executed and many others subjected to other human rights abuses by government forces and armed groups, confirming a pattern of abuses deeply rooted in power struggles since independence, the report said.

"Virtually all the leaders of forces taking part in the ongoing conflict have been responsible for previous crises since the Republic of Congo became independent in 1960", the human rights organization said, stressing in particular that "systematic and widespread human rights abuses by government forces and various armed groups have occurred since 1993".

Forces loyal to President Denis Sassou Nguesso have abducted, tortured, raped, arbitrarily arrested and unlawfully detained civilians, in

flagrant violation of the *Acte Fondamental*, Fundamental Act, adopted last year. In virtually all cases those responsible for these abuses have not been brought to justice.

Over the past few months, combatants on both sides have raped women and deliberately wounded civilians. As many as 40,000 of civilians living in the Bakongo and Makélé-kélé districts of the capital, Brazzaville, have fled their homes, and 150,000 more have gone into hiding in the forests in the Pool region. Others have sought refuge in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

During the fierce fighting in June–October 1997 which led to the overthrow of then President Pascal Lissouba by Denis Sassou Nguesso's forces, forces supporting both protagonists perpetrated grave human rights abuses.

During talks with Amnesty International delegates in July–August 1998, the Congolese authorities denied that President Sassou's militia, known, as the *Cobras* had been responsible for human rights abuses. The authorities blamed these abuses on former President Lissouba's *Cocoyes* militia and former Prime Minister Bernard Kolelas' *Ninjas*. All these militias have been involved in further killings and other abuses since late 1998.

On the basis of information collected during and after a visit to Congo in 1998 by Amnesty International's delegates, the organization concluded that "most of the victims of abuses were unarmed civilians targeted on the basis of their political or ethnic affiliation. The abuses are a clear violation of international humanitarian law." The delegates also established that the police was carrying out a shoot-to-kill policy against alleged armed robbers, and dozens of detainees had been summarily executed in custody.

For example, the Congolese authorities and the leaders of the *Ninjas* have accused each other of being responsible for the killings of six representatives of religious groups in Mindouli on 14 November 1998. The

representatives were visiting the town to mediate between belligerents when they were attacked.

Children were among dozens of people arrested in late 1998 to early 1999 by government forces on suspicion of supporting the armed opposition. For example, the two sons of Jean-Mari Mfilou, a karate expert, were arrested with their mother on 13 January 1999, because the police accused him of training *Ninjas*.

Amnesty International is also concerned that foreign government forces, particularly Angolan soldiers, have since October 1997 been responsible for unlawful and deliberate killings and other human rights violations, including many rapes of women.

“Foreign governments that are involved in the armed conflict should ensure that their troops are not involved in human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law in Congo.”

“Successive Congolese governments have effectively ignored or even obstructed the work of the judiciary and thus perpetuated impunity, both for themselves and for their supporters responsible for human rights abuses and other crimes. This cycle of impunity has created conditions in which violence is perceived by many in Congo as the only means of correcting injustice and acquiring or retaining power,” Amnesty International added.

The organization believes that this pattern of human rights abuses will continue in the country “unless the government and its opponents commit themselves to respecting the rule of law, enforced by an independent, competent and impartial judiciary.”

Amnesty International urges governments and intergovernmental organizations “to wake up to the gravity of the crisis and to take immediate measures to bring it to an end.”

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