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## **Democratic Republic of Congo: armed conflict fuelled by history of human rights abuses and impunity**

The populations of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and neighbouring countries face further catastrophe unless concrete measures are taken now to protect human rights, Amnesty International said today.

In a report entitled *DRC: A long-standing crisis spinning out of control*, the organization accuses all sides in the current armed conflict in the DRC of carrying out, or failing to prevent, human rights atrocities, and calls on all governments and armed groups participating in the conflict to issue clear instructions to their combatants to respect human rights and abide by the fundamental rules of the laws of armed conflict by protecting unarmed civilians.

“The international community has failed to take a decisive position against the perpetrators or to place itself on the side of the victims. It is these unresolved violations of human rights and international humanitarian law that are at the heart of the current conflict,” Amnesty International said.

The organization is also calling on regional and other governments to immediately halt all supplies of military equipment or transfers of military personnel which could contribute to further abuses.

“Given the appalling recent human rights record of some of the forces opposed to and supporting Kabila, the recent history of genocide perpetrated against Tutsi in Rwanda and massacres of Hutu and others in the DRC and Rwanda, any further transfers of military equipment, personnel and training, to them might lead to an escalation in violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in the DRC and in neighbouring countries.”

Since 2 August, hundreds of Tutsi and people in the DRC with suspected or known links to Tutsi or to Rwanda have been arbitrarily detained in the capital Kinshasa, with reports that some have been extrajudicially executed.

Senior DRC authorities and national media have been waging a hate campaign against Tutsi and people of Rwandese origin, reminiscent of the campaign leading up to the 1994 genocide perpetrated in Rwanda. The authorities have incited civilians to attack Tutsi and others suspected of belonging to the armed opposition, many of whom have reportedly been burned alive by civilians and others summarily executed by government troops in Kinshasa, particularly in the districts of Masina, Kingasani and Kimbaseke.

Armed opposition combatants, as well as Rwandese and Burundi government forces in eastern DRC, are reported to have killed hundreds of unarmed civilians suspected of supporting the government. For example, on 24 August more than 280 unarmed civilians, including several Roman Catholic priests and nuns, were killed by the armed opposition and Rwandese government troops in and around the Kasika Roman Catholic parish in South-Kivu province. Members of the armed opposition are also reported to have abducted many civilians.

In 1996 and 1997, much of the international community was silent about the fact that combatants supporting President Laurent-Désiré Kabila and members of the Rwandese government forces, who have now turned against each other, killed tens of thousands of unarmed Rwandese refugees and Congolese citizens in the DRC.

Some in the international community played killings down or pretended they did not happen. Even the UN Security Council failed in July 1998 to act effectively when it received a report of the UN Secretary-General's Investigative Team which made it clear that those forces had committed crimes against humanity, some of which could amount to genocide. The perpetrators -- who have still not been brought to justice -- are now on different sides but are on course to repeat such atrocities.

Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia are providing military and political support to forces loyal to President Kabila, while Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi are supporting the armed opposition. Until recently, all the six governments supported President Kabila before and after he came to power in May 1997. International involvement in the conflict threatens to increase.

Amnesty International is therefore calling on all governments to prevent further supplies of weapons and other types of military, security and police transfers to all parties to the conflict which could be used to commit abuses in the DRC, unless and until effective measures and appropriate mechanisms can be put into place to monitor and ensure that the transfers do not contribute to human rights abuses.

On 31 August 1998 the UN Security Council joined a growing number of organizations and other bodies calling for a peaceful solution to the conflict. It urged all parties to respect and protect human rights and respect humanitarian law, in particular, the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Additional Protocols of 1977. Amnesty International calls on Member States of the UN, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Non-Aligned Movement which will be discussing the DRC crisis in the coming days to publicly condemn and demand an end to all human rights abuses in the DRC, regardless of the identity of the perpetrators or the victims.

“Any peace initiative brokered by the international community should include specific mechanisms for preventing human rights violations and guarantees that all those responsible for human rights abuses in the context of armed conflict in DRC will be brought to justice,” Amnesty International said.

“Parties to the conflict should allow members of human rights organizations and other independent human rights observers in the DRC to investigate and report on allegations of human rights abuses in areas under their control, and ensure that the investigators have unhindered and safe access to all such areas”. ENDS.../