

AI INDEX: AFR 62/14/98

8 APRIL 1998

Democratic Republic of Congo: Government cracks down on human rights organizations

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Government's recent ban of the country's leading human rights organization is the latest move in a crackdown on local human rights activists, Amnesty International declared today as it warned that repressive measures against other organizations may follow.

The ban on AZADHO, *Association zairoise de défense des droits de l'homme*, Zairian Association for the Defence of Human Rights, was imposed on 3 April.

"The government is clearly taking steps to make independent human rights work in the DRC impossible as it shows its increasing intolerance towards any dissenting voices in the country," Amnesty International said.

On the very same day that it banned AZADHO, the DRC government, as a member of the United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights, joined in the consensus on the adoption of a resolution to protect the rights of human rights defenders. The UN Human Rights Commission recommended that the declaration on human rights defenders be adopted by the Economic and Social Council and the UN General Assembly later this year.

"The DRC Government is speaking with two voices – promising to respect human rights at a meeting in Geneva, then stifling the work of those same defenders at home," Amnesty International said.

The ban on AZADHO was declared by the Minister of Justice, Mwenze Kongolo, on national television. He accused AZADHO of carrying out political campaigns against the government and receiving money from abroad. He also criticized AZADHO for retaining in its name the old designation of the country, Zaire. The minister announced that all human rights organizations had to register at the Ministry of Justice or face a ban.

AZADHO has played a key role in monitoring the human rights situation under the previous government of Mobutu Sese Seko as well as under the current government.

One day after the ban of AZADHO, soldiers came to the AZADHO office in Lubumbashi, Katanga province, searching for leading members of the organization. In mid March, the Vice-President of AZADHO, Pascal Kambale, was summoned to court after having claimed that the Congolese army killed at least 300 civilians in Butembo, North Kivu, in the context of the armed conflict in eastern DRC.

Meanwhile, the UN team for the investigation of alleged massacres in the DRC has encountered further problems. Amnesty International has received numerous reports of harassment and threats against witnesses and human rights organizations who met with the UN team. The UN investigative team has been compelled to leave Mbandaka, in the northwest of the country, after being wrongly accused by local officials and by the government of desecrating the graves of a traditional chief and his family.

In the light of the DRC Government's repeated attempts to block the UN's investigations, Amnesty International is calling on the UN Secretary General to withdraw the investigative team from the country and present to the UN Security Council a report of its findings, as well as an account of the difficulties and obstacles it encountered.

"The behaviour of the DRC Government towards the UN team is unacceptable and has managed to turn the investigators' presence in the country into a farce," Amnesty International said. "The international community should ensure that perpetrators of human rights violations in the DRC are brought to justice -- whichever government they belong to."

BACKGROUND

Over the last few months, several Congolese human rights activists have been arrested, and others have been physically assaulted. On 20 March, Floribert Chebeya Bahizire, president of *La Voix des Sans Voix* (VSV), Voice of the Voiceless, was violently attacked by five men, four of whom wore uniforms of the national army. From late November 1997 to 12 February 1998, Roger Sala Nzo Badila and Nyabirungu Mwene Songa, both leading members of the *Centre national des droits de l'homme* (CENADHO), National Centre for Human Rights, were detained because of their human rights activities.

ENDS.../