

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 62/014/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 173
10 September 2007

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): Escalating violence in North-Kivu deepens risk of mass ethnic killings

In the wake of recent intense fighting in North-Kivu province between government forces and fighters loyal to renegade general Laurent Nkunda, Amnesty International today accused the DRC government and international community of having failed the people of eastern DRC.

"Despite peace agreements, landmark national elections, and the continued deployment of more than 17,000 UN peacekeepers, the people of the Kivus have known no end to the conflict that has blighted their lives for more than a decade," said Erwin van der Borght, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

The organization warned of a growing danger that the violence could develop into a renewal of mass ethnic killings and other human rights abuses. Amnesty International is receiving reports from those fleeing the fighting of rapes and killings of civilians. Recruitment and use of children by armed groups in the Kivus has continued.

Amnesty International called on all forces involved in the fighting to respect international human rights and humanitarian law, stop attacking civilians and allow humanitarian access to all civilians caught up in the violence. MONUC should prioritize protection of civilian life over providing support to DRC government military operations

The organization also called on the Rwandan government to act immediately to stop the recruitment on its territory of individuals, including children, as fighters for Laurent Nkunda's forces, and to comply with the UN arms embargo by ensuring that no military equipment crosses its frontier into the DRC.

"Reports that the Rwandan government is, at the very least, conniving in the supply of manpower, arms and ammunition to an alleged war criminal like Laurent Nkunda are deeply worrying," said van der Borght.

Amnesty International believes that the continued violence in eastern DRC stems directly from the failure by the government and international community to tackle entrenched impunity for human rights crimes.

"An international warrant for the arrest of Laurent Nkunda was issued nearly two years ago -- if it had been acted on, we might not be seeing the terrible violations we are seeing today," said van der Borght. "There must now be clear international, DRC and Rwandan government commitment and collaboration to bring him to justice."

"The DRC government has rewarded other alleged war criminals with senior command positions in its army. There can be little confidence that the government army will ever be capable of protecting civilians professionally and impartially as long as no action is taken to remove these individuals from their positions and bring them to justice. The international community, which is providing considerable financial and technical assistance to the country's security sector reform programme, should be insisting on this."

Background

Fighting between the DRC army and Laurent Nkunda's forces has been ongoing for more than a week in the Masisi and Rutshuru territories of North-Kivu. A fragile cease-fire has been negotiated but may not hold. More than 40,000 people have been forced to flee their homes in recent days, adding to the more than 200,000 displaced by insecurity in the province since the beginning of the year.

Laurent Nkunda, a former senior RCD-Goma officer, is accused of having committed war crimes including in Kisangani in 2002 and Bukavu in 2004. He is the subject of an international arrest warrant issued by the DRC government in September 2005. The UN has accused him of breaking the arms embargo on DRC. To date, no DRC government or UN operation has been initiated to arrest him. He has been able to move freely in parts of North-Kivu province and Rwanda.

Laurent Nkunda claims that his forces are protecting the province's ethnic Tutsi population from attacks by the Rwandan insurgent armed group, the FDLR (*Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda*). He accuses the DRC government making insufficient effort to dislodge the FDLR from eastern DRC. The FDLR has also been responsible for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in the DRC.

The DRC government has pursued a policy of appointing to command positions in the government army and police force individuals who are suspected of involvement in war crimes, crimes against humanity and other grave human rights abuses. Such crimes include ethnic massacres, the widespread recruitment and use of child soldiers, mass rape and torture.

In late 2006 the government reached an agreement with Laurent Nkunda allowing for the deployment in North-Kivu of "mixed brigades" composed jointly of Nkunda's fighters and regular government soldiers. A supposed confidence-building measure, the mixed brigades were instead responsible for numerous human rights violations and served only to deepen the insecurity and humanitarian crisis in the province.

In June and July 2007 UN investigators reported that fighters for Laurent Nkunda's forces had been recruited in Rwanda by "networks sympathetic to Nkunda." Many of the recruits were children.

Public Document

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>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>