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**DR Congo: Threats against human rights defenders must end**

The Congolese government and M23 armed group fighting in DR Congo's north Kivu province must ensure threats against human rights defenders and journalists are stopped, Amnesty International has said, following an increase in documented cases of intimidation over the past three weeks.

The organization also called on the Congolese government to abide by its commitment to provide security to protect human rights defenders working amid the conflict.

"Amid increasing violence in eastern DRC, human rights defenders and journalists play a vital role in documenting abuses committed by both sides and informing the international community of the fighting's impact on the civilian population," said Paule Rigaud, Deputy Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"The ongoing threats and intimidation must stop. Both sides must respect the work carried out by human rights defenders and journalists", said Rigaud.

"We urge the Congolese authorities to implement their human rights national action plan, and to respect their commitment – made at the UN Human Rights Council in March – to create an effective and adequately resourced protection cell for human rights defenders."

Amnesty International has documented several cases since last month where human rights activists from North Kivu have been directly threatened by members of the M23 after criticizing the group or denouncing their human rights violations, including forced recruitment and summary executions. Several of them received repeated death threats in July through sms, anonymous phone calls and visits at night by armed men reportedly linked to the M23.

Journalists have also been the target of threats and intimidation over the last three months by either the M23 or the Congolese authorities. On 4th August, in Butembo territory (North Kivu province), a local radio was closed down by the Mayor of Butembo after broadcasting an interview of a M23 spokesperson.

The threats follow an intensification in the conflict.

The M23 armed group has recently driven back the Congolese government army in a determined offensive over the last few days and is reportedly controlling an area that reaches up to 30km north of Goma.

Fearing the launch of an attack by the M23 on Goma, the capital of North Kivu, the Congolese army has increased its presence in the city and along main roads with the support of the UN peacekeeping force.

**Background**

The M23 armed group named itself in reference to the alleged failure of the DRC government to respect a peace agreement signed on 23 March 2009.

The armed group is mostly composed of soldiers who defected from the Congolese army in April this year amid pressure on the government to arrest General Bosco Ntaganda – the International Criminal Court have issued a warrant for his arrest on alleged war crimes charges.

Many previously belonged to the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) integrated into the FARDC in 2009.