

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 62/011/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 074
31 March 2003

Democratic Republic of Congo: End the use of child soldiers

(Geneva) Children continue to be the casualties of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Amnesty International said today speaking at a side event at the UN Commission on Human Rights.

"Despite the signature of peace accords and of an agreement for a political transition, the conflict continues to ravage many parts of the DRC," Amnesty International said.

"Unarmed civilians continue to be killed or tortured, women continue to be raped and children continue to be recruited in regions where fighting by armed groups and militias is on-going."

Amnesty International remains deeply concerned that these systematic and widespread human rights abuses remain unpunished.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, of which Amnesty International is a member, has estimated that tens of thousands of children are used as soldiers in DRC. A recent Amnesty International mission to that country found that children as young as seven are recruited into some of the armed groups involved in the conflict.

"Under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court the recruitment of children under the age of 15 as soldiers is considered a war crime," Amnesty International stated.

The governments of DRC, Rwanda and Uganda have all ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. All three governments deposited binding declarations setting the minimum voluntary recruitment age as 18.

The organization called on the Commission to remind the governments involved in the conflict in DRC that they have already made an international commitment not to recruit under-18s.

"Not only must the governments involved in the DRC conflict abide by their promise not to recruit children, they must also put in place effective and sustainable demobilization and rehabilitation programs," Amnesty International urged.

"Demobilization is not simply about taking children out of the armed forces -- it is about providing them with the necessary emotional and material support to promote their successful reintegration into civilian society," Amnesty International added.

"Alternatives to military recruitment must be provided, including increasing employment and

education opportunities, and prevent re-recruitment."

Amnesty International called on the Commission to support the establishment of an international commission of inquiry into allegations of grave abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law in the context of the conflict, and for it to report back to the 60th session of the Commission.

"Avoiding the truth about a country's past and ignoring accountability will not achieve peace," Amnesty International concluded.

To arrange an interview, please contact Amnesty International's researcher on DRC Veronique Aubert on +41 765 188 698.

To see Amnesty International's media materials for the 59th Session of the UN Commission of Human Rights please visit: <http://www.web.amnesty.org/mavp/av.nsf/pages/UNCHR>.

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