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Amnesty International urges peace negotiators to place the protection of DRC human rights defenders on the agenda

Amnesty International is concerned that members of several human rights groups in both eastern and western regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are at risk of ill-treatment and imprisonment this week because of their human rights work.

“Ministers meeting in the Zambian capital, Lusaka, about the crisis in the DRC should urge the DRC Government and its armed opponents to prevent the persecution of human rights activists,” the organisation added.

“Both the government and its armed opponents are persecuting human rights workers. There can be no peace in a country where human rights workers cannot carry out their activities on behalf of victims, without fear of being abused themselves. The protection and promotion of human rights, including those of human rights defenders, must be central to the peace process going on in Lusaka,” Amnesty International said.

La Voix des sans voix, (VSV), Voice of the Voiceless, was forced to close its office on 26 June 1999 and its President, Floribert Chebeya Bahizire, and several of his colleagues, were forced into hiding fearing arrest and violence a day earlier. Members of the VSV have for several months been threatened and intimidated, particularly by soldiers of the 50th Brigade in the capital, Kinshasa.

The VSV has been campaigning against incommunicado and arbitrary detentions and torture in military barracks and other unofficial detention centres. These abuses have increased dramatically since a renewed outbreak of armed conflict in August 1998.

On 23 June 1999, two soldiers from the 50th Brigade took Peter Ntumba and Olivier Kungwa of the VSV to witness what they claimed would be the release of former government minister Richard-Etienne Mbaya who had been detained at Kokolo military barracks, since 2 June 1999 (See UA 143/99). The soldiers also took along three journalists from *La Tempête des tropiques* newspaper which had published VSV appeals on behalf of Mbaya and other detainees.

On arrival at Camp Kokolo, the soldiers told the human rights activists and the journalists that they would be in trouble if they continued to work on behalf of the detainees. The journalists were told to publish a retraction about the arrest of Mbaya. Soldiers then filmed the two VSV members accompanying Mbaya to buy medication for his high blood pressure, over which the VSV had voiced concern. The film was broadcast on national television during the evening news of 25 June. Mbaya was not released.

Shortly after the television broadcast, sources close to the 50th Brigade informed Floribert Chebeya that he was about to be arrested. He and his family went into hiding. On the night of 26 June, men believed to be members of the security forces arrived at the home of a VSV staff member asking to know the whereabouts of Chebeya and other members of the organisation. Amnesty International is concerned for the security of all the members of VSV, as well as for staff of *La Tempête des tropiques*.

In eastern DRC, members of the *Héritiers de Justice* and those of *Groupe Jérémie* human rights organizations are being threatened with violence and detention by members of the

Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie (RCD). Dozens of human rights activists have fled RCD persecution since August 1998.

More recently, RCD leaders accused *Héritiers de la Justice* of divulging state secrets, inciting to revolt and endangering the security of the state after the organization published in April 1999 a list of 109 people killed in March by RCD combatants in Burhinyi, South Kivu province. In June a top RCD official threatened to ban the organization. Its activities have since been suspended.

On 15 June, RCD combatants broke into the office of *Groupe Jérémie*, took away documents and sealed the office. The following day RCD issued a statement, which was read on the official radio, accusing *Groupe Jérémie* and others of publishing anti-RCD tracts.

On 19 June a judicial official of the RCD military intelligence initiated a charge of endangering the security of the state against *Groupe Jérémie*. Members of the organization named on the charge sheet are Georges Bahaya, Jean-Moreau Tubibu, Déogratias Kiriza, Rémy Mpanano and Bisimwa Ntakobajora.

Amnesty International urges the DRC Government and the RCD to publicly withdraw all threats of violence or other human rights abuses against human rights activists and to commit themselves to the protection of human rights.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on + 44 171 413 5566.

