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Democratic Republic of Congo: Victims of Deadly Alliances - Time the International Community opened its Eyes

“The aggressors attacked this time in a U-formation... I saw Dathive behind me succumb to automatic fire... My lips trembled and a stream of tears flowed instinctively. I saw an inert female body and a child who cried on its side fingering her breasts!... What carnage! I saw before me bodies falling like banana trees cut down by a sharp machete”.

The speaker: a Rwandese refugee. The scene: a massacre of Rwandese refugees by the forces supporting the current President, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, at Wendji, northwestern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) on 13 May 1997.

“There can no lasting peace and security in the DRC while the government continues to deny the terrifying truth to the international community -- that its combatants carried out a deliberate and calculated policy to kill thousands of Rwandese refugees and Congolese civilians,” Amnesty International said in a new report released today.

The Amnesty International report, *DRC: Deadly alliances in Congolese forests*, portrays a sustained pattern of atrocities committed primarily against Rwandese, Burundian and Congolese Hutu, as well as against Congolese nationals from other ethnic groups -- which have persisted after Laurent Kabila assumed power in May 1997. There is abundant evidence to support that the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo* (AFDL) and its allies -- particularly the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA), as well as the *Forces armées zairoises* (FAZ) and other armed groups, including mercenaries -- were involved in the killings.

Various sources in the DRC have reported that the AFDL and its allies have been using various methods, including burning bodies and dumping them in rivers, to conceal evidence of the atrocities. The AFDL caused many of the victims to die from starvation, disease and exposure -- a fact that led the United Nations Secretary-General to speak of the “*victims of slow extermination*”.

“There is an urgent need to carry out a thorough investigation to establish at what level these actions were ordered, encouraged or condoned by the AFDL leadership,” Amnesty International said. “If the intent to kill or cause the death of all or many of the refugees is established, it could constitute evidence that genocide or other crimes against humanity were committed -- particularly against members of the Hutu ethnic group.”

Although the DRC Government has finally allowed the UN investigative team back into the country to begin investigations into the massacres, the UN Secretary-General has been threatening to pull the team out as even after two weeks access has still not yet been allowed.

Instead of seeking means to protect hundreds of thousands of refugees and other unarmed civilians from human rights abuses, governments and intergovernmental organizations focussed

almost exclusively on the repatriation of Rwandese refugees. Some governments even claimed that most of the refugees who failed to return to Rwanda were combatants which had the effect of making the AFDL and its allies believe that the international community considered Rwandese Hutu nationals left in the DRC as legitimate targets.

“The presence of armed elements among or close to unarmed Hutu refugees was usually given as justification for attacking the refugees,” Amnesty International said “This had the effect of establishing a pattern of wanton killing of Hutu, initially men of fighting age, as early as December 1996.”

Witnesses, interviewed by Amnesty International in June 1997, said as many as 140 refugees were killed by the AFDL at Wendji. One Congolese witness claimed to have counted 295 bodies lying along the road between Wendji and Mbandaka. Some sources have claimed that as many as 800 refugees may have been killed in and around Mbandaka.

“The AFDL has used all means, including denial of access by human rights and humanitarian agencies, to prevent a thorough investigation of the massacres,” Amnesty International said.

Since the start of 1997, a number of humanitarian organizations have said, some confidentially and a few publicly, that they were being used by the AFDL to lure refugees from hiding to be killed. For example, in late May, a group of 30 refugees who had been encouraged by humanitarian workers to come out of their hiding in the forest around Wendji was reportedly massacred by AFDL soldiers travelling on a truck.

Critics of the AFDL and its leaders, including journalists, members of opposition political parties and human rights defenders, have also been targeted for arrest and ill-treatment since the AFDL assumed power. In some cases, arrest warrants were reportedly issued days or even weeks after the arrests to legalise otherwise arbitrary arrests and unlawful detentions.

Despite numerous appeals by Amnesty International -- including a 27-page memorandum submitted to President Kabila in August 1997 -- the DRC Government has consistently failed to address the organization's concerns. Amnesty International believes that the DRC Government, UN Member States, the Organization of African Unity and the wider international community should take action now to end human rights violations condoned or ordered by government and other political leaders in the DRC.

“It is time that world governments accepted their role in legitimizing the killing, abduction, torture and rape of thousands of unarmed civilians and refugees accused of ‘guilt by association’ with the armed groups -- and in supporting President Kabila’s denial of these atrocities,” Amnesty International said. “Governments should not allow their past responsibilities to paralyze their much needed action now in putting an end to these abuses.”

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For further information, please refer to the Amnesty International document: *Democratic Republic of Congo: Deadly Alliances in Congolese forests*, 3 December 1997, AI Index: AFR 62/33/97. To arrange an interview, please call the Amnesty International, International Secretariat, Press Office: +171 413 5566/5810. ISDN Line now available.