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Democratic Republic of Congo: No peace without an end to impunity for human rights abuses

The transitional government in Kinshasa must give the highest priority to stopping, urgently and immediately, the horrendous cycle of human rights abuse still prevailing in eastern DRC, said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International, at the end of her visit in Kinshasa.

"While the different factions now in Kinshasa wrangle for power and privilege, people still live in fear of death, plunder and carnage in the Kivus, Ituri and other parts of the country. Mutilations and massacres continue. Children are still being used as soldiers, and rape of women and girls is a standard tactic of warfare. That grim reality throws a cold shadow on the optimism in Kinshasa," said Ms. Khan.

Underlining the continued links between several senior members of the government, the political parties they represent and the armed elements who are committing these abuses, Ms. Khan said: "The credibility of the transitional government will suffer if these atrocities are allowed to continue with impunity."

"Neither national unity nor democracy can be built on the back of abuse and impunity. The right of victims and their families to truth and justice is an essential element of the process of reconciliation and peace in the DRC. Those who are suspected of having perpetrated war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide must be investigated, regardless of the position or power they enjoy," Ms Khan said.

"We welcome the indications by the International Criminal Court (ICC) that they will investigate crimes committed in Ituri. This must be accompanied by further action at the national and international level to investigate crimes beyond the scope of the ICC."

In talks with the Vice Presidents and other senior members of the government as well as the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and members of the diplomatic community, Amnesty International stressed that the real test of the political process in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) will not lie in the planned election two years down the road but in the willingness and ability of the government to reign in the armed elements, to end human rights abuse, address impunity and undertake fundamental reform of the army, police and justice systems.

"Giving men and women the chance to vote is meaningless if they do not enjoy the right to a life free from the threat of rape, murder, torture, arbitrary detention and forcible displacement. Preparations for elections and economic reconstruction must go hand in hand with building institutions of governance, based on respect for human rights and international humanitarian law," emphasised Ms. Khan.

During a visit to Bunia last week, Amnesty International noted that a reinforced MONUC has brought some degree of security, but a lot more needs to be done to deploy troops in other parts of Ituri and in the Kivus, to support the reform of the army and the police, and demobilisation and disarmament.

"The international community must continue to give MONUC the political and financial support it needs and must stay the course until the tasks are done," urged Irene Khan.

"More attention must be given to assisting the victims of sexual violence and the demobilisation and rehabilitation of child soldiers, in particular building the capacity of local organisations."

"The UN Security Council must insist on the most scrupulous respect of the arms embargo on eastern DRC. It must put teeth in its resolution by setting up a mechanism to enforce the embargo, and provide MONUC with the resources to support this mechanism," said Irene Khan.

Amnesty International calls on UN member states not to engage in arms transfers and supplies of military and police equipment or training to the DRC, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda unless these transfers are subject to the most stringent certification and scrutiny to ensure that the equipment will not be used to perpetrate human rights abuses.

"We must not forget that the desire to control and exploit the natural resources of DRC has been a major driving force behind massive human rights abuses," said Irene Khan.

"So far, the findings of the UN Panel, implicating Uganda, Rwanda and Zimbabwe as well as many companies worldwide, have not led to investigations or action against these actors. On the eve of the publication of the final report of the UN Panel, we call on the UN Security Council to take concrete action to implement the recommendations of the four reports of the Panel. It is of the utmost importance that the UN Security Council establishes a mechanism to continue to monitor actively the resource exploitation to ensure that it is not tainted with human rights abuses."

"In order to gain the confidence of the Congolese people and set a new beginning for this country, the Congolese leaders must take firm steps to stop babies from being mutilated, children from being recruited to fight wars, women from being raped. The United Nations, the international community and governments in the region must work with the Transitional Government -- but the ultimate responsibility lies with the Congolese leaders," concluded Irene Khan.

Background

Irene Khan, the Secretary General of Amnesty International led a high level mission to Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo from 15 - 24 October 2003 to discuss with the leaders of these countries, their role in ending grave violations of human rights in eastern DRC, including massive summary killings of civilians, torture, rape, "disappearances", forced displacements and systematic use of rape as a weapon of war. Ms. Khan also raised with various presidents and senior government leaders Amnesty International's human rights concerns specific to their countries.

Amnesty International recognizes the regional dimensions of the conflict in eastern DRC and has, during the current visit to the Great Lakes region, raised its concerns with the Presidents and governments of Rwanda and Uganda. Kigali and Kampala must take immediate steps to translate into fact, pledges made to end their continued support of armed groups and the economic plunder which fuels the human rights atrocities in eastern DRC.

In addition to Kigali, Kampala and Kinshasa, Amnesty International's delegation visited Goma and Bunia in eastern DRC where it met with human rights defenders, civil society, survivors of human rights abuses, the governor of North Kivu, MONUC and other UN officials.

The delegation gathered information indicating that a large number of civilians, including children,

women and the old, continue to be deliberately and systematically subjected to horrendous human rights abuses in eastern DRC.

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