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Democratic Republic of Congo: Fuelling ethnic hatred escalates human rights crisis

The incitement to violence by the authorities and media in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) -- and the manipulation of information by armed opposition groups supported mainly by Rwandese government troops -- will merely exacerbate an already serious human rights situation in the country, Amnesty International warned today.

The human rights organization condemned the actions of some senior Congolese government officials who have called upon civilians to take up arms and to end what they have called "*the senseless adventure of the Rwandese in Congo*".

Statements made by a spokesperson in an 8 August broadcast of the Congolese radio from Bunia, calling on listeners to "... *jump on the people with long noses, who are tall and slim and want to dominate us* [reference to the Tutsi] ... *Wake up, be aware of our destiny so as to defeat the enemy.*"

The Congolese radio in Bunia broadcast on 12 August directions from the military spokesperson, that "*The entire population has become a military population from today onwards.*" adding further that "*You will detect enemies and massacre them without mercy, victory is assured.*" "*Be ferocious,*" the report continued. "*If you happen to encounter a Rwandan enemy, do not (word or words indistinct), beat him to bruises.*"

"Inflammatory statements by Congolese government officials inciting the population to violence against unarmed civilians will escalate the human rights crisis in the DRC," Amnesty International maintained.

In areas held by the armed opposition, reports of killings continue to surface. Amnesty International is particularly concerned by reports of massacres of civilians near Uvira, and the summary execution of government soldiers at Kavumu, near Bukavu. The outflow of information is strictly controlled, and known human rights activists are being threatened. Witnesses are being prevented from revealing human rights abuses, thereby keeping the international community in the dark about atrocities being committed.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the confiscation by the armed opposition in North and South-Kivu provinces of communication equipment from the general population and humanitarian organizations.

"As in 1996 and 1997, this measure is being used by the same armed groups to prevent information about human rights abuses reaching the outside world," the organization said.

“Both of these tactics -- the suppression of information and the incitement of civilians against particular groups -- have had a devastating effect in this region. We have no reason to believe that these tactics will prove to be any less harmful this time around.”

Amnesty International is especially concerned that unarmed civilians are being targeted by both sides because of their ethnic origin or because of their perceived political affiliation.

Fighting led by soldiers of the Tutsi ethnic group, known as Banyamulenge, and Rwandese government troops erupted on 2 August, following orders on 27 July by President Laurent-Désiré Kabila for all Rwandese and other foreign troops to leave Congolese territory. The armed opposition groups reportedly control most of North and South-Kivu, with further reports of heavy fighting in the southwest.

Since 2 August, Amnesty International has received reports of hundreds of arbitrary and unlawful arrests in Kinshasa, in particular of ethnic Tutsi civilians, of people of Rwandese origin, of Congolese married to Rwandese, and of others perceived as sympathizers of the rebellion.

“These people have been taken away to unknown destinations by members of the security forces and their lives are at risk, amidst reports that some may already have been killed,” Amnesty International said.

Search operations in the capital are reported to be continuing and many people with Tutsi or Rwandese connections have reportedly gone into hiding. Congolese Interior Minister Gaetan Kakudji admitted that Tutsi civilians were being held in ‘preventive’ detention in Kinshasha, supposedly to shield them from lynch mobs.

“Political and military leaders should immediately refrain from making provocative statements which are likely to incite further abuses against Tutsi civilians or people of Rwandese or Burundian origin,” Amnesty International said. “On the contrary, they should give public instructions to government and security officials to protect all people on territory under their control, regardless of their identity, and should do all they can to prevent further human rights abuses.”

Amnesty International is also calling on neighbouring countries, regional bodies and other members of the international community to recognise the seriousness of the situation in the DRC and to use their political influence on both the DRC and the armed groups to demand that they establish safeguards against further human rights abuses. Governments of neighbouring countries should also allow unarmed civilians fleeing the conflict and human rights abuses in DRC to seek refuge in their country.
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