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Human Rights Council: Words are not enough – Civilians in eastern DRC need more than half measures

The population of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo need actions that will bring an end to repetitive cycles of gross human rights violations, rather than mere words, Amnesty International said today. The organization's call came as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) unanimously adopted a resolution expressing its concern at the deteriorating situation in North Kivu and calling for an immediate end to all human rights violations.

"We regret that the Council expended so much time and energy on reaching agreement to make these important political statements that it could not find the political courage and unity of purpose to adopt practical measures to give effect to them," said Peter Splinter, Amnesty International's representative at the United Nations Geneva office.

In the Special Session devoted to address the situation of human rights in Eastern DRC, the Council condemned the acts of violence and human rights violations and abuses committed there, and stressed the importance of bringing all perpetrators to justice.

While the Council's resolution usefully calls on the Government of the DRC to investigate and bring to justice perpetrators of human rights violations, it includes no practical measures to combat impunity.

The Council remained silent on the need for the Government and the international community to expedite the rehabilitation and reform of the DRC courts and policing services. It says nothing about the establishment of an independent and effective vetting process to exclude from the security forces persons reasonably suspected of having committed crimes under international law or other human rights violations. No support is offered for the contribution of the International Criminal Court to addressing impunity or for the DRC Government's cooperation with the Court in this regard.

"Political jockeying, this time having nothing to do with the human rights situation in the East of the DRC, has once again stood in the way of the Human Rights Council living up to its potential to contribute to the protection of the victims of human rights violations," said Peter Splinter. "Once again the majority of members of the Council have been content to be silent witnesses to a tug-of-war between the African Group position and the European Union, rather than active contributors to an outcome demanded by the situation."

Amnesty International welcomes the Council's emphasis on the importance of strengthening the mandate of MONUC and its call on all states to immediately provide assistance to MONUC. However, the Council should have called for a stronger human rights component, including by calling for the deployment of more human rights officers and supporting reporting on the human rights situation to the Council and other parts of the UN.

The Council has done nothing to ensure that the efforts of the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy, Olusegun Obasanjo, will also be informed by human rights considerations or practical measures that will take account of the need for justice and accountability to break the repeated cycle of massive human rights violations.

"This is a measure that approaches self-inflicted blindness. The Council has mandated a weak follow-up procedure that will depend on already over-taxed human rights experts to keep it informed of developments in the eastern DRC," said Peter Splinter. "Instead, the HRC should have put in place a mechanism dedicated to enquiring into and reporting back to the HRC and other parts of the UN on the human rights situation in the region."

"It is time for all members of the Human Rights Council to assume their responsibility to effectively address situations of gross and systematic violations of human rights. The half measures that they served the population of the eastern DRC today are not enough."