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Democratic Republic of Congo: Time to stop the carnage and economic exploitation

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The international community should urgently assume its moral and legal responsibilities and bring about an immediate end to violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by forces involved in the pillaging of war-ravaged Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and to the inconceivable suffering which this has caused to the Congolese people, Amnesty International urged in a new report published today.

"For the last four and half years Rwanda, Uganda and their Congolese allies have systematically plundered eastern DRC's natural wealth on a vast scale causing, directly or indirectly, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Congolese civilians. In spite of numerous peace agreements, the killing continues, while the international community looks on," Amnesty International said.

The report, entitled '*Democratic Republic of Congo - 'Our brothers who help kill us'*', identifies the drive to control and exploit the DRC's natural resources as the biggest single factor underpinning the continuing violence in the country.

The northern and eastern regions of the DRC, which are under the control of Congolese armed groups sponsored by Rwanda and Uganda, are rich in many precious resources, including coltan, gold, diamonds and timber. These resources have been systematically pillaged by the warring parties, with senior members of the Rwandese and Ugandan armies and their Congolese allies being the major beneficiaries. While they have grown rich beyond the dreams of avarice, the vast majority of the local Congolese population face widespread abject poverty, insecurity, displacement, abduction and death .

Wealth for a small military, political and commercial elite has come at a huge price. Hundreds of thousands of Congolese civilians have been tortured and killed during fighting to secure control of natural resources. Thousands of others have died due to malnutrition and lack of access to humanitarian assistance after being forced to flee their homes.

Foreign forces have also deliberately stoked inter-ethnic conflicts and mass killings in order to promote their economic interests. This has been the case in Ituri for example, resulting in further mass killings and large scale destruction of habitations. Thousands of women have been raped. Children as young as 12 have been forced into hard labour in the mines. Human rights defenders who have denounced these abuses have been beaten, detained, forced to flee or

killed.

Although the international community knows what has been happening, it has consistently failed to respond in a timely and decisive manner. In June 2000 the United Nations Security Council mandated a Panel of Experts to investigate the exploitation of the DRC's natural resources by foreign actors. The Panel has since published three extensive reports, and submitted them to the UN Security Council, identifying the major economic players in the region and has proposed concrete measures to censure the states, individuals and companies involved. Despite this, governments of the alleged perpetrators, as well as the Security Council, have done next to nothing to hold economic actors to account for their commercial activities in the DRC, or for the human rights abuses which these activities have given rise to.

"Human rights abuses on such an unprecedented scale have only been possible in the DRC because the perpetrators, often motivated by personal financial gain, have been allowed to act with almost complete impunity. It is only through concerted and robust international action to end such impunity that further abuses will be prevented," Amnesty International said.

The power-sharing agreement ratified in early April 2003 by the main protagonists in the conflict, following peace talks in Sun City, South Africa, affords a further, valuable opportunity to break with the terrible violence and human rights abuses of the DRC's recent past. Amnesty International is urging all parties to the agreement and a future DRC Government to ensure that perpetrators of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law are not granted impunity.

The human rights situation in the DRC could be dramatically improved if the international community had a genuine political will and commitment to act.

Such action should include a strengthening of the mandate and deployment of the UN cease-fire monitoring body MONUC and the full implementation of MONUC's mandate "to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence".

In addition, the international community, in particular through the auspices of the UN Security Council, needs to bring decisive pressure to bear on the key protagonists in the conflict, including the governments of Rwanda and Uganda and the leaders of armed political groups, to ensure that they both condemn abuses by their own forces and bring suspected perpetrators to justice.

The international community should support and provide resources for judicial mechanisms, such as an international commission of inquiry, aimed at enforcing accountability for human rights abuses.

Governments should also take steps to ensure that businesses active in the DRC do not cause or condone violations of the rights of the communities in which they are operating, and that revenues generated from commercial activities involving the DRC's natural resources contribute to the progressive realisation of the population's social and economic rights.

Furthermore, governments should promote the adherence of the DRC and of regional diamond transit countries to the international diamond certification system agreed through the Kimberley Process. Governments should also take practical steps to submit the trade in other natural resources to similar international scrutiny, to ensure that the manner in which those resources are exploited does not give rise to human rights abuses.

"By moving to end impunity and to hold to account those who seek to profit on the back of human suffering, the international community could yet deliver justice to the Congolese people," Amnesty International said. "

*** This report is available at: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf620102003>**

For more details see the following reports:

Democratic Republic of Congo: On the precipice: the deepening human rights and humanitarian crisis in Ituri (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index:engaf620062003>)

Democratic Republic of Congo: From assassination to state murder? (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index:engaf620232002>)

Democratic Republic of Congo: Making a killing: The diamond trade in government-controlled DRC (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index:engaf620172002>)

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