

Rwandese-controlled eastern DRC: Devastating human toll

Amnesty International today appealed to the different armed forces fighting in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire) to halt further killings and other mass human rights abuses against unarmed civilians.

It is estimated that 2.5 million people have died in eastern DRC from war-related causes in the last four years. Since August 1998, Rwandese government forces have occupied most of this part of the DRC, an area equivalent to 16 times the size of Rwanda itself.

Amnesty International said today in a newly published report *Rwandese-controlled eastern DRC: Devastating human toll* that "the killing of thousands of Congolese civilians trapped in the middle of this destructive fighting cannot be justified by the Rwandese Government and allied *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie-Goma* (RCD-Goma) authorities on the basis of security threats to Rwanda's borders. The abuses cannot be justified either by the Rwandese and Burundian Hutu-dominated armed opposition groups and the Congolese *mayi-mayi* militia who are fighting to throw out the Rwandese forces and their RCD-Goma allies".

Human rights violations by Rwandese Government and RCD-Goma forces

Since Rwanda's second armed intervention in the DRC in 1998, tens of thousands of Congolese civilians have been unlawfully attacked, killed and beaten.

Many of the killings have occurred in areas rich in minerals, where the gains of economic exploitation fuel the fighting.

"Women, children and the elderly who have been unable to flee have often been victims of such attacks. The troops have also frequently engaged in sexual violence, including against very young girls and old women. Many women have also died because of lack of health services destroyed by the war" the organization added.

The report also highlights the increasing recruitment of children into the fighting forces, police, and armed civilian paramilitary Local Defence Forces, including many children under 15 years of age, and a substantial number of children less than 12 years old. Children suffer disproportionately from the general rigours of the combatant's life, especially in the bush, and are particularly vulnerable to disease and malnutrition. Frequently ill-treated or even killed by the commanders, they have no protectors, Amnesty International said.

Arbitrary arrests and unlawful detention are also a constant practice in the areas controlled by the Rwandese army and RCD-Goma forces. In many cases, arrests of people on charges of collaboration with armed opponents appear to be politically motivated. The overwhelming majority of detainees are held unlawfully for prolonged periods, often without charge, without having the opportunity to challenge the basis of their detention before the courts. Food is often not regularly provided and families are prevented from visiting detainees.

Many detainees are often secretly held in unofficial places of detention including military officers' private homes to prevent families and lawyers from finding them, or to extract money from the detainees. Many detainees are tortured or beaten with iron bars or sticks and women have been raped.

It has become increasingly difficult and dangerous for human rights defenders to investigate reports of human rights abuses and to publish the result of their investigations. They are frequently harassed and prevented from doing their work, and some have been arbitrarily arrested and tortured.

Abuses by armed political groups opposing the Rwandese army and RCD-Goma forces

Rwandese and Burundian Hutu-dominated armed groups, and Congolese *mayi-mayi* militia, have also been responsible for the killing of civilians and other systematic human rights abuses in eastern DRC.

Girls and women have been raped by combatants and threatened with death if they try to resist. Some have even been raped in front of their husbands, parents or other relatives. Victims of sexual violence often suffer

Further brutality, including beatings and having sharp objects such as piece of wood inserted into their genitals,@Amnesty said.

Many of the children who have been recruited have also been victims of deliberate and arbitrary killing, beatings and other forms of torture or ill-treatment. Girls have been raped and forced into sexual slavery.

Amnesty International=s appeal

Amnesty International in this report is highlighting the appalling extent to which civilians in eastern DRC have been relentlessly deprived of their most basic human rights, especially the right to life. They get no protection or redress from the authorities there. AThis climate of fear and impunity has sparked an explosion of ethnic violence within eastern DRC and given rise to the population=s enormous feeling of injustice in being forgotten by the international community," the organization said.

Amnesty International is appealing to foreign governments, especially those with close relations to Rwanda, "to assume their responsibility to publicly condemn grave human rights abuses committed both by the Rwandese forces and its allied RCD-Goma forces as well as armed political groups opposing and fighting them. Amnesty International is calling for an international investigation into violations of international human rights and humanitarian law so that perpetrators can be brought to justice."

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