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Democratic Republic of Congo: Continuing and urgent need for effective international intervention to avert human rights abuses

On the eve of the anniversary of the start of the conflict, 2 August 1998, and as international attention focuses on the installation of a new transitional government in the capital Kinshasa and the supposed end to the five-year war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the atrocities in the east of the country continue. The need for effective intervention by the international community remains as urgent as ever, Amnesty International said today after a three-week research mission to eastern DRC and neighbouring Uganda.

"Most Congolese are desperate for peace to return to their country so that they can begin to pick up the pieces of their broken lives. But as massacres, mutilations and rapes continue throughout the Ituri and Kivu regions, it would be a triumph of vain hope over bitter, daily experience for the Congolese people of eastern DRC to believe that peace has genuinely returned to their communities," the organization said.

Continuing and urgent need for effective international intervention

In Bunia, Ituri's capital, some 20,000 residents are currently living in makeshift camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), under the military protection of international troops. Most of these IDPs have fled from violence between warring militias which has decimated Bunia and its surroundings in recent months, and they remain too terrified to return to their homes.

The violence in Ituri is the result of a power struggle between leaders of rival armed groups in the region. These leaders have remorselessly manipulated tensions between two main ethnic groups - the Hema and Lendu - to further their own political and economic interests. This has not been a war in which civilians have been the unfortunate victims of 'collateral damage', but one in which civilians have consistently and deliberately been targeted. The primary military undertaking of the armed factions operating in Ituri has been the systematic extermination of people, civilians or otherwise, on the basis of their ethnic identity, regardless of their age or gender.

"Mutual hatred among the ethnic groups of Ituri, fuelled by political and militia leaders, is now so deep and entrenched that it will take years for these rifts to begin to heal," Amnesty International stressed. "It is essential that the international community is there in force, both to nurture along that healing process and, where necessary, to directly confront the militia who would continue the killing."

In the meantime, the civilian population of Bunia continues to live in fearful anticipation of what further atrocities may ensue if the French-led multinational force withdraws as planned on 1 September, without there being a robust and committed force in its place which is willing to intervene militarily to save

their lives. On 28 July the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1493, extending the mandate of its force in the DRC - the *Mission de l'organisation des Nations Unies au Congo* (United Nations mission in the Congo, MONUC) - until 30 July 2004 and authorising MONUC, acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, to use all necessary means to protect civilian lives.

"If the blood of the helpless civilians of Bunia flows once again in September, as it did in May, the primary culprits will be the militia leaders and the gangs, including children, they employ to implement their 'program' of ethnic hatred and cleansing," Amnesty International said. "But if it should stand by and allow this to happen again, MONUC itself, as the embodiment of the will of international community, would be morally culpable for its failure to save lives. It is no longer enough for MONUC to simply 'observe'; with its recently reinforced mandate, it is time for MONUC to act, and to act effectively, to prevent further countless, and needless, deaths."

Recommendations

Amnesty International, in principle, welcomes the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 1493 reinforcing MONUC's mandate. However, the success of the strengthened MONUC force in Ituri will depend to a great extent on its ability, and its political will, to face down the militias militarily, as well as on its ability to build effective relations with the local civilian population. Success will also depend on the cooperation of key actors in the armed conflict. Amnesty International is therefore urging that:

MONUC fully implements its newly reinforced mandate under Chapter VII and intervenes decisively to protect civilian lives.

MONUC is provided with all necessary combat personnel, equipment and training to fulfil its mandate.

MONUC deploys throughout all districts of Bunia and, progressively, throughout the rest of Ituri.

MONUC has adequate numbers of French-speaking liaison and humanitarian affairs officers to facilitate communication with local communities.

Uganda, Rwanda, and the Kinshasa government must end all military and political support to the armed groups operating in DRC, all of whom have been responsible for gross human rights abuses.

Amnesty International also welcomes the decision of the Prosecutor of the **International Criminal Court** (ICC) to collect preliminary evidence on crimes committed in Ituri since July 2002 which may fall within the ICC's jurisdiction. Amnesty International hopes that this will lead to full ICC investigations and prosecutions. All parties to the conflict in eastern DRC, and all relevant national and international institutions, should cooperate fully to ensure that those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity are brought to justice. These crimes include the targeted and deliberate killing of civilians on the basis of their ethnic identity, incitation to ethnic hatred and the use of child soldiers under the age of 15.

In addition, an appropriate judicial mechanism should be set up with a view to investigating human rights abuses committed prior to July 2002 and bringing the perpetrators to justice.

For preliminary findings of recent three-week research mission to eastern DRC and neighbouring Uganda, see Media Briefing (AFR 62/025/2003 of 1 March 2003)

For further information on the crisis in the DRC and to sign AI's online petition visit: <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/cod-040803-petition-eng>

For further information on the human rights crisis in Ituri, please refer to the AI report 'On the precipice: the deepening human rights and humanitarian crisis in Ituri - (AFR 62/006/2003, March 2003)

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