

Service: 225/98

AI INDEX: AFR 62/38/98

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 1400 GMT MONDAY 23 NOVEMBER 1998**

## **Great Lakes: Thousands of civilians victims of atrocities in the DRC**

All parties in the escalating conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are waging a war against unarmed civilians. Thousands have been massacred and many others have “disappeared” or been abducted, tortured, raped or unlawfully detained since the outbreak of recent fighting on 2 August, Amnesty International says in a new report published today.

The report highlights abuses committed by government soldiers, armed opposition forces and ethnic groups allied to both sides and foreign forces intervening and supporting the government and armed opposition.

“Every hour a person is arrested, a person is illegally detained, a person is tortured, a person is raped,” according to one local human rights activist, interviewed by Amnesty International. “While the conflict has received some international attention, almost nothing has been said or done about the atrocities inflicted on the unarmed civilian population,” Amnesty International adds. “These victims, regardless of their identity, must be protected”

**Armed forces loyal to president Kabila** have massacred civilians suspected of being sympathisers of the armed opposition. Civilians have been armed with guns and instructed to defend their *patric* (homeland) from the enemy, described as “...a virus, a mosquito and filth which must be crushed with determination and resolve”.

“Incitement to ethnic hatred against the Tutsi or any others is a recipe for a human rights disaster, and has already led to the indiscriminate killing of particularly vulnerable civilians, as it did in Rwanda in 1994” Amnesty International says.

The organization has documented allegations of mass graves near the capital, Kinshasa, containing as many as 500 bodies. Hundreds of unarmed civilians, most of them Tutsi, and captured combatants were shot dead, beaten or burned to death by government forces and their civilian supporters in Kinshasa at the end of August. Women and girls were raped and some subsequently killed. “These crimes must be investigated, and those responsible must be brought to justice,” the report adds.

Local youths in Uvira and Fizi in South-Kivu were reportedly mobilized by the FAC and killed as many as 250 Tutsi between 2 and 3 August. In Kisangani, at least 150 civilians from Kivu region were killed by the FAC before the town was captured by the RCD on 23 August. At least 77 Tutsi civilians were killed in Kalémie, Katanga province, in mid-August, and a further 100 killed in the village of Viura, near Moba, by government soldiers and armed groups apparently including Rwandese *interahamwe* militia withdrawing from the area.

Security forces have arbitrarily arrested hundreds of Tutsi and other people suspected, on the basis of their ethnic or political affiliation, or even their physical appearance, of supporting the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD), Congolese Rally for Democracy, armed

opposition group. Authorities claim they are held for their own security, but reports of torture, including rape and deaths in custody continue to surface.

Journalists and human rights activists have also been targeted. Amnesty International quotes one spokesperson for President Kabila who accused journalists of being “no better than common criminals, of being blind, immoral, unprofessional, and some of being evil monsters”.

Amnesty International is also alarmed by the **widespread human rights abuses committed by the RCD and its allies** against unarmed civilians. For example, On 24 August, RCD combatants killed more than 850 unarmed civilians in and around Kasika Roman Catholic parish in South-Kivu province, to avenge the killing of about 50 RCD combatants and Rwandese government troops by the *mai-mai* armed group.

A local traditional chief was killed with a knife and his heart removed. One pregnant woman had her stomach opened. Children were held by their feet, their heads bounced against walls. Many of them were thrown into latrines. *“A young boy cried, demanding to know what we had done, and he was strangled in front of us,”* one survivor explains. *“The fact that I am alive is a miracle. Moreover, I wonder whether I am alive.”* Despite promises by the RCD to begin investigations into the Kasika massacre, it is still not known whether any investigation has taken place.

Sources in Bukavu reported that in October, as many as two dozen people were being abducted daily by the RCD. Many more have been arbitrarily arrested.

“Rape has been used since August by the RDC as a weapon of war”, Amnesty International writes, giving the example of one woman who was consistently raped for 5 days for refusing to reveal the whereabouts of her husband. In Bukavu, on 1 September, at least 57 women and girls were arrested during a search operation, taken to a secret location and raped by RCD troops.

The human rights situation in the DRC is exacerbated by the continuing supplies of arms and military support to both parties to the conflict. The report points out a number of African governments throughout the continent who continue to lend support to either side: Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Chad, supporting the Congolese army; Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi supporting the RCD.

“Amnesty International calls on all involved in the conflict to give public instructions to all their combatants that human rights abuses will not be tolerated and that those responsible will be brought to justice,” the report adds.

The organization is also urging all parties to the conflict to allow independent investigations of human rights abuses in areas under their control, and calls for the release of all detainees held outside the law.

Amnesty International also urges all governments to stop supplying weapons and other types of military, security and police equipment to both sides to the conflict which would fuel further human rights abuses in the country. ENDS.../

Amnesty International has regularly published documents regarding human rights abuses in the Great Lakes region in the past few months. The most recent one is *Burundi: Insurgency and counter-insurgency perpetuate human rights abuses* (AI Index: AFR 16/34/98), published on 18 November.