

AI Index: PRE 01/654/2013
16 December 2013

DRC: Death threats and intimidation silencing human rights defenders

Death threats and intimidation by armed groups and state security forces in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo over the past year have made it extremely difficult for human rights defenders to carry out their work, Amnesty International said today.

A new report “Better to die while telling the truth”: Attacks against human rights defenders in North Kivu, DRC details the heightened clampdown on human rights defenders by armed groups and the national security forces since the crisis escalated last year.

“The whole population is vulnerable to human rights abuses in North Kivu and those speaking out to protect these people are deliberately targeted from all sides,” says Sarah Jackson, Amnesty International’s Deputy Regional Director.

“Members of armed groups and the national security services have been attempting to silence human rights defenders throughout the country for too long. And this cannot go on.”

Since last year, human rights defenders have faced an increased number of death threats, visits to their houses and offices by armed men, abductions and arbitrary detentions. They are often threatened for speaking out against armed groups or the national army. Many human rights defenders had to stop their work, close their offices and flee for their lives.

The M23 armed group left North Kivu in November, but human rights defenders still face harassment and intimidation by other armed factions and elements of the national security forces in eastern DRC.

One human rights defender who has consistently spoken out about human rights abuses told Amnesty International that he received death threats, anonymous messages and house visits letting him know he is being watched. He also received a text message stating: “we’re going to chop your head off” and “we know where you live”. Some human rights defenders are directly threatened by several armed groups simultaneously.

The report highlights the difficulties of working in areas with weak, undisciplined, and unaccountable armed forces and where there is little or no rule of law. “Victims can’t access justice through the normal route of reporting a crime to the police in North Kivu, so the only thing they can do is to report crimes to human rights defenders,” added Sarah Jackson.

Women human rights defenders are particularly at risk as they are seen to be challenging the social norms that discourage women from publicly criticizing people in power. There have been several cases of women who, as a result of helping victims of abuses, including of sexual violence, have been harassed or sexually attacked themselves.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned that there has been a longstanding pattern of targeting

human rights defenders and the perpetrators of these attacks have very rarely been held to account.

The report details the case of Pascal Kabungulu, a leading human rights defender, who was shot dead in his home in front of his wife and children in 2005. The men accused of killing him, including soldiers and more senior military and political figures, remain free.

“As long as the perpetrators of abuses against human rights defenders are at large, these attacks will continue and violence against civilians will go unchecked. It has to come to an end,” said Sarah Jackson.

Amnesty International is calling for urgent reform of the security sector in the DRC.

“Creating professional, disciplined and accountable security forces is a major priority in DRC,” said Sarah Jackson. “The authorities have to ensure that individuals who have committed serious human rights abuses against civilians are removed and that any future integration of armed groups into the armed forces includes a robust vetting process.”