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D R Congo: Combatants in Bukavu must stop attacks on civilians

Amnesty International strongly condemns continuing serious human rights abuses in the city of Bukavu, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

"General Laurent Nkunda and Colonel Jules Mutebusi, whose forces seized the city yesterday, should ensure that combatants under their command uphold international humanitarian law and stop attacking civilians," the organization urged.

Amnesty International is also urging MONUC, the UN peacekeeping force in DRC, which is also present in Bukavu, to do its utmost to protect civilians in the city and its environs.

General Nkunda and Colonel Mutebusi took control of the city after driving out forces loyal to the DRC's transitional government. An unconfirmed number of civilians were killed in the course of the fighting, many from indiscriminate gun or shell fire from all forces.

The organization has received reports of killings, rapes and other abuses being committed by Nkunda and Mutebusi's forces. In one case, a trader named "Soleil", was reportedly summarily executed at around 5am this morning in the Ndendere district of the city, after combatants entered his house looking for money and valuables. A member of his family was allegedly raped. According to reports, "Soleil" had already been forced to hand over all his valuables to two preceding groups of combatants who had looted his house.

At least six other people have reportedly been killed in similar circumstances, and further cases of rape are being alleged. Despite reports this morning that forces belonging to Nkunda and Mutebusi had agreed to canton themselves, looting by soldiers in the city is ongoing and extensive.

Other human rights abuses have been reported since the violence first erupted on 26 May. These include the rape of a 19-year-old woman by Mutebusi's soldiers on 27 May in the Nguba area of the city and the reported unlawful killing of civilians by Nkunda's forces as he advanced on Bukavu from the north.

General Nkunda and Colonel Mutebusi have claimed that their assault on Bukavu was to halt killings and other abuses by pro-government forces against the minority Banyamulenge community in Bukavu. To date, Amnesty International has not been able to confirm these reports. An investigation into their claims by MONUC human rights officers has been prevented by the violence. Up to 3,000 civilians, mainly Banyamulenge, have fled to neighbouring Rwanda since last week citing fears of persecution. A further 700 displaced civilians are sheltering inside the MONUC compound in the city.

A number of Amnesty International's sources report that looting is often accompanied by death threats, in which combatants promise to avenge perceived abuses committed against Banyamulenge civilians.

Rwanda, a supporter of the RCD-Goma armed group in which Laurent Nkunda and Jules Mutebusi are commanders, has denied any involvement in the violence. A number of sources in Bukavu continue to allege the presence of Rwandan soldiers in the city, however.

The transitional power-sharing government came to office in June 2003. Among its most pressing tasks is the integration of the different armed forces in the DRC, including those of the RCD-Goma, into a new national army. Progress towards integration of the army has been slow, however, marked by poor coordination and an apparent reluctance by the various armed groups to surrender control of their forces to central authority. The failure by the transitional government and international community to address integration adequately or promptly is a major factor sustaining the insecurity in eastern DRC.

The violence in Bukavu threatens to derail the DRC's fragile transitional government and process. Violent demonstrations in Kinshasa and other cities have followed yesterday's events. AI is concerned for the safety of people perceived to be of Banyamulenge origin in the capital, who have been forced to seek refuge from demonstrators.

Both Nkunda and Mutebusi and the bulk of the forces under their command are from a dissident wing of the RCD-Goma armed group, which is now represented in the DRC transitional government and occupies one of the four vice-president positions. A return to conflict by dissident RCD-Goma forces in eastern DRC has long been rumoured.

Public Document

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