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DRC: Governments launching offensives against armed groups must take precautions to avoid civilian casualties

Amnesty International today appealed to governments of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda and Rwanda, whose forces are now engaged in military offensives inside the DRC against the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) and the Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda (FDLR), to fully observe international humanitarian and human rights law while conducting military operations.

The organization also appealed to LRA and FDLR armed groups to immediately halt attacks against civilians and respect international humanitarian law.

“Both the LRA and FDLR have an established tactic of inflicting deliberate and horrendous human rights abuses on civilians when they are attacked,” said Andrew Philip, Amnesty International’s researcher on the DRC. “Systematic reprisals by both armed groups are entirely predictable and must be countered effectively.”

Amnesty International called on the three governments to develop clear plans to prevent reprisal attacks against civilians by the FDLR and LRA and to ensure that civilians do not pay the price of these military offensives. All feasible precautions must be taken by the governments during the planning of the military operations and the attacks to avoid civilian casualties.

“Many tens of thousands of Congolese civilians are caught up in these wide-ranging government offensives. The LRA and FDLR also have thousands of civilians -- family members as well as adult and child abductees --- in their midst. Government forces must at all times distinguish carefully between civilians and fighters”.

The UN peacekeeping force in the DRC, MONUC, must also be prepared to intervene to protect civilians and assume a particular responsibility to escort people fleeing the conflict zones to places of safety, Amnesty International said. “New UN Security Council resolutions 1856 and 1857 on the DRC emphasize that the protection of civilians has absolute priority in all MONUC operations. The current situation is an important test for MONUC of the application of these resolutions in practice,” said Andrew Philip.

Background

At the invitation of the DRC government, a reported 2,000 Rwandan troops today crossed the border into North-Kivu province, eastern DRC, to join DRC army units in operations to disband the FDLR. Previous army operations against the FDLR proved inconclusive, but were attended by systematic FDLR reprisals against civilians and large-scale population displacement.

Ugandan troops have been engaged alongside DRC government forces in an offensive against LRA fighters

in Haut-Uélé territory, north-eastern DRC, since mid-December 2008. At least 500 civilians are reported to have been killed, many hundreds including children abducted and scores of villages looted and burned in LRA reprisals. Around 100,000 are believed to have been displaced by the violence.