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DRC: Resurgence in rape and recruitment of child soldiers

For every two children released, five are taken and forced to be child soldiers, said Amnesty International, in a new report released today on the ongoing conflict in the province of North Kivu, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Many of those recruited had already been reunited with their families after having been freed from armed groups who had previously kidnapped them and forced them to fight as child soldiers.

According to Amnesty International, of the former child soldiers who had been reunited with their families in North Kivu through a national demobilization programme, as many as half may since have been re-recruited by armed groups.

“It is precisely their previous experience with armed groups that makes them valuable recruits and puts these children at greater risk,” said Andrew Philip, Amnesty International’s expert on the DRC, who collected eyewitness testimony in the region. “The more they know, the more they are at risk of re-recruitment. In this case, experience can be deadly.”

The report also uncovers the extent of continuing physical and sexual abuse of women and children in the conflict, despite government and armed group commitments to bring such atrocities to an end.

Child soldiers who attempt to escape are killed or tortured, sometimes in front of other children, to discourage further escapes.

One former child soldier told Amnesty International how two youths were beaten to death in front of him and other child recruits “as a lesson to all of us not to try to escape”:

“[The boys] were brought out of a pit in the ground and presented to us during a training session. [An armed group senior commander] then gave the order to beat them. Two soldiers and a captain pushed them down into the mud. When they tired of kicking them...they beat them with wooden sticks. The punishment lasted 90 minutes, until they died.”

Other children, taken captive by the DRC army on suspicion of being armed group fighters, reported that they were ill-treated and tortured in military detention.

But it is not only children who face extreme abuse in the eastern DRC.

“The human rights situation in North Kivu is appalling,” said Andrew Philip. “Armed groups and government forces continue to rape women and girls. Even infants and elderly women are among the victims

– some of whom have been gang raped. Disturbingly, rapes are often committed in public and in front of family members, including children.”

One 16-year-old rape survivor described how she had been abducted by two junior army officers and held captive in an army camp in North Kivu for several days before she was released. In the camp, she was raped nightly by one of the officers.

“The other officers and soldiers in the camp didn’t seem to care or be willing to take responsibility”, she told Amnesty International. She now suffers flashbacks and persistent headaches.

In its report, Amnesty International issued comprehensive recommendations to the armed groups, DRC government and the international community aimed at stopping human rights abuses. The recommendations include a call on armed groups to immediately release all children associated with their forces, and measures to end to the horror of sexual violence.

Notes to editors:

- In an “Act of Engagement” signed on 23 January 2008, armed groups in the operating in the North Kivu province of the DRC agreed to end the killing, rape and torture of civilians, and the recruitment of child soldiers.
- More than 100,000 people have been displaced by renewed fighting in North Kivu since 28 August 2008, adding to more than 1 million people displaced by earlier violence in the region.