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Democratic Republic of Congo: Massive violations kill human decency

Thousands of unarmed civilians have been unlawfully killed, many others tortured and scores "disappeared" in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), said Amnesty International as it released a new report, Democratic Republic of Congo: Killing human decency.

*The armed opposition in the DRC conflict is supported by Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. The Government is supported by Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and, reportedly, Sudan. The government also has links with armed groups collectively known as *mayi-mayi* as well as an alliance with the *interahamwe* militia, combatants of the Hutu ethnic group from Rwanda.*

Human rights violations in government-controlled areas

Although the deliberate killings of civilians by government forces have been far less widespread since the start of 1999 than in late 1998, hundreds of unarmed civilians have been killed as a result of attacks by forces loyal to President Laurent Kabila.

More than 100 civilians and soldiers have been executed since early 1999, after military trials that fell short of international standards. For example, on 15 January Kasongo, a 14-year-old child soldier, and a 22-year-old were executed within 30 minutes of their trial.

A number of people have "disappeared" after they were detained by members of the security forces -- their relatives fear that they may have been killed secretly. Most of those who have "disappeared" since the start of 1999 are members of the security forces accused of complicity with the armed opposition.

"Torture, including rape has been frequently reported in the DRC," Amnesty International said.

Conditions in many prisons and detention centres amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. At Boma prison in Likasi the prisoners have been described as "walking skeletons" and inmates received food only once a week.

Violations of the right to life in areas under rebel control and foreign forces

In areas controlled by foreign government forces and Congolese armed opposition groups, most of the human rights abuses are reported to have been committed by members of the *Rassemblement Congolaise pour la democracie*, Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD). In some cases victims and witnesses of human rights abuses have been able to identify the units responsible for the abuses as belonging to Burundian, Rwandese and Ugandan government forces.

"Thousands of unarmed civilians -- mainly women, children and the elderly who were not able to flee or who thought they would not be targeted by combatants -- have been victims of deliberate and arbitrary killings by armed opposition groups and Burundian government forces," Amnesty International said.

The year 1999 started with the massacre of at least 800 civilians by the RCD and allied troops from Rwanda and Burundi at Makobola in South-Kivu province. The massacre lasted for up to three days from 30

December 1998. Sources reported that civilians were herded into houses and set on fire. Local human rights groups have compiled lists of more than 800 people believed to be victims of the Makobola massacre.

In March 1999, Burundian government soldiers reportedly burned alive at least seven fishermen at Kazimia on the shores of Lake Tanganyika.

Between 15 and 20 October 1999, RCD soldiers are reported to have killed at least 12 women – some of whom were buried alive after being tortured and raped – accused of witchcraft in Mwenga, South-Kivu.

The armed opposition groups have established military courts, which have sentenced people to death after unfair trials. RCD combatants, including children, are reported to have been summarily executed, without formal charge or trial. Ndondo, a 15-year-old child soldier, was publicly executed in Goma after a woman accused him of stealing a radio. Before he was executed, Ndondo was reportedly severely tortured while in detention.

"Hanging men by their genitals, prohibiting detainees from urinating or defecating, rape, whippings, beatings and detention in water-logged pits -- are some of the treatments that those detained by the RCD and their allies are subjected to," Amnesty International said.

Some people have been tortured for voicing opposition to the war and calling on the armed opposition to abide by the Lusaka cease-fire agreement or on suspicion of being in contact with armed militia which support the government.

Rape of women in areas occupied by the armed opposition is reported to be widespread. It is carried out by Congolese armed groups and soldiers from Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda. Although this particular abuse is widely reported, most victims do not report it for fear of being stigmatized by society or rejected by their husbands.

Armed groups opposed to the RCD and their foreign backers have also deliberately killed and abducted unarmed civilians. Numerous sources have reported that groups of *mayi-mayi* fighters have been responsible for killings and torture, including rape, mainly of people suspected of cooperating with the RCD and its foreign backers. However, the *interahamwe* militia appear to be the most feared of the armed groups fighting the RCD and its foreign backers.

The DRC Government has received support in personnel and weapons from the governments of Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe, as well as Chad which pulled out of the conflict in mid-1999. Many civilians in areas controlled by the armed opposition and their backers are reported to have been killed during indiscriminate attacks or bombings by aircraft from Zimbabwe, Namibia and Sudan.

Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda have continued to acquire weapons and other military equipment, which are likely to be used by their forces and their Congolese allies in the DRC.

"Children are being deprived of their basic rights as they are forced to fight in this conflict," Amnesty International said. "The DRC Government is known to have recruited many children -- some as young as 12 years -- and the *mayi-mayi* militia also heavily recruit children."

Ugandan and Rwandese governments have escalated the recruitment in their countries of fighters, including children, many of

whom are reported to have been deployed in the DRC. In Uganda, parents in the western district of Hoima told *The Monitor* newspaper in November 1998 that children as young as 12 years had been secretly recruited by officials of the Internal Security Organization (ISO) to join the army.

Amnesty International has concluded that there has been a blatant lack of will on the part of the leaders of the governments and armed groups involved in the DRC war to prevent human rights abuses and a total disregard for their obligations under international law to prevent attacks on unarmed civilians.

"It's not too late however. The international community should expect and demand that military and political leaders of the forces in the DRC take effective action to prevent further human rights abuses and bring those among their forces responsible for the abuses to justice," Amnesty International said.

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