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Democratic Republic of Congo: UN must take urgent steps to stop the escalation of ethnic killings

In an open letter to the United Nations Security Council, Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International, called for urgent attention to be given to the escalation of human rights violations in the Ituri region of the north-eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The Security Council will meet today to consider the new report of the Secretary General on the United Nations Organisation Mission in the DRC (MONUC).

In her letter Ms Khan writes: "There have been mass killings and targeted rapes based on ethnic identity. Extremist calls for "ethnically pure towns and villages" have increasingly been spread. Extremists who were once on the margins of the ethnic groups are now in leading positions. As extreme hatred is escalating, Amnesty International fears that deliberate incitement could lead to the possibility of genocide."

The intensification of ethnic killings and extremist behaviours in Ituri is such that the international community needs to take urgent action. In particular Amnesty International calls for the Security Council to increase the numbers of observers in the region in order to dissuade further attacks against civilians and to ensure that attacks against civilians are investigated and monitored.

Amnesty International strongly supports the possibility of training a civilian police force to ensure the safety of the local populations, as suggested by the UN Special Representative to the DRC. In particular, Amnesty International urges the Security Council to fully implement the mandate of the MONUC and take the necessary action to protect both the civilian population and its personnel.

The organization receives consistent reports of large-scale killings of unarmed civilians that are carried out, ordered and condoned by leaders using ethnic affiliations to acquire or maintain economic and political power. As a result, armed clashes between members of the Hema and Lendu ethnic groups has left an estimated 50,000, mainly civilian, dead since June 1999, and forced around 500,000 people to flee, with 60,000 displaced in Bunia, the capital of Ituri province, alone.

Aside from the deepening violence directed against civilian communities, the repeated political divisions and ethnic-based violence have had a disastrous impact on international humanitarian agencies operating in the region. Certain agencies have been deliberately targeted for threats, obstruction and even killings.

Since 1998 the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) have occupied the mineral-rich province of Ituri in the north-eastern part of the DRC. Members of the UPDF have supported rival armed political groups, allowing violence between different Congolese ethnic groups to escalate, while at the same time instigating wide-spread human rights violations.

Amnesty International believes that since 1999, members of the UPDF have taken part in attacks on unarmed civilians and have committed atrocities in the context of the armed conflict. Given that the UPDF has not only failed to protect unarmed civilians but has also played an active part in violations of human rights, Amnesty International believes that it is the international community's responsibility to prevent the deterioration of the situation.

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