

PUBLIC STATEMENT

Democratic Republic of Congo: urgent appeal to safeguard human rights

A renewed human rights crisis can be expected in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Amnesty International warned today, in response to waves of arrests in the capital Kinshasa and reports of widespread killings, especially in the eastern Kivu region.

The organization is appealing to all parties involved in the conflict and to foreign governments who can have an influence on the situation to ensure that further human rights abuses are prevented.

Since 2 August, Amnesty International has received reports of hundreds of arbitrary and unlawful arrests in Kinshasa, in particular of members of the Tutsi ethnic group, of people of Rwandese origin, of Congolese married to Rwandese, and of others perceived as sympathizers of the rebellion. Search operations in the capital are reported to be continuing and many people have reportedly gone into hiding.

The organization has also received reports from the eastern towns of Bukavu and Uvira indicating that many people there have been killed and others seriously injured in the last few days. The victims are known to include unarmed civilians. Tutsi forces in eastern DRC are also reported to have arrested a number of Katangese soldiers seen as loyal to President Kabila and taken them to unknown destinations.

Amnesty International highlighted the inevitable impact on neighbouring countries and the real possibility of the violence spreading beyond the borders of the DRC. Several neighbouring countries are already known to be playing an active role in the conflict, apparently in support of the rebellion. The presence of hundreds of troops of the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA) has been signalled in eastern DRC; members of the Burundian security forces are also reported to have crossed over the border into DRC. Ugandan forces had established bases in eastern DRC before the current fighting broke out.

Amnesty International is especially concerned about the latest developments in DRC in light of the fact that all parties to the conflict have carried out serious human rights abuses in recent years and months. Since the end of 1996, in particular, widespread killings of unarmed civilians have been carried out by members of the Congolese army loyal to President Kabila and by those opposed to his government, as well as by members of the Rwandese and Burundian security forces.

Other armed groups in the DRC - such as those known as the *mayi-mayi*, and members of the former Rwandese armed forces and militia - may also become involved in the current conflict.

The situation is likely to be aggravated by inflammatory statements made by some Congolese government officials, calling upon civilians to take up arms and to end what they have called "*the senseless adventure of the Rwandese in Congo*".

Amnesty International urges political and military leaders to immediately refrain from making provocative statements which are likely to incite further abuses against Tutsi civilians or people of Rwandese or Burundian origin.

The organization reminds all parties to the conflict of their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. Specifically, Common Article 3 of the *Geneva Conventions, 1949* prohibits all parties to the conflict from targeting people taking no active part in the hostilities; in particular from carrying out acts of violence or torture against them, as well as the taking of hostages.

Amnesty International calls on neighbouring countries, regional bodies and other members of the international community to recognize the seriousness of this conflict and demand human rights safeguards against further human rights abuses. It is also appealing to governments of neighbouring countries to allow unarmed civilians fleeing the conflict and human rights abuses in DRC to seek refuge in their country.

BACKGROUND

On 2 August, fighting broke out in the DRC, initially in the capital Kinshasa and in the eastern regions of North and South-Kivu, following orders on 27 July by President Laurent-Désiré Kabila for all Rwandese troops to leave Congolese territory. The rebellion against the government of President Kabila is led by soldiers of the Tutsi ethnic group, known as Banyamulenge, and Rwandese government troops, who are reported to have taken control of most of of Goma, Bukavu towns after several days of heavy fighting. Fighting has also been reported in other parts of the country, including in the south west and around the town of Kisangani.

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