

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Democratic Republic of Congo: Ituri -- a need for protection, a thirst for justice**

The Ugandan government must acknowledge its share of the responsibility for the enormous human suffering and abuse of human rights in Ituri. It must take immediate steps to end its continued support of armed groups and the economic plunder which fuels the atrocities, said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International in Kampala, launching the report *Democratic Republic of Congo: Ituri, a need for protection, a thirst for justice*.

"For the past few years, a plethora of armed groups, sponsored and supported by governments in Kinshasa, Kampala and Kigali, have stoked inter-ethnic conflict in Ituri, turning one community against another and causing violence of unimaginable brutality. Uganda remains a major regional player in the conflict," said Khan.

In May 2003 militia fighters slaughtered and mutilated entire families in Bunia. They specifically targeted women and girls, using rape as a weapon of war. The frequent and widespread use of child soldiers is a telling and tragic feature of this conflict, destroying their future and making them both perpetrator and victim.

While a logic of peace is emerging in Kinshasa, the dynamic of war is still well rooted in Ituri. Amnesty International's report chronicles the mass slaughter, rape, abuse and displacement of thousands of civilians during the first nine months of this year by various armed groups and militia. Hundreds of schools, health centres and social facilities have been destroyed; villages have been pillaged, burned and razed to the ground. Some of the worst atrocities were committed in Bunia in the weeks following the rapid withdrawal of the Ugandan forces in May 2003 and the failure of the UN operation in the Congo (MONUC) to provide protection.

The report acknowledges the tentative steps towards a political settlement being made in Kinshasa but notes that the situation in Ituri will be a test for this process which could go in either direction.

"Bunia is still divided along ethnic lines, people live in fear and those displaced are unable to return to their homes. Massacres and other human rights abuses continue with impunity in other parts of Ituri. But the French-led Operation Artemis and the subsequent deployment of MONUC with a strengthened mandate have brought some semblance of security to Bunia," noted Irene Khan.

"If this new beginning is to be sustained, then a lot more needs to be done and done urgently. MONUC must step up its deployment outside Bunia, strictly monitor the arms embargo, speed up the disarmament and demobilisation process, including of child soldiers, and help set up a proper policing system. The Transitional Government and the groups must support the work of the Ituri Pacification Commission to establish a civil administration. Uganda and Rwanda must stop their support of armed groups."

The report welcomes the decision of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to take up cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Ituri.

"There will be no peace and reconciliation in Ituri without justice. Impunity must not be sanctioned in the name of national unity. The cycle of brutal reprisals, of attacks and counter-attack will not stop unless impunity is ended for all abuses," said Irene Khan.

"Prosecution by the ICC will send an important signal, but it is not enough and other international measures must also be considered. Priority must be given to establishing an effective national system of justice."

"For years Ituri has been the scene of plunder, pillage and massive human rights abuse, while the world watched in silence. This must not be allowed to happen ever again, international attention must be converted into effective action to protect the human rights of the people of Ituri," Irene Khan concluded.

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