

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: POL 30/002/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 132
2 June 2003

G8: No trade off for human rights

As G8 leaders gather in Evian, France, Amnesty International urges them to make good on their promises, made at last year's summit, "to promote peace and security in Africa."

"Tough action by the G8 leaders can liberate the people of Africa from the devastating effects of conflict. If the G8 are serious about change in Africa, they must act on the sources of conflict -- the trade in arms and in natural resources that fuels wars across the continent," Amnesty International said.

The conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is perhaps the most horrifying example of the impact on human rights of wars fuelled by a scramble for resources and enabled by the easy flow of arms.

It is estimated that up to 3 million people have died as a result of the conflict in the DRC since 1998. Hundreds of thousands of Congolese civilians have been tortured and killed during fighting driven by the desire of the warring parties to secure control of natural resources. Thousands of others have died due to malnutrition and lack of access to humanitarian assistance after being forced to flee their homes. The region of Ituri, north-east DRC, has seen the worst of the violence: there have been mass killings and targeted rapes based on ethnic identity, by members of different ethnic groups, yielding a spiral of deadly reprisal attacks.

It looks increasingly likely that an international force will be dispatched to Ituri, a move Amnesty International had called for and now welcomes. The organisation emphasises that the rapid reaction force should have a robust mandate to ensure the maintenance of law and order and to protect civilians in Bunia, to locate and protect those civilians who have fled outside the town, and to ensure that humanitarian assistance can reach civilian populations in need.

"But solutions to the crisis in eastern DRC needed to be based on prevention and not just on cure. The G8 must take decisive action to break the links between the trade in arms, the trade in natural resources and conflicts like that in the DRC."

The first decisive step that the G8 should take is to initiate a worldwide arms trade treaty with legally enforceable national export controls. Such a treaty would serve to turn off the flow of arms to human rights abusers and make it no longer so easy for companies, dealers and brokers - often with the collusion of government officials - to violate United Nations arms embargoes.

Amnesty International is also calling on the G8 governments to publicly support the work

of the UN Sub-commission on the draft *Norms on the Responsibilities of Transnational Corporations*. Companies based in the G8 should be held to account for overseas operations which may be contributing to human rights violations. Governments should strengthen national legislation to ensure companies respect human rights wherever they are operating.

"Only if the G8 takes powerful steps in the areas of the trade in arms and the accountability of companies involved in the trade in natural resources will their stated intention to increase peace and security in Africa really make a difference," the organisation concluded.

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