

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR.62/002/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 011
25 January 2007

Embargo Date: 25 January 2007 00:01 GMT

DRC: Stability threatened as country fails to reform army

Amnesty International today warned that the demobilization and army reform programme currently underway in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) risks compromising the country's entire political process and future stability.

In a comprehensive study, Amnesty International revealed that the national demobilization and reform process has so far been characterized by serious human rights violations, a lack of political will, and ineffective control of troops.

"A failed demobilization and army reform programme risks a new cycle of political and military crises that could lead to an escalation of violence and a deterioration of the humanitarian and human rights situation in a country already ravaged by war -- with potentially disastrous consequences for hundreds of thousands of people," said Tawanda Hondora, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

Currently, the Congolese national army (the FARDC), whether in its integrated or still-to-be-integrated units, is responsible for the majority of human rights violations reported in the country.

In September 2006, the first brigade ever to be integrated killed at least 32 people in Bavi, Ituru district. Ten soldiers were arrested, of whom seven have been accused of war crimes. More recently, on 11 January, over 250 soldiers in an integrated unit of the FARDC based in Bunia went on an armed rampage in the town throughout the night, reportedly raping a number of women and looting shops and houses.

"Reform of the army is not just a desirable military activity -- it is a pre-condition for peace and stability in the DRC," said Hondora. "While demobilization is an essentially civilian project, and army reform a military initiative, there is a fundamental link between the success of both. One cannot succeed without the other."

Many armed group commanders -- determined to maintain their hold on power -- have been hostile to the demobilization programme. Leaders often resorted to killings, torture and other human rights abuses to prevent members from joining the programme.

Despite this, there was an overwhelmingly favourable reaction from ordinary members of armed groups, who, in early days, flooded reception centres where they could choose to be either integrated into the national army (with training) or demobilized and reintegrated into civilian society.

"The positive reaction to the programme makes its failings even more heart-breaking," said Hondora. "Thousands of fighters came ready to demobilize -- only to be left hanging without vocational training, meaningful job opportunities or adequate salaries. Many felt they had been tricked, and demanded their weapons back."

A former fighter demobilized in Ituri told Amnesty International:

"These people have tricked us. We risked our lives to hand in our weapons .Some of our friends have been killed because they joined the programme. Now we can no longer live in our villages because people are looking for us to kills us. We are incapable of feeding our families and cannot even pay the rent. The solution is for these people to give us our weapons back.."

Local human rights organizations say that there has been an upsurge in pillage, extortion and crime, which they say is committed by former fighters who have not been integrated into their communities or into the army.

Amnesty International also warned about the activities of the "Republican Guard" ("*Garde Republicaine*", the former GSSP) -- an elite corps of soldiers that is responsible for the security of the President of the DRC. The soldiers in the corps are deployed throughout the country and are thought to be number more than 10,000.

"Although the Republican Guard is now, in principle, part of the national forces, it clearly conducts itself as an independent army within an army and does not appear to answer to any chain of command within the national army," said Hondora.

According to testimonies received by Amnesty International, Republican Guard soldiers regularly harass and steal from the civilian population and commit other serious violations.

Army officials state that the Republican Guard is answerable only to the President.

"A framework does exist for the creation of a truly national, apolitical army that respects the rights of the people -- but this framework needs to be translated into a reality on the ground," said Hondora. "It is absolutely critical that the newly-elected government commit itself to completing the army reform programme as soon as possible -- and to including the Republican Guard in this programme."

The organization urged the government to provide, amongst other things:

- clear instructions to all FARDC troops to respect and uphold international human rights and humanitarian law;
- training in international human rights and humanitarian law to all FARDC troops;
- the creation of an independent vetting mechanism to exclude or suspend persons suspected of committing serious human rights violations from the integrated FARDC;
- assurances that the DDR (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) programme will provide projects for effective reintegration into the community of demobilized fighters.

"Until the reform of the army and effective demobilization is complete, the DRC will experience at best a fragile peace, and the cycle of violence the country is experiencing will remain unbroken," said Hondora.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>