

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Central African Republic: Civilians bear the brunt of decades of violence and abuses**

Local and foreign armed groups in the CAR are still killing, abducting, torturing and raping civilians, as well as burning houses and looting property, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

The report *Central African Republic - Action needed to end decades of abuse* describes how CAR's population has been terrorized for decades by armed groups who have been able to operate with virtual impunity.

Despite peace agreements and a fledgling Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration process, armed conflict continues to ravage the country resulting in civilian deaths and mass internal displacement.

"The CAR covers an enormous territory and most of it is a black hole in terms of human rights. At least 14 armed groups are currently operating in the country yet the government has consistently shown itself to be incapable or unwilling to take action to protect its citizens," said Godfrey Byaruhanga, Amnesty International's Central Africa researcher.

"Grave human rights violations, including possible war crimes and crimes against humanity, are committed with appalling frequency but the justice vacuum that exists in CAR means there's no end in sight."

The CAR government exercises tenuous control over the country with an ill-equipped, ill disciplined and poorly trained security force which itself commits human rights violations. The malfunctioning domestic justice system has failed to prosecute anyone for crimes under international law despite the crimes being incorporated in its Penal Code in January 2010.

Measures such as amnesties, which are often incorporated into peace agreements between the government and armed groups, as well as a failure to prosecute members of the security forces and armed group leaders, will continue to encourage others to commit human rights abuses.

Since the referral of CAR to the International Criminal Court in December 2004 just one arrest has been made. Congolese armed group leader Jean-Pierre Bemba is currently on trial at The Hague on charges of crimes against humanity and the war crimes of murder, rape and pillage.

"Investigation and prosecution of abuses that indicate that war crimes and crimes against humanity may have been committed are a shared responsibility of the international community and the CAR. To date all attempts have failed abysmally," said Godfrey Byaruhanga.

Despite repeated attempts to solve the crisis, the situation has not improved for civilians. In late 2008, for example, the US government financed and supported the Ugandan national army (UPDF) to militarily end the threat of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) – one of the armed groups now operating the CAR. UPDF attacks on LRA bases killed some fighters and dispersed others but did not bring an end to the group's abuses. LRA atrocities have instead spread to other parts of the CAR.

On April 3 2010 Thierry Bakanote- a 23-year-old trader - was attacked by the LRA in south eastern CAR who opened fire on a pick up truck carrying passengers. Seven of the passengers died while eight were injured. The LRA fighters looted goods from the truck before setting it on fire.

Félicité Mboligassie and dozens of other civilians were in early 2008 abducted from southeastern CAR and taken to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) by LRA fighters. She and other women and girls were forced into sexual slavery by LRA commanders, while boys and men were forced to fight for the LRA. Mboligassie and others were able to escape after LRA camps were attacked by the UPDF. She eventually returned to the CAR but she and other abductees live in fear of further attacks.

“The investigation of abuses in the CAR and the bringing to justice of those responsible deserve the same coordinated response and shared material, financial and personnel resources that states devote to other serious crimes,” said Godfrey Byaruhanga.

“The people of CAR have suffered enough. The country’s international partners must now commit themselves to the implementation of new, viable measures to address this diabolical situation.”

Amnesty International is calling on the African Union, through its Peace and Security Council, to take the lead to coordinate measures to build a coalition of governments and inter-governmental organisations for the purpose of protecting and promoting human rights in the CAR.