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Congo: Kisangani Residents Again Under Fire

Rwanda's Congolese Proxy Force Killing Civilians, Closing Civil Society Groups

(New York, May 24, 2002) – Soldiers of the Rwandan-backed Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) have been rounding up and summarily executing suspected backers of a short-lived mutiny in Kisangani, the third-largest city in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Human Rights Watch said today.

According to information Human Rights Watch has received, RCD troops have killed or seized dozens of civilians and others suspected of supporting a breakaway anti-Rwandan faction of the RCD. Many are still unaccounted for. The violence began on May 14.

“The RCD and its Rwandan army backers are the de facto authority in Kisangani, and as such must be held responsible for the security of the civilian population there,” said Suliman Baldo, senior researcher on the Congo at Human Rights Watch. “The RCD and the Rwandan army garrison in Kisangani must immediately rein in unruly soldiers in their own ranks and hold those responsible for murder accountable.”

Human Rights Watch urged the United Nations Security Council to order the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Congo to initiate an investigation into the May 14 events and their aftermath, ideally in collaboration with the field office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights in Congo.

In the early hours of May 14, about a hundred soldiers from within the RCD, calling themselves the RCD-Originales, briefly occupied the official radio and called on Congolese RCD soldiers and city residents to unite and drive the Rwandans out of the country. A mob of about a thousand youths responded, and attacked and killed at least three people whom they identified as Rwandans. RCD soldiers eventually dispersed the mob, killing a handful of people in that incident.

RCD loyalists later on the same day went on a rampage in quarters whose residents had demonstrated in support of the mutineers, killing about a dozen people, injuring many more, and pillaging houses and church offices in these populous neighborhoods.

Local sources told Human Rights Watch that RCD soldiers rounded up young women from Mangobo quarters and raped them at their barracks. They briefly detained Father Xavier Zabalo, an elderly missionary from the Catholic Parish of Christ Roi, apparently for carrying some of the wounded to a local hospital. They later thoroughly looted the parish compound, and beat another elderly missionary.

Top RCD officials have accused Kisangani's highly active human rights groups, church associations, and other civil society organizations of fomenting the trouble, and ordered them to halt their activities. The RCD-controlled radio station continues to air threats aimed at these groups, forcing many human rights and peace activists to go into hiding to evade imminent arrest.

In the immediate aftermath of the mutiny, RCD troops seized dozens of suspect RCD military personnel and civilians, many of whom remain unaccounted for since their arrest. On May 17 and 18, bodies were seen floating in the Tshopo river, a tributary of the Congo river, by residents in outlying quarters of the city and, reportedly, by observers of the U.N. peacekeeping mission and the International Committee of the Red Cross stationed there. According to local sources, some of the decomposing corpses had been decapitated, and others had their wrists tied behind their backs.

Dozens of Congolese police, soldiers, and civilians were detained following the events of May 14, and the discovery of some of their bodies in the river confirmed the worst fears of relatives that they had been summarily executed. Sources in Kisangani have estimated one hundred killings to date, with at least thirty killings of civilians.

The recent violence was the fourth outbreak in as many years between competing rebel factions and the rival occupying armies of Rwanda and Uganda. All of them are vying for control of the strategically important Kisangani, a city of an estimated half a million inhabitants known for its lucrative diamond trade. At least nine hundred civilians were killed and many more were injured in crossfire when the occupying Ugandan and Rwandan armies fought in June 2000 over the control of the city, resulting in the Ugandan's withdrawal. The fighting destroyed thousands of private homes as well as schools and clinics, prompting the U.N. Security Council to adopt a resolution demanding the immediate demilitarization of the city by both armies and the Congolese rebel factions they back, and that Rwanda and Uganda pay reparations to Kisangani residents for the losses and injuries they caused.

“Kisangani inhabitants were still slowly recovering from the trauma of earlier feuds when they were again assaulted this week,” said Baldo. “If the security of civilians is still a priority, the Security Council must insist that Rwanda and the RCD immediately implement its earlier resolutions on the demilitarization of the city. Rwanda and Uganda should be pressed to pay the reparations long overdue to the residents.”