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D.R. Congo: U.N. Must Prevent “Ethnic Cleansing” in Ituri

(New York, October 31, 2002) — The U.N. Security Council must increase its peacekeeping force in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to protect civilians against slaughter, Human Rights Watch said in a backgrounder released today. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has asked that the United Nations Organization Mission in Congo (MONUC) be expanded to 8,700 troops, and the U.N. Security Council is considering the matter today.

As Congolese rebel groups as well as Ugandan and Rwandan government forces continue to fight over control of eastern DRC, hundreds of civilians have died in the provinces of South Kivu, Ituri and Orientale during the last few weeks. Some victims have been targeted for their political loyalties and others have been killed because of their ethnic affiliation. According to U.N. estimates, some two million people are now displaced in the region, most of them without access to humanitarian assistance.

In mid-October, a coalition of local Mai-Mai and Banyamulenge combatants drove the Congolese Rally for Democracy-Goma (RCD-Goma) from the town of Uvira and surrounding areas of South Kivu province. RCD-Goma, a rebel movement opposed to the DRC government, is strongly supported by Rwanda and Burundi. It was defeated after Rwandan government troops withdrew from eastern DRC under the terms of a July 30 treaty between Rwanda and the DRC. On October 19, RCD-Goma retook Uvira and much of the region with the assistance of Rwandan and Burundian government troops. Their forces have killed, raped and arbitrarily arrested civilians.

In early September, another branch of the RCD, the RCD- Liberation Movement (RCD-ML) and militias of the Ngiti ethnic group attacked the town of Nyankunde, about 20 kilometers west of Bunia in Ituri province. A survivor of the attack said, “Thousands of Ngiti came down in groups to loot: men, women and children, all armed with machetes, axes, knives, arrows and bows, spears and fire arms.” The attackers killed members of the Hema ethnic group and others said to have collaborated with them. They killed patients in their hospital beds, medical personnel of the Nyankunde hospital, and a local official. Some 200 people are estimated to have died in this attack and one several weeks earlier carried out by the largely Hema Union des Patriotes Congolais (UPC) against RCD-ML supporters and the Ngiti.

Until recently, Ugandan army troops occupied much of this part of northeastern DRC. Most have now left, but hundreds of Ugandan troops continue to occupy Bunia under

a September 6 agreement between Uganda and DRC. When the UPC attacked the RCD-ML, some Ugandan soldiers stood by and watched as civilians were killed.

“The slaughter of civilians in the last few weeks shows that neither the Ugandans in the north nor the RCD-Goma in the south can effectively protect civilian lives”, said Alison Des Forges, senior advisor to the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch. “The Security Council gave MONUC the mandate to protect civilians at risk. Now it must give the peacekeepers the numbers needed to carry out the mandate.”

The conflict in eastern Congo stems in large part from competition to control the area’s rich natural resources, such as coltan (columbite-tantalite, used in the manufacture of cell phones) gold, diamonds and timber. A special investigative panel of the U.N. Security Council last week issued a report condemning high-ranking Rwandan and Ugandan army officers for enriching themselves through illegal exploitation of Congolese resources. The panel concluded that various foreign actors encouraged local conflicts as a way to maintain their own control and ease their extraction of local wealth.

The Human Rights Watch briefing paper, “Chaos in Eastern Congo: U.N. Action Needed Now,” is available at <http://hrw.org/press/2002/10/easterncongo-bck.htm>.