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D.R. Congo: Human Rights Defenders Under Attack

(New York, July 24, 2003) – Human rights defenders in the Democratic Republic of Congo are under increasing attack, Human Rights Watch said in a backgrounder on freedom of expression and freedom of assembly released today.

In the past few years, the main rebel groups and the previous DRC government have been responsible for intimidating and harassing those who have exposed human rights abuses. But the new transitional government in Kinshasa offers the chance to break this pattern, Human Rights Watch said.

“Human rights activists have put their lives on the line throughout this war, bringing to light its worst atrocities,” said Alison Des Forges, senior advisor to Human Rights Watch on the Great Lakes. “The new government should protect these brave people.”

Intimidation of human rights defenders and other activists has actually been on the increase despite the signing of a recent peace accord. The backgrounder details more than twenty cases of arrests and harassment of human rights defenders, civil society activists, and independent journalists documented by Human Rights Watch in the past three months alone.

There have also been a few positive developments lately. Earlier this month, the Rwandan-backed Rally for Congolese Democracy-Goma (RCD-Goma) released Donatien Kisangani Mukatamwina, an Uvira-based activist who had been detained without charge for thirteen days and beaten. The RCD-Goma also authorized the independent Radio Maendeleo to resume broadcasting this month, after having banned it for the previous seven months. In response to outcries from human rights groups, the DRC government recently abolished the military court in Kinshasa, the Court d'Ordre Militaire.

“Now is the time to turn a new page and allow human rights groups and journalists to do their jobs,” said Des Forges. “If the new government is to succeed in building a lasting peace, it will have to be based on the rule of law and respect for freedom of expression.”

Human Rights Watch also urged the new government to actively encourage the participation of human rights groups in key aspects of the transition, including justice for war crimes and crimes against humanity and a truth and reconciliation process. As a first step, Human Rights Watch urged the new minister for human rights, Marie Kalala, to hold consultations with human rights groups in different regions of the country within her first month in office.

The backgrounder is available online at:

<http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/africa/drc072403.htm>