

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: AFR 62/027/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 326
21 December 2004

D R Congo: Renewed fighting in North Kivu - need for unconditional protection of civilians

The grave situation in the North-Kivu province of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) should not divert the transitional government and international community from implementing essential reforms aimed at protecting civilians and building greater security, Amnesty International said today.

Ongoing fighting between DRC government forces and dissident troops allied to the former RCD-Goma armed opposition group in North-Kivu province, as well as recent unconfirmed reports of a Rwandan Defence Force (RDF) army incursion into the province, represent a serious degradation of the prospects for lasting peace in the DRC.

The fighting underlines the need for the transitional government and the international community to move forward urgently on programmes for the disarmament and demobilization of combatants and the integration of the army.

The organization is urging the UN peacekeeping force, MONUC, UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to observe reported troops movement and arms flow by deploying in strength and increasing its presence on the DRC-Rwandan border, as well in areas such as the territory of Rutshuru, through which recent infiltrations of troops and arms from Rwanda are reportedly believed to have taken place.

MONUC should act according to the UN Security Council Resolution 1493 of 28 July 2003 authorizing the UN MONUC peace-keeping forces to use all necessary means to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence in Ituri and the Kivus.

During military operations in recent weeks between DRC government forces and dissident troops allied to the former RCD-Goma backed by Rwanda, civilians have been summarily executed, raped and some villages systematically looted and destroyed. Thousands of people have also been displaced.

All forces involved must refrain from attacking civilians, who are already paying the heaviest price for the conflict.

Amnesty International is extremely concerned by the rise of ethnic tensions. Recent demonstrations in the city of Goma, organised largely along ethnic lines, turned violent. The forces of the RCD-Goma have threatened Non-Rwandophone populations in the North Kivu

province, while, in both North and South Kivu, civilians considered to be of Rwandan origin are feeling increasingly insecure.

The organization is calling for protection of all civilians regardless of their ethnic origin.

Background

There has been ongoing fighting between troops loyal to the DRC government (FARDC), and elements of the RCD-Goma backed by Rwanda, in the territories of Walikale, Rutshuru and Massisi in North Kivu, since early December 2004. There are strong indications that Rwanda has reinforced and resupplied the dissident RCD-Goma forces and it is widely reported that Rwandan government troops (RDF) entered the DRC in strength in November.

While denying the incursion, the Rwandan government has repeatedly stated that Rwanda is prepared to send troops back into the DRC to fight Rwandan insurgent forces based there. In response to this statement, the DRC President Kabila announced that up to 10,000 soldiers will be sent to reinforce the eastern province of North Kivu bordering Rwanda.

The stakes in North-Kivu are extremely high. The RCD-Goma, traditionally allied to and supported by Rwanda, regards the province as its bastion. Elements of the political and military wings of the RCD-Goma are increasingly opposed to the extension of the transitional government's authority to the province. Following the loss of South-Kivu province to governmental control earlier this year, the dissident RCD-Goma force under its commander General Laurent Nkunda, responsible for multiple human rights abuses across South Kivu, have regrouped in North-Kivu.

Thousands of children, women and men are dying every day from the effects of the conflict that has ravaged the region since 1998. Recent figures produced by the International Rescue Committee indicate that the conflict has caused 3.8 million excess deaths, or 1,000 per day, the majority children dying from preventable disease.