

AI Index: AFR 22/07/ 98
23 December 1998

Republic of Congo: Amnesty International condemns abuses against unarmed civilians

Amnesty International today condemned the deliberate and arbitrary killings of unarmed civilians as well as other abuses, including indiscriminate shelling of civilian targets perpetrated by government forces and armed opposition groups in and around the capital, Brazzaville.

The organization has received reports of government forces, including President Denis Sassou Nguesso's own militia known as *Cobras*, deliberately killing unarmed civilians suspected of supporting the armed opposition group known as *Ninjas* loyal to former Prime Minister Bernard Kolelas.

Government forces are also reported to be using heavy weapons such as multiple rocket launchers to shell heavily populated areas said to be strongholds of the *Ninjas*. There are also reports that *Ninjas* have targeted unarmed civilians suspected to be government supporters. Combatants on both sides are reported to be raping women and deliberately wounding civilians.

Since late August 1998 hundreds of unarmed civilians are reported to have been killed in the context of fighting between the *Ninjas* and government forces in the Pool region of southern Congo, as well as in Brazzaville. Thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes into forests in the Pool region and as many as 15,000 are reported to have fled to neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo.

Amnesty International fears that those who are internally displaced may be at risk of further human rights abuses, starvation or disease. Humanitarian agencies are reportedly unable to gain access to many of the displaced, who have no protection from further attacks by combatants.

In addition to Congolese government forces and the *Cobras* militia, others supporting President Nguesso include members of the Angolan and Chadian government forces.

"The Angolan and Chadian governments should instruct their own forces in the Republic of Congo not to commit human rights abuses and to ensure that their presence and influence is used to prevent abuses and protect unarmed civilians, Amnesty International said.

"These abuses are reminiscent of those carried out by the combatants on both sides since 1993 and more particularly between June and November 1997. Tens of thousands or more of civilians not taking any active part in the hostilities are at grave risk of human rights abuses by combatants who have in the past, as now, demonstrated a total disregard for international humanitarian law and human rights in general", the human rights organization said.

During a visit to the Republic of Congo in late July and early August 1998, Amnesty International's delegates established that there had been no independent and impartial investigation into the human rights abuses committed in previous months and years and no one has been brought to justice for the abuses.

Amnesty International is calling on President Denis Sassou Nguesso and armed opposition group leaders, including Bernard Kolelas, who lives in exile, to give clear public instructions to their forces not to carry out deliberate and arbitrary killings, rape and other abuses. The government should declare publicly that it will prevent the shelling of civilian targets.

The organization is also calling on the Congolese authorities to carry out immediate investigations into human rights abuses committed by all parties to the conflict, including government forces, and to bring to justice those found to be responsible in accordance with international standards of fairness, without recourse to the death penalty or other inhumane punishment.

Both parties to the conflict should allow members of Congolese human rights organizations and other independent human rights observers to investigate and report on allegations of human rights abuses in areas under their control, and ensure that the investigators have unhindered and safe access to all such areas.

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