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Zaire: Amnesty International Condemns AFDL Abuses against Rwandese Refugees in Eastern Zaire

Amnesty International condemns actions of the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaire* (AFDL), Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire, which are exacerbating the already intolerable situation of Rwandese refugees in eastern Zaire.

About 80,000 refugees camped at several locations south of Kisangani, the capital of Haut-Zaire region, are reported to be severely weakened by starvation, disease and exhaustion.

“How many refugees have to die or suffer human rights abuses at the hands of the AFDL before world governments and intergovernmental organizations send a clear message to the AFDL that they would be held accountable for any further deaths ordered or condoned by their leaders,” Amnesty International said today.

“The international community should put pressure on the AFDL to recognise that refugees have a right to life and other human rights,” the organization said. “The deliberate violation of these rights is totally unacceptable under any circumstances.”

Humanitarian agencies, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have been attacked and supplies for refugees looted by Zairian civilians while members of the AFDL looked on. The AFDL has stopped providing security for relief supplies and aid workers. Lack of security inside and on the way to the camps has stopped relief work and refugees are left to die from starvation, disease and exhaustion.

Amnesty International has learned that as many as 90 refugees were dying each day before the assistance was disrupted by violence at the end of last week. The organization is concerned that many more may be massacred during attacks by Zairian civilians and the AFDL, which have been reported in recent days. The exclusion of humanitarian agencies from the camps means that there are no independent witnesses to these abuses.

“The deliberate disruption of humanitarian assistance to the refugees amounts to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. We expect the international community to condemn this and call for an immediate and unconditional end to this inhumane behaviour of the AFDL,” Amnesty International said.

At the start of April the AFDL authorized an airlift of the refugees to Rwanda. However, the Rwandese authorities have reportedly said that they will not allow the refugees to be flown direct to Rwanda, although most of the refugees reportedly come from areas close to Kigali international airport. In recent days AFDL leaders have claimed that an airlift now would spread cholera among the Zairian population.

Amnesty International is concerned that the ill-treatment and attacks on Rwandese refugees appear to be part of a pattern of human rights abuses by the AFDL against Rwandese refugees. The organization has received numerous and consistent reports of human rights abuses, including deliberate and arbitrary killings and “disappearances”, of Rwandese Hutu refugees and Zairian Hutu since the armed conflict began in September 1996. The refugees being targeted have since then been roaming the forests of Zaire to escape attacks and are unable to flee any further.

On 18 April, in an apparent move to further disrupt humanitarian work for the refugees, the AFDL forcibly took 60,000 litres of UNHCR fuel reserves in the eastern Zairian town of Goma. The fuel would have been used to reach and transport Rwandese refugees. On the same day, the AFDL failed to prevent the looting of about 120 tons of humanitarian supplies being transported to the camps. Further looting has been reported at Kasese. The AFDL has also reportedly threatened to close Kisangani airport to humanitarian traffic.

Sources in eastern Zaire have told Amnesty International that AFDL leaders are inciting the local population against the refugees and humanitarian organizations.

An aid worker told Amnesty International: *“This is part of an orchestrated campaign by the AFDL. They have been using their radio to blame the refugees for the cholera and to emphasise that humanitarian agencies only help Rwandese refugees. This is not true. We have assisted displaced Zairians and the UNHCR has flown many of them to eastern Zaire, something they are refusing to be done for the Rwandese”.*

Aid agencies have also told the organization that they fear attacks on the refugees will result in many deaths and drive many others further south and away from any assistance.

Amnesty International is also concerned about reports that tens of thousands of other refugees still hiding in the forests or congregating in open spaces may be attacked by armed groups. The AFDL has imposed severe restrictions on the movement of humanitarian agencies and there are no independent witnesses to reports of killings and other abuses against refugees and displaced Zairians. Refugees are reported to be still hiding in parts of North and South-Kivu regions. Amnesty International has received reports that some direct or indirect witnesses are failing to report any abuses for fear of severe reprisals by the AFDL.

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