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DRC: Catastrophe looming unless UN troops receive reinforcements

The situation in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo is at risk of turning into a humanitarian catastrophe, unless further reinforcements are given to the UN peace-keeping troops so that they can protect civilians, Amnesty International said today.

“We urge the Security Council to send immediate assistance to UN troops in the form of additional troop numbers, air support and other equipment. Only then will they be able to disrupt armed group attacks against civilian populations and enforce the UN arms embargo on the DRC, in line with their existing mandate,” said Tawanda Hondora, Deputy Director of the Africa Programme.

The humanitarian and human rights crisis in eastern DRC has escalated dramatically in the past month since the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), under the command of renegade general Laurent Nkunda, launched a fresh offensive early October against government forces and are threatening to overrun the provincial capital, Goma.

Despite a peace accord signed in January 2008, armed conflict has persisted in North Kivu. The fighting involves the regular Congolese army (FARDC) and the CNDP armed group, under the command of Laurent Nkunda, as well as a number of local mayi-mayi militia and the Rwandan Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) armed group.

“The international community must not stand by as the conflict degenerates to levels last seen between 1998 and 2002 in eastern DRC. This resulted in the death of three million people, which must not be allowed to happen again,” said Tawanda Hondora.

“World leaders should bring pressure to bear upon the warring parties, especially the CNDP, as well as governments that have influence over them, especially Rwanda, to prevent more civilian casualties.”

Ituri has also recently seen a significant resurgence of armed group violence, while in the Haut-Uélé district of Orientale province Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) attacks against civilians and abductions of children have steadily intensified throughout 2008.

More than one million people are estimated to have been displaced by this and previous rounds of fighting in the province. Whole communities have been uprooted, with women, children and the elderly bearing the brunt of the fighting.

The United Nations Organization Mission of the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) is mandated to ensure the protection of civilians, including humanitarian personnel, under imminent threat of physical violence.

Amnesty International urges firm international action to press the governments of the DRC and Rwanda to abide by the commitments made in the Nairobi joint communiqué in November 2007, particularly to end negative propaganda against each other and to refrain from providing support to armed groups, including the CNDP and the FDLR.

“Deliberate or indiscriminate attacks against civilians and peacekeepers carrying out their duty of protecting civilians is a war crime, punishable under international law. Civilians are bearing the brunt, and this cannot go on,” said Tawanda Hondora.

In addition, all parties to the conflict must ensure that humanitarian aid agencies are not hindered in their work to provide humanitarian aid to displaced people, including those who are injured.

More than five million people have already died since 1998 in the DRC's protracted conflict.

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