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Uganda must act now to halt further slaughter in DRC

Amnesty International today expressed grave fears for the safety of civilians in the Ituri region of northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), following the killing in the town of Bunia of at least 200 civilians during recent violence between the Lendu and Hema ethnic groups. Ugandan military forces in control of the town failed to prevent many of these killings, although they were apparently in a position to do so.

"The latest killings and the climate of extreme distrust which is once again taking hold in the region are an indication that ethnic violence is set to intensify and could lead to renewed large-scale loss of civilian life", Amnesty International warned.

"Uganda, as the authority in ultimate control in the region, has a clear responsibility to act impartially to protect civilian life and to prevent a further slide into violence. The international community, too, must face up to the scale and gravity of this conflict and take a more active role in ending the violence against civilians," the organization said.

At least 150 Lendu civilians were reportedly killed by armed Hema civilian groups who attacked districts of Bunia throughout the day of 19 January. The victims, who included women and children, were reportedly killed with machetes and in some cases decapitated. Many of the bodies were thrown into open latrines. The killings were in reprisal for an attack by a Lendu and allied Ngiti armed group early that morning on Ugandan military positions and residential areas in the town, during which as many as 50 Hema civilians were reported killed by spears or bow and arrow, or burned alive in their homes by Lendu/Ngiti assailants. At least 60 Lendu/Ngiti attackers were also reported killed during the earlier assault, which was repulsed by Ugandan forces.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned by reports that Ugandan military forces, having driven off the initial attack, did not intervene promptly to halt subsequent killings of civilians in Bunia, despite repeated requests to do so from community leaders and international humanitarian agencies, or may even have stood by as killings took place.

In the past few weeks violence between the two ethnic groups in the area around Bunia has led to scores of deaths and the displacement of several thousands of civilians. The Ituri region is under the control of the Ugandan government and military, and a newly-formed armed opposition group allied to Uganda, the Congolese Liberation Front (CLF).

Recommendations

Amnesty International is appealing to the Ugandan and CLF authorities, and the international community to put in place urgent measures to prevent further bloodshed in Ituri.

The organization is calling on the Ugandan authorities as a first step to instruct the military command in Bunia of its responsibility to act promptly, efficiently and impartially to protect all civilian life

throughout the region. The Ugandan authorities should also act to protect international humanitarian organizations in the region and to facilitate the safe delivery of aid. International humanitarian agencies operating from Bunia have in the past been threatened and attacked by extremist groups.

The Ugandan and CLF authorities should also make every effort to calm ethnic tensions by urgently restoring mediation efforts between the two communities.

Amnesty International is calling on the international community to exert immediate pressure on the Ugandan government to halt the spread of violence in the region and to actively promote and support reconciliation efforts between the two communities. The international community should also establish an international commission of enquiry to investigate violations of international humanitarian and human rights law during the Hema-Lendu conflict, including allegations of Ugandan and allied military involvement in atrocities.

Background

The Hema-Lendu conflict originated in a dispute over land rights in June 1999. During the latter half of 1999 Hema armed groups carried out a campaign to drive Lendu from their homes in the Ituri region, which is rich in mineral wealth. By the beginning of 2000 the conflict had left an estimated 7,000 civilians dead and more than 180,000 displaced. Throughout the conflict there were consistent reports that Ugandan and allied troops sided with the Hema and were involved in killings and other abuses against Lendu.

Mediation attempts, which had shown some signs of success, were undermined by recent political upheavals among the Ugandan-backed armed opposition and by the detention and transfer to Uganda by the Ugandan military of the former governor of Ituri province, Ernest Uringi Padolo, earlier this month. Ernest Uringi Padolo was credited by many with playing a constructive role in reconciliation efforts. The reason for his detention has not been explained by the Ugandan authorities.

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