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D R Congo: Human rights workers receive death threats

Amnesty International is increasingly concerned for the safety of human rights activists working in the troubled North Kivu province of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), following what appears to be a concerted campaign of intimidation against them by local security services.

In the past few weeks, several leading activists in the provincial capital, Goma, have been directly threatened - including by death threats - and a number forced into hiding or to leave the country. The threats are reportedly the work of members of the local security apparatus linked to renegade RCD-Goma (*Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie - Goma*) forces opposed to the DRC's central government.

"The leaders of the RCD-Goma and the DRC government should guarantee the safety of Congolese human rights defenders and allow them to work without obstruction," said Dr. Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Program. "The International Committee in Support of the Transition (CIAT) and the *Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo* (MONUC), should also intervene with the Congolese authorities to ensure that this campaign of intimidation is stopped."

On 6 January the Director General of the human rights organization *Action Sociale pour la Paix et le Développement* (ASPD), fled Goma after spending several days in hiding. He had received anonymous threatening phone calls and a visit to his home by security agents. He was told: "*You have become a politician. Be careful because you risk paying dearly.*" On 29 December an attempt was made by unknown assailants to force the door to his house.

Another human rights defender, the Director General of the *Centre de Recherche sur l'Environnement, la Démocratie et les Droits de l'Homme* (CREDDHO) also fled after receiving repeated threatening phone calls. One of these calls warned him in stark terms: "*If you think you are protected you are wrong. We have a programme to kill you.*" On 3 January three men, believed to be local military intelligence agents, had visited his neighbourhood asking to be shown his house.

A third activist and spokesperson for a collective of human rights organisations was forced to flee after receiving repeated threats. One phone call threatened, "*We will shut you up for good.*" His home was visited on 31 December, while he was away, by three armed men who demanded to know his whereabouts.

These latest threats appear to have been prompted by two reports to which a number of North Kivu human rights activists and organisations, including those above, were signatories. The reports detailed

recent arms distributions to civilians in Goma and elsewhere in North Kivu province, and denounced increasing ethnic polarisation and violence in the province. Civil society representatives also briefed representatives of the CIAT and a DRC government commission on the findings presented in the reports. Local security forces reportedly have made efforts to identify the private homes of all the signatories to the reports.

Background

The most recent threats are part of a pattern of intimidation that has been ongoing in North Kivu for some time. In late November another prominent human rights defender and lawyer was detained and interrogated for several hours by soldiers at the T2 military intelligence detention centre in Goma. He was reproached for having "too many meetings" and his mobile phone was confiscated. A trader, Balyana Kivuruga, who was detained at the same time, was seriously beaten. Other activists have reported threats and other forms of intimidation against them.

The campaign of intimidation takes place in a context of growing lawlessness and increased attacks on civilians in North Kivu province, where renegade RCD-Goma forces have forcibly resisted the imposition of central authority. Arms have been distributed to extremists and local civilian militia, and inter-communal tensions have been deliberately inflamed by factional leaders. Fighting between renegade and governmental forces in the province has displaced thousands and scores of civilians have been unlawfully killed by different armed forces, including at least 30 people who were massacred by renegade RCD-Goma forces at Buramba on 17 December. Around 20 people have also reportedly been killed by unidentified gunmen in Goma since early November.

Human rights and development activists in other provinces of DRC have also been targeted recently. These include in Katanga, where activists have received threats after campaigning against the activities of a local mining company which threatened to pollute water supplies, and in Ituri where, on 24 December, Pax Christi worker Furabo Mangana was shot dead by militia forces.

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