

Congo Warlord Faces Hague Court

The New York Times

March 21, 2006

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THE HAGUE, March 20 — It was a brief session but a momentous occasion at the International Criminal Court on Monday, when a former Congolese warlord, the first person to stand trial before the new institution, faced the judges.

The man, Thomas Lubanga, 45, has been accused of kidnapping children as young as 7 and turning them into soldiers, messengers, cooks and sex slaves during fighting in the long-troubled Ituri region of Congo.

He was "the founder and leader of one of the most dangerous militias in Ituri," the chief prosecutor, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, said at a weekend news conference. Ituri, he said, was one of the regions where children had been trained "to become machines of war."

Mr. Lubanga, who arrived in The Hague on Friday after more than a year in a Kinshasa prison, looked surprised as he walked into a new wood-paneled court, facing an array of court officers in gowns and a public gallery filled with diplomats and journalists.

He was asked to stand as the presiding judge, Claude Jorda of France, went through the formalities of identifying him and informing him of his rights. Mr. Lubanga gave his occupation as "politician."

For the 350 people who work at the new institution, the 30-minute hearing, for all its businesslike tone, opened a new chapter in international law. Created by the Rome Treaty of 1998, the International Criminal Court aims to deal with war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

Unlike temporary tribunals, like the court that dealt with Nazi crimes at Nuremberg, and those addressing war crimes in Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone, this court is the world's first permanent and independent forum for judging large-scale abuses. Its prosecutors have also been investigating the mass killings in Uganda and Darfur, in Sudan, since 2002.

The International Criminal Court has said it will deal only with the top leaders and it will seek out cases that a national court is unwilling or unable to investigate. It became involved in Ituri after President [Joseph Kabila](#) asked the court to investigate war crimes in the region.

The prosecutor said Mr. Lubanga's hearing was only the start of cases linked to the years of militia violence in Ituri, which has killed thousands and produced more than 600,000 refugees. At least five militia armies have fought to control the region, much coveted for its gold deposits. A Human Rights Watch report said some had ties to or were supported by neighboring states, notably Rwanda and Uganda.

Civilians suffered widely at the hands of the warring groups, which carried out massacres, torture, rape, extortion and mutilation, and used children as cannon fodder and sex slaves.

Mr. Lubanga set up his group as long as five years ago, but international pressure to arrest him and other Ituri warlords grew after nine [United Nations](#) Bangladeshi peacekeepers were killed by unknown men in February 2005. He was arrested a month later.

A trial date for Mr. Lubanga has not been set. The prosecution said it might expand the charges, which must be reviewed and confirmed by judges. The next hearing is set for June 27.