

Human Rights Watch
Press Release

May 21, 2003

Congo: U.N. Should Deploy a Rapid Reaction Force in Ituri

(New York, May 21, 2003) - Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International today jointly called on the U.N. Security Council to authorize the deployment of a rapid reaction force to protect civilians in Ituri, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

In an open letter to the Security Council, the two human rights organizations called the situation in Ituri "a critical test" of the Security Council's commitments to prevent mass killings and protect civilians, and noted that the United Nations Observation Mission in Congo (MONUC) has been unable to adequately protect civilians. The Security Council is currently discussing the characteristics and mandate of a possible force.

"In Ituri today, the elements of a devastating crisis are clearly present," said Irene Khan, secretary general of Amnesty International.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said that thousands of civilians continue to be at risk as opposing Hema and Lendu ethnic militia groups remain fully armed and ready to attack again. Tens of thousands of other civilians are believed to have fled Bunia, and their condition is unknown.

The two organizations stressed that any military action should be undertaken with full respect for international human rights and humanitarian law. They emphasized that the rapid reaction force should have a robust mandate to ensure the maintenance of law and order and to protect civilians in Bunia, to locate and protect those civilians who have fled outside the town, and to ensure that humanitarian assistance can reach civilian populations in need.

Given the urgency of the situation, the two human rights organizations urged that a rapid reaction force be deployed immediately in the Ituri region, pending an agreement by the Security Council on the expansion and strengthening of MONUC's mandate, and the respective deployment of its reinforced troops.

The organizations are following up their appeal to the Security Council with appeals to specific countries to support Security

Council action along the lines suggested and to contribute troops to an U.N.-authorized force.

"Thousands of civilians have already died in this conflict," said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. "Only rapid U.N. action can head off continued killings."

At least 5,000 people died from direct violence in Ituri between July 2002 and March 2003. These victims are in addition to the 50,000 civilians that, according to United Nations estimates, have died there since 1999. These losses are just one part of an estimated total of 4.7 million civilians dead throughout the Congo, a toll that makes this war more deadly to civilians than any other since World War II.

To read more on human rights in DRC, please see:
<http://www.hrw.org/africa/congo.php>

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International Letter to the U.N.
Security Council

May 21, 2003

Security Council Members

Your Excellency,

In recent days, the Security Council has expressed growing concern about the deteriorating human rights situation in Ituri, north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Despite the signing last week of a cease-fire, the potential for the situation to rapidly escalate into further killings of civilians demands an immediate and urgent response, notably the deployment of troops with a clear and robust mandate to protect civilians.

Ituri presents the Security Council with a critical test of the commitments it has made in many previous resolutions to prevent mass killings and protect civilians. In Resolution 1296 of April 2000 on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, the Council indicated "its willingness to consider the appropriateness and feasibility of temporary security zones and safe corridors for the protection of civilians and the delivery of assistance in situations characterized by threat of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes against the civilian population." The

Security Council's various resolutions on children and armed conflict and women in peace and security have highlighted their special protection needs.

In Ituri today, the elements of a devastating crisis are clearly present: thousands of civilians continue to be at risk as opposing Hema and Lendu ethnic militia groups remain fully armed and ready to attack again; tens of thousands of other civilians are believed to have fled Bunia, and their fate is unknown. In a fast-changing scene, the ethnic groups have allied with several different Congolese rebel movements and with foreign backers, including Uganda and Rwanda. There have been mass killings and targeted rapes based on ethnic identity, by members of different ethnic groups, yielding a spiral of deadly reprisal attacks.

The potential for escalating abuses is illustrated by the massacre of hundreds of civilians at Drodro in April 2003 and by the 10 May killing of as many as 20 Hema civilians, including two priests, at a church in Nyakazansa, reportedly carried out by Lendu combatants. On 11 May MONUC personnel reportedly found 12 dead civilians in the centre of Bunia - three of them were babies who had had their throats cut.

These constitute only the most recent cases of unlawful deliberate killings on ethnic grounds in a conflict in Ituri that has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced over 500,000 people since mid-1999. Tens of thousands of civilians have reportedly fled Bunia in search of safety, many crossing the border into neighbouring Uganda. Aid workers have also been forced to cease their work and evacuate from Bunia. By 12 May the armed group Union des patriotes congolais (UPC), Union of Congolese Patriots, which had been driven out of Bunia by Ugandan troops in early March, had reportedly recaptured most parts of the town. Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation is becoming increasingly desperate: nearly 10,000 civilians of various ethnic groups are now sheltering in UN installations in Bunia, facing serious shortages of food, water, and sanitation, and leading to rising fears of cholera; small children are already starting to die.

The United Nations Observation Mission in Congo (MONUC) with some 700 troops in Bunia has been completely overwhelmed and has been unable to adequately protect civilians and help restore calm to this volatile region. On 12 May, the Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations, Mr. Guehenno warned that "without decisive action there could be a bloodbath in the region." The troop reinforcements from Bangladesh are not due to arrive for a

couple of months, which means that MONUC will be unable to respond adequately to events in the short term.

We are aware that intensive efforts are underway internationally to mobilize a rapid reaction force. The UN Security Council is currently discussing the characteristics and mandate of a possible force to be sent by one or more UN member states to the DRC to help calm the fighting and to protect civilians, as requested by the UN Secretary-General. Given the urgency of the situation, we urge you to ensure a rapid reaction force is deployed immediately in Bunia, pending an agreement by the Security Council on the expansion and strengthening of MONUC's mandate, and the respective deployment of its reinforced troops.

It is of utmost importance that any military action should be undertaken with full respect for international human rights and humanitarian law. The rapid reaction force should have a robust mandate to: 1) ensure the maintenance of law and order to protect civilians in Bunia, and to try to locate and protect those civilians who have fled outside the town, progressively establishing a presence beyond Bunia to ensure civilians are protected throughout the region; and 2) to help ensure that humanitarian assistance can reach civilian populations in need.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are ready to assist you with further information should you require it. Thank you for your kind consideration of these urgent matters.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Roth
Executive Director
Human Rights Watch

Irene Khan
Secretary General
Amnesty International