

For Immediate Release

DR Congo: Protect Civilians From Brutal Rebel Attacks

Killings, Abductions, and Pillaging by Lord's Resistance Army Continue

(New York, November 13, 2008) – The UN Security Council should urgently increase the number of peacekeepers to help protect civilians in northern Democratic Republic of Congo following renewed attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), four international and national human rights organizations said today.

Human Rights Watch, Enough, Resolve Uganda, and the Justice and Peace Commission of Dungu/Doruma also called on the United Nations, the United States, the United Kingdom, and governments in the region to develop and carry out an arrest strategy for LRA leaders wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC).

According to reports, LRA combatants have killed at least 10 civilians, abducted scores of children, and pillaged and burned untold numbers of homes and schools in northeastern Congo in the last two months alone. On November 1, 2008, LRA forces attacked Dungu, the capital of Haut-Uélé district, in Orientale province. According to local sources, after fighting in which three government soldiers were killed, LRA fighters abducted at least 36 boys and 21 girls.

“The LRA leader, Joseph Kony, is continuing his brutal and abusive tactics,” said Georgette Gagnon, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “The US and UK, along with the UN and governments in the region, should actively work together to apprehend LRA leaders wanted by the ICC.”

UN peacekeepers are currently struggling to protect civilians in North Kivu province, in eastern Congo, where combat between the rebel leader Laurent Nkunda and government soldiers and their allied militias has led to the displacement of a quarter of a million people and the deaths of hundreds of civilians since late August.

The United Nations says it has too few peacekeepers and logistical resources to protect civilians. On October 3, Alan Doss, the special representative of the UN secretary-general in Congo, asked the Security Council for reinforcements, but it has not yet taken any action and no countries have offered reinforcements. Some governments argue that the UN already has enough troops in the DRC that could simply be deployed differently. The continuing abduction of children by the LRA in northeastern Congo over recent months demonstrates those peacekeepers are overextended and struggling to fulfill their mandate to protect civilians. Troops are desperately needed in both the Kivus and Orientale.

On October 19-20, LRA rebels killed at least six people and abducted 17 others to transport their looted goods. Local youths then formed a self-defense unit to try to fend off the LRA. On September 17-18, the LRA attacked several villages simultaneously, abducting at least 45 children from Kiliwa and Duru. The LRA forces killed local leaders,

pillaged, and burned as they swept through the villages. Precise information of these attacks has been difficult because of problems of access and security.

The ICC has issued warrants for the arrest of Joseph Kony and other Lord's Resistance Army leaders for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

"Our people live in fear," said Abbé Benoît Kinalegu of the Dungu/Doruma Justice and Peace Commission. "Our children are preyed on by the LRA rebels."

Abducted children are forced to become combatants and girls are forced to provide sexual services for more senior combatants.

"The LRA is committing new abductions of children with the clear purpose of restocking its ranks," said Michael Poffenberger of Resolve Uganda. "This was the strategy in Uganda for two decades."

In August, 150 peacekeepers of the UN force in Congo, MONUC, and Congolese army soldiers were sent to Orientale province to contain the LRA and help provide protection for civilians. On October 25 and 29, armed clashes between the Congolese army and the LRA resulted in the death of six Congolese army soldiers and three LRA combatants, according to local reports.

Some 25,000 persons fled their homes after attacks in September and October, and another 50,000 have been displaced by the attack in Dungu. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, virtually all of the people living in an area of more than 10,000 square kilometers of northeastern Congo fled because they feared future LRA attacks. Displaced people urgently require basic humanitarian support.

The government of Uganda and the LRA negotiated a peace deal in early 2008, but Kony failed to appear at a ceremony scheduled for signing the agreement on April 10. Since then he has occasionally promised to sign, but continues his attacks on civilians.

"For 20 years the international community has not had a comprehensive strategy to end the LRA insurgency," said John Norris, executive director of the Enough Project. "Unless the world acts now to execute the ICC warrants, Joseph Kony's war on civilians will continue and an already fragile region will be further destabilized."

Background

During the conflict in northern Uganda, which began in 1986, the LRA and, to a lesser extent, forces of the Ugandan government have committed serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. LRA combatants have committed killings, abductions, rapes and other injuries, forced recruitment into military service, and widespread looting, and destruction of civilian property. Soldiers of the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) have carried out extrajudicial executions, rape, torture, and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, arbitrary detention, and forced displacement.

In December 2003, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda asked the International Criminal Court to investigate crimes committed by the LRA. Once the ICC exercises jurisdiction over crimes, as it has done in northern Uganda, the court has the authority to prosecute crimes by any individual, regardless of affiliation. Under its statute, the ICC has jurisdiction to prosecute only crimes committed after 2002. In July 2005, the court issued warrants for the arrest of the top five LRA leaders: Joseph Kony, Vincent Otti, Okot Odhiambo, Raska Lukwiya, and Dominic Ongwen. Lukwiya was killed in 2006, and Otti was reportedly killed in 2007. The ICC has not issued warrants for any UPDF commanders or Ugandan government officials.

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