

A Plea from Local Organizations and Civil Society in North Kivu
19 November 2008
Goma, DRC

The following letter was signed by 44 NGOs in North Kivu, DRC, to the UN Security Council.

As the representatives of Congolese non-governmental organizations in North Kivu, we come before your authority to request an immediate reinforcement of peacekeeping forces for the Democratic Republic of Congo, reinforcements that would be capable of protecting us. This would help to prevent the atrocities that continue to be committed against civilians on an ever greater scale here in North Kivu, on the border of Rwanda and Uganda.

This letter presents a sad, cynical, tragic and very frustrating situation, which reveals the misery in which the population of North Kivu are immersed. We are anxious, afraid and utterly traumatised by the constant insecurity in which we live. We don't know which saint to pray to; we are condemned to death by all this violence and displacement. We have been abandoned. Who will protect us? Who will help us? The United Nations says that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, but our dignity and our rights are violated every day with hardly a cry of protest. Do we not deserve protection? Are we not equal to others?

Since August 28, fighting has intensified in many areas, causing deaths, rapes, lootings, forced recruitment and further displacements of civilian populations. The population has thus been immersed in unspeakable suffering. In the last few days, fighting has drawn closer to large populated areas, such as the town of Goma. Fighting has also invaded and torn apart the region of Rutshuru, particularly in the town of Kiwanja, where hundreds of civilian deaths have now been recorded.

The suffering has gone on too long for the population of North Kivu. It is time for the government and the international community to protect the civilians who have fallen victim to the atrocities of the conflict.

We are aware that during several high-level visits to eastern Congo this year, you and your representatives heard many firsthand testimonies which could not have left you indifferent to the tragedy facing the population of our region of the DRC. ()

As the conquering army of Laurent Nkunda gradually takes new areas, the Congolese army takes flight. As they flee, they end up killing, pillaging, raping and stealing, leaving chaos and total disorder in their wake. This is the case in Goma, where more than 20 civilians were killed, several women were raped, and valuable goods were stolen on October 29. Since last week, the towns of Kanyabayonga, Kirumba and Kayna have been invaded in almost the same way as Goma by FARDC soldiers fleeing the fighting.

Forced recruitment has also intensified. In several areas of Rutshuru and Masisi, armed groups, the CNDP in particular, go from door to door to force young boys and adults - aged between 14 and 40 - to go to the front, without any prior military training. Last week, reports documented the recruitment by force of hundreds of civilians by the CNDP, especially in Kitchanga, Kiwanja, Rutshuru and Rubare.

In all of these cases, we, the civilian population, have been held hostage and caught between

many lines of fire. Women are among the first victims. Sexual violence has become dramatically worse since the end of August, as military forces and armed groups have reduced women to a battlefield.

MONUC has fallen short of fulfilling its mandate to protect civilians, openly and publicly, but no concrete action has been taken. Powerless, MONUC witnesses all the atrocities committed by the armed forces and groups. At times, its interventions are delayed, if not ineffective. We can therefore no longer continue to rely on MONUC to protect us. The case of Kiwanja, where civilians are massacred daily near the MONUC base, is a striking example.

We ask you urgently to assist us at this most difficult time. It is absolutely clear to everyone that we need reinforcements of troops capable of protecting civilians effectively and efficiently, with the means to deal with any kind of attacks. This must be done quickly.

We therefore urge you to:

- o Immediately send EU troops which can deploy quickly to provide protection and security for civilians as you did for our brothers and sisters in Bunia, Ituri, in June 2003.
- o Increase the number of troops for MONUC and provide them with a mandate that allows them to sufficiently protect civilians and to do so as their top priority.

Your Excellencies, you must save our lives now; otherwise it will be too late.

Source: <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/11/19/plea-local-organizations-and-civil-society-north-kivu>