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CIVILIAN KILLINGS BY WARRING PARTIES IN KISANGANI

Uganda and Rwanda Urged to Spare Congolese Civilians

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Human Rights Watch today expressed grave concerns about widespread shelling and fierce fighting over the last few days in the streets of Kisangani. The fighting is between Rwandan and Ugandan regular forces backing competing factions of the rebel Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD). The factions are headed by rebel leaders Emile Illunga, who is backed by Rwanda and Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, who is supported by Uganda.

The headquarters of the Wamba faction is at the Hotel Wagenia, located in central Kisangani, the third largest Congolese city and home to about a million inhabitants. Residents in this heavily populated area are thus placed in a deadly crossfire zone. Dozens of civilians are believed to have died already and many more were reportedly wounded as the hotel came under heavy attack on Tuesday. The city streets remained deserted as a tense truce prevailed on Wednesday.

This confrontation between Rwanda and Uganda and their respective rebel allies occurred in the middle of what was supposed to be a truce allowing the vaccination against polio and other deadly childhood diseases for Congolese children in Kisangani and the eastern province of Congo. The Congolese government had agreed to the vaccination campaign in rebel-held areas, and all parties had endorsed a vaccination truce. The fighting this week in Kisangani trapped hundreds of women and children in vaccination centers as the streets turned into battlefields.

"The war had already reduced the population in Kisangani to grinding poverty, said Suliman Baldo, the Congo researcher at the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch. "The parties to the current fighting are placing civilians in mortal danger -- with food, medical supplies and other essentials reaching dangerously low levels."

Human Rights Watch condemned the callous disregard for civilian life shown by Rwandan and Ugandan forces and their allies in the current crisis in Kisangani. "International humanitarian law provides for the protection of civilians and materials essential to their survival, including electric power, foodstuffs and drinking water," noted Baldo.

Human Rights Watch urged Rwanda and Uganda to prohibit their troops and allies in Kisangani from attacking civilians or structures and supplies essential to the survival of the civilian population. It urged the warring parties to strictly enforce the truce declared between them so that stranded civilians could reach safety and health workers could treat the wounded and bury the dead. The organization urged the international community and humanitarian agencies to intervene more forcefully to alleviate the suffering of the civilian population in Kisangani.

The fighting originally erupted over which rebel faction was qualified to sign a cease-fire agreement purporting to end to the year-old war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The government of President Kabila and three southern African governments backing Kabila's forces against the RCD signed the agreement on July 10, as did Rwanda and Uganda. Rivalry between the two rebel factions prevented the RCD from joining the truce.

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