

CRACKDOWN ON CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS IN EASTERN CONGO

Activists Routinely Detained, Threatened, and Whipped by Rebels Controlling Eastern Congo

(New York, February 2, 2000) Human Rights Watch today condemned the ongoing crackdown by authorities of the rebel Congolese Rally for Democracy against civil society activists, and particularly human rights defenders in areas under rebel control in eastern Congo. Human Rights Watch called upon the RCD to immediately and unconditionally release all detained activists, and to allow the local human rights organisations and other non-governmental associations in eastern Congo to express their views openly and to operate freely.

Background:

Outspoken and courageous members of civil society in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are again being threatened and attacked by the authorities of the rebel Congolese Rally for Democracy, (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD), which is fighting against the government of President Laurent-Désiré Kabila and has taken control of large parts of eastern DRC with significant backing from the Rwandese government.

On 29 January 2000, three members of civil society in Bukavu, South Kivu were arrested and taken to the Agence nationale de renseignements (AIR), the security service, in Bukavu. Two of them remain in detention: Patient Bagenda Balagizi is one of the main figures of the civil society and chairing an anti-poverty organisation, the Comité Anti-Bwaki; Gustave Lunjwere is a church leader. The two men are accused of mobilising the population and distributing tracts for a general strike to protest the lack of payment of wages, the taxation by the Rwandese, and the continuing presence in eastern Congo of foreign Rwandan and Ugandan troops. Despite the arrests and threats by the RCD against several suspected protest leaders, the strike took place peacefully on 31 January 2000 in Bukavu.

Human rights activists are also being targeted in the Kivu region. On 16 January 2000 in the morning, security forces of the RCD arrested at her home Ms. Immaculée Birhaheka, President of the leading women's group Promotion and Support of Women's Initiatives (PAIF) in Goma. She was taken to the "Bureau 2" detention center in Goma where she was whipped with a piece of tire. Her colleague Jeannine Mukanirwa, Vice President of PAIF, was arrested the same day. Several other women detained at the Bureau 2 were beaten during their detention, and some had to be transferred to hospital. Immaculée Birhaheka was released on the same day but received further visits by RCD soldiers at her house, threatening her and demanding money. Jeannine Mukanirwa was released on 18 January.

The arrest of the two women's rights activists was apparently linked to Mrs Mukanirwa's leading role in organising a peace movement that brings together groups from rebel-held and areas controlled by the government of president Kabila. In December 1999, Mrs Mukanirwa had traveled from eastern DRC to Kinshasa to participate in a civil society meeting. She also

publicly denounced the killings of civilians by the RCD, in particular reports that twelve women and two men were buried alive in mid November 1999 in Mwenga, South Kivu.

Over the past few months, the RCD authorities repeatedly cracked down on human rights groups investigating and denouncing abuses committed by their forces. In August 1999, two independent journalists and a human rights activist from Héritiers de la Justice, a leading human rights association based in Bukavu, South Kivu, were detained for several days. In early January 2000, several members of Héritiers de la Justice were summoned because the organisation had investigated reports of killings of civilians in Mwenga, South Kivu.

Human Rights Watch calls upon the RCD to immediately and unconditionally release all detained civil society and human rights activists. Human Rights Watch urges the RCD to allow the local human rights organisations and other non-governmental associations in eastern DRC to express their views openly and to operate freely, including by granting them access to sites of reported killings. The RCD should bring to justice all perpetrators of ill-treatment, torture and summary executions in its ranks. The RCD should make it clear to all its combatants that human rights abuses will be punished.

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