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## Eastern Congo: Rebels' Persecution of Rights Activists

(New York, August 21, 2001) -- The Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD-Goma), a rebel group based in eastern Congo, has stepped up abuse of civil society activists, Human Rights Watch charged today.

Civil society leaders are set to play an important part in the inter-Congolese dialogue meant to bring peace to the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). As preparatory discussions for the dialogue opened yesterday in Gaborone, Human Rights Watch denounced the rebel authorities for having detained, beaten, and threatened leaders of civil society. RCD-Goma also initially delayed, but later authorized the departure of Gervais Chirhalirwa, leader of a coalition of civil society groups in Bukavu, who was to attend the meeting.

"Just as the international community is inviting Congolese leaders of civil society to say what they think is needed for peace, the RCD is trying to shut them up," said Alison DesForges, Senior Advisor for the Great Lakes region with the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch.

On August 9 agents of the RCD Department of Security and Intelligence abducted Pastor Claude Olenga, head of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Kisangani, and took him to their office where they forced him to disrobe and beat him severely. They interrogated him about the content of radio and television programs that he had broadcast on Amani, a station owned by the Catholic Church, and about contacts with other activists and the Archbishop of Kisangani. When released later that day, Olenga was ordered to keep silent about his ordeal.

Congolese activists have campaigned for the demilitarization of Kisangani, the second largest Congolese city. RCD troops have thus far refused to quit the city as called for by the U.N. Security Council, delaying the arrival there of U.N.

peacekeeping forces known as MONUC. Kisangani may serve as the site for the inter-Congolese dialogue. In 2000, Rwanda, which backs the RCD, and Uganda fought for the control of Kisangani, killing hundreds of civilians and causing great property damage. Kisangani activists are demanding that the two governments pay reparations, as urged also by the U.N. Security Council.

Activists have also delivered information about human rights abuses by the RCD to visiting foreign dignitaries, including the U.N. Special Rapporteur for the DRC and the Belgian Prime Minister. In addition, they have called repeatedly for an international court to prosecute war crimes committed in the DRC war.

To silence and isolate critical activists, local RCD authorities denounced them on the radio and in public rallies as informants and agents of hostile foreigners. They also prohibited activists from traveling and sent soldiers to intimidate them with nightly visits to their homes. Among those so harassed were Dismas Kitenge, chairman of the Lotus Group, Jean-Pierre Badideke of Justice and Liberation, Firmin Yangambi Libote, head of Peace on Earth, Floribert Ngongo, a journalist active with Lotus, and Abisa Bokanga, coordinator of a civil society coalition.

RCD authorities in Uvira, South Kivu, have also detained, beaten, and threatened local leaders whom they charge with supporting the Mai-Mai, a local militia fighting to expel foreigners from the Congo. When opponents of the RCD disrupted a rally meant to celebrate the third anniversary of the start of the rebellion on August 2, local authorities detained scores of alleged Mai-Mai accomplices, among them staff of Elimu and the Action Committee for Integrated Development, local civil society groups. At least two of the detainees were beaten, one so severely as to require hospitalization. Prominent activists were soon released, but others remain detained in harsh conditions.

"If the inter-Congolese dialogue is going to work," said Des Forges, "activists--like leaders of the political opposition--must be free to talk to each other, to express their ideas publicly, and to travel from place to place. RCD-Goma must guarantee these basic rights, even to those who hold opinions different from their own."

Human Rights Watch called on the RCD-Goma to put an immediate end to the harassment and threats of civil society and rights activists, and in particular to immediately release those still detained for no reason other than their opinion and activities they undertook in fulfillment of the mandate of their organizations. The RCD-Goma should investigate all reports of torture and ill-treatment of detainees and hold those responsible accountable.