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## Rwanda: Rules Can Restrict Abuses *But More Protections for Child Soldiers Needed*

(New York, December 20, 2001) -- Both Rwandan government troops and adversary rebel forces of the Army for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALIR) have given civilians greater protection in the conflict in Rwanda's northwest in 2001, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today.

As these forces continue to confront each other in the eastern Congo, Human Rights Watch called on both sides to impose the same discipline on their combatants in any new clashes.

"Both sides have shown that they can make their combatants respect the rules of war when they believe it is in their interest to do so," said Alison Des Forges, senior advisor to the Africa division of Human Rights Watch.

In contrast to previous combat in northwestern Rwanda where thousands of civilians were slain by both government army and rebel forces, the most recent episode inside Rwanda of the ongoing central African war cost relatively few civilian lives.

The report, "Rwanda: Observing the Rules of War?" documents the findings of field research into combat in the northwest of Rwanda from May to July, based on interviews with civilians, combatants, and former combatants. Evidence shows that both government and rebel forces imposed new rules restricting attacks on civilians in the internal conflict, enforcing these through disciplinary measures. In stark contrast, the new rules did not apply to fighting by the Rwandan army and its proxies in eastern Congo's Kivu region or to ALIR's forces there. ALIR forces inside Rwanda also persisted in past patterns of looting and the use of child soldiers.



Human Rights Watch researchers received reports of Rwandan troops killing people who were traveling in the company of rebel combatants but no accounts of reprisal attacks against local residents. ALIR combatants killed at least ten civilians, mostly in the course of looting, but did not target civilians in general, nor Tutsi in particular. ALIR combatants are often identified with the forces that executed the 1994 genocide that killed at least half a million Tutsi in Rwanda. Some ALIR leaders were officers in units of the former Rwandan army and in militia that participated in the genocide. But most ALIR combatants are of a later generation and were not part of the genocidal forces.

ALIR continues to recruit and sometimes abduct children for military service, including some as young as ten years old. Several dozen children in ALIR forces were killed in recent military operations and nearly three hundred were captured by the Rwandan army. ALIR leaders have said that they have banned the use of child soldiers in accord with international humanitarian law, but in this case they have not effectively enforced their orders.

“Both sides should continue and extend more careful observance of international humanitarian law,” said Des Forges. “Let’s see them apply the rules about child soldiers as well as rules about not attacking civilians. And let’s see them enforce the rules of war in the Congo where combatants of both sides continue to commit abuses devastating to the local population.”

Until December 20, the report “Rwanda: Observing the Rules of War?” can be found at <http://docs.hrw.org/embargo/rwanda/> with the username: ‘wr2002’ and the password: ‘2002’.

Beginning December 20, the report will be found at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/rwanda2/>.