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Congo: UN Must Protect Civilians Under Threat in Ituri Fighting Escalates in Power Vacuum

(New York, May 8, 2003) — The United Nations Observer Mission in Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) must urgently protect civilians threatened by renewed violence in the war-torn region of Ituri in northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Human Rights Watch said today.

Following yesterday's withdrawal of Ugandan troops from the provincial capital of Bunia, Hema militias began fighting Lendu and Ngiti militias for control of the town. Thousands of combatants armed with firearms, spears, axes and machetes streamed into the town as panicked civilians fled or sought refuge in one of the sites where MONUC troops have been posted. Witnesses in Bunia reported fighting in two suburbs and near the airport. Telephone conversations with persons in the area were interrupted by bursts of gunfire.

"The Security Council has given MONUC a mandate to 'protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence,'" said Alison Des Forges, senior adviser to the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch. "But to do that, it must have enough troops and equipment."

The Hema and Lendu have been fighting since 1999 in a conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced some 500,000 people. In a fast-changing scene, the groups have allied with several different Congolese rebel groups and with foreign backers, including Uganda and Rwanda. With an agenda of apparent ethnic purification, the people of one group have massacred people of the other, yielding a spiral of deadly reprisal attacks.

The United Nations recently increased its troops in the area from eight to about 400, anticipating that fighting might resume with the departure of the Ugandans who have exercised de facto control in the region since 1999. The Ugandans left after a series of peace deals called for their withdrawal. A civilian administration set up recently by agreement among the various parties is supposed to govern the area but appears unable to control the deteriorating situation. According to preliminary reports, some MONUC soldiers were trying to restore order by conducting patrols and setting up roadblocks but they were far outnumbered by militia forces.

Human Rights Watch urged the Security Council and the UN. peacekeeping office to urgently send MONUC reinforcements to Ituri from elsewhere in the DRC. As of March 31, there were 3,805 MONUC troops in the DRC. MONUC had been expected to deploy another 2,000 troops in the area in the coming months.

“People in Ituri can’t wait months for help to come,” said Des Forges. “They’re looking to the UN. and to the rest of us for protection now.”

For more information on human rights in DRC, please see:
<http://www.hrw.org/africa/congo.php>