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D.R. Congo: Uganda Must Protect Civilians in Ituri

(New York, April 8, 2003) — Ugandan forces and their allies must prevent the killing of civilians in Ituri in northeastern Congo, Human Rights Watch said in an open letter to President Museveni of Uganda today after information of yet another massacre of civilians surfaced over the weekend.

The killing of civilians in Drodro and Blukwa in Ituri, northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) on April 3 is the latest in a surge of killings and other serious human rights abuses that have taken place in the area. Reports from the field suggest that Lendu militias, who may have been supported by Ugandan soldiers, attacked remnants of the recently ousted Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC) Hema forces. The operation degenerated into a killing spree targeting primarily Hema, and hundreds were reportedly killed.

“This massacre follows a horrific pattern we’ve seen in Ituri in recent months, where military operations often turn into the slaughter of civilians,” said Alison Des Forges, senior advisor to the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch. “The Ugandan forces have a responsibility to prevent such killings by their own troops and their allies.”

Human Rights Watch research recently conducted in Ituri shows that at least 4,000 people have lost their lives in ethnic killings over the past eight months on both sides of the ethnic divide. Uganda’s volatile sponsorship of a variety of ethnic militias in Ituri has inflamed the situation.

Human Rights Watch has urged the government of Uganda to:

- Give clear instructions to Ugandan commanders and those of their allies in Ituri, specifically the Lendu militias and other elements of Front for Peace and Integration in Ituri (FIPI), to respect fully the provisions of international humanitarian law.
- Launch an investigation into any violations of humanitarian law that may have been committed by Ugandan troops or those of their allies in Ituri since 1999, including the recent Drodro massacre and the attacks on Bunia on March 6, 2003 as well as August 9, 2002, and hold those responsible accountable.
- Allow full access to independent human rights investigators looking into allegations of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law.

“The people of Ituri have suffered enough and must be spared the terrible consequences of further military actions and killings where they often pay the highest price,” said Des Forges.

To read the Human Rights Watch letter, please see:
<http://www.hrw.org/press/2003/congo0407ltr.htm>.