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Displaced Congolese Face Being Returned to Harm's Way

Thousands Flee Violence in DR Congo's Djugu Territory

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Since mid-December, unidentified assailants have killed more than 260 people and burned thousands of homes in the Democratic Republic of Congo's northeastern Djugu territory in Ituri province. The atrocities we have documented include massacres, rapes, and decapitation. More than 200,000 people have fled their homes, many to neighboring Uganda.



A woman walks at an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Bunia, Ituri province, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, April 12, 2018.

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The surge of deadly violence seems to have erupted out of nowhere, tearing through a once-embattled area that had been largely peaceful in recent years.

Last Sunday, the provincial governor, Jefferson Abdallah Penembaka, called on tens of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) living in two makeshift camps in Bunia, the provincial capital, to return home, assuring them there were no longer “any concerns.” The Congolese army’s chief of staff, Gen. Didier Etumba proclaimed that “the security conditions [have] returned to normal” in Djugu. Several displaced people at one camp told us that visiting provincial officials warned them yesterday that “the site must be empty by next week.”

But civilians now in Djugu tell a very different story. “I am in Drodro [village], and we cannot go further than the parish for fear of being killed,” one man who just returned home said yesterday. “Even if the military and police are here with us, we continue to fear for our safety.”

Just in the past few weeks, at least 11 people were reportedly killed and 43 houses burned in Djugu territory.

Even before the government began urging displaced people to go home, the abysmal conditions in the camps had compelled many to leave. “We have nothing to eat and there’s no hope left,” one camp representative said. “Those who leave don’t do it because they want to, but because they have no other choice.”

Local authorities announced on Wednesday that 20,000 IDPs had already left the camps, but camp representatives told us that most have refused to leave the capital. Many fear that the government might demolish the camps by force, as it has done in North Kivu province over the past several years.

Instead of proclaiming all concerns to be over and forcing displaced people to return home, government officials should ensure that the basic needs of IDPs are met in the camps, while working to secure Djugu territory and bring those responsible for the atrocities to justice.

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