

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	436
Land:	DR. Congo
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	DR Congo: Protect Civilians in Beni from Attack
Udgivet:	7. oktober 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	9. januar 2017



DR Congo: Protect Civilians in Beni from Attack

Publisher [Human Rights Watch](#)

Publication Date 7 October 2016

Cite as Human Rights Watch, *DR Congo: Protect Civilians in Beni from Attack*, 7 October 2016, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/57fb738c4.html> [accessed 15 December 2016]

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Unidentified fighters have killed nearly 700 civilians in a series of massacres that began two years ago in Beni territory in eastern [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), Human Rights Watch said today.

In one of the largest recent attacks, on August 13, 2016, fighters killed at least 40 people and set fire to several homes in the Rwangoma neighborhood in the town of Beni, despite a large presence of Congolese army soldiers and United Nations peacekeepers.

"The Congolese government and UN peacekeepers need a new strategy to protect civilians in Beni and to hold those responsible for attacks to account," said [Ida Sawyer](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "After two years of brutal killings, many people in Beni live in fear of the next attack and have all but lost hope that anyone can end the carnage."

Human Rights Watch research and credible reports from Congolese activists and the UN indicate that armed fighters have killed at least 680 civilians in at least 120 attacks in Beni territory since October 2014. Victims and witnesses described brutal attacks in which assailants methodically hacked people to death with axes and machetes or shot them dead. The actual number of victims could be much higher.

It is unclear who is carrying out the attacks. The Congolese government blames one armed group that has been active in the area, while other sources have also implicated other groups and army officers in some of the attacks.

The Human Rights Watch findings are based on five research trips to Beni territory since November 2014, and interviews with over 160 victims and witnesses to attacks, as well as with Congolese army and government officials, UN officials, and others.

A 10-year-old boy said that he had been taken hostage during the Rwangoma attack and witnessed several killings: "Men in military uniform came and took me and my big brother and grandmother. ... They tied us up and made us walk with them. Along the way, they started to kill some of us,

including my 16-year-old brother. They killed him and some of the others with axes and machetes."

Congolese army soldiers and UN peacekeepers only deployed to the area after the attack had ended and the assailants had long fled.

Human Rights Watch documented other incidents in which community members had alerted the army, but it did not respond.

In one case, on July 4, 2016, four local farmers warned the army about the suspicious presence of armed men near the town of Oicha, 30 kilometers north of Beni. The farmers later told Human Rights Watch how an army officer responded: "We have taken all necessary measures to respond to all eventualities. Go home but don't tell anyone. Don't scare people for no reason." The next morning, unidentified fighters fired shots in Oicha. Later, the bodies of nine gunshot victims were found close to two army positions in town.

An army officer based in Oicha told Human Rights Watch that some soldiers were angry when their superior ordered them to leave a nearby position and not engage the assailants as the attack was unfolding.

Senior UN and Congolese army officials have repeatedly asserted that the attacks in Beni territory have been carried out by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a Ugandan-led Islamist rebel group that has been in the area since 1996. Human Rights Watch research and findings by the [UN Group of Experts on Congo](#), the New York-based [Congo Research Group](#), and Congolese human rights organizations, however, point to the involvement of other armed groups and certain Congolese army officers in planning and carrying out some of these attacks.

ADF fighters from Uganda and Congo have been responsible for scores of kidnappings, mostly for recruitment or carrying goods in recent years, Human Rights Watch said. Civilians who had earlier been held in ADF camps [told](#) Human Rights Watch they saw deaths by crucifixion, executions of those trying to escape, and people with their mouths sewn shut for allegedly lying to their captors. In January 2014, the Congolese army officially opened a new phase of military operations against the ADF with some limited logistical support from the UN Stabilization Mission in Congo, MONUSCO, and its "Intervention Brigade," a 3,000-member force created in mid-2013 to carry out military operations against armed groups. The series of massacres began several months after the Congolese army pushed the ADF out of their main bases.

The [UN Group of Experts](#) found that Brig. Gen. Muhindo Akili Mundos, the Congolese army commander responsible for military operations against the ADF from August 2014 to June 2015, had recruited ADF fighters, former fighters from local armed groups known as Mai Mai, and others to establish a new armed group. This group was implicated in some of the massacres in Beni territory that began in October 2014, according to the Group of Experts.

In a March 2016 report, the [Congo Research Group](#) found that certain army elements as well as armed groups other than the ADF might be involved in the massacres.

The forces responsible, chains of command, and motivations behind these attacks remain unclear. Congo's international partners should support credible government efforts to determine responsibility for the attacks and to improve protection for civilians, Human Rights Watch said.

Given the alleged involvement of some Congolese army officers in the massacres, MONUSCO should ensure full respect for the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy when supporting Congolese army operations and withhold all support to units or commanders that may be

implicated in the attacks or other serious human rights violations. UN peacekeepers should also improve ties with local communities and immediately deploy to threatened areas.

Human Rights Watch urged the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to collect information to determine whether an ICC investigation into alleged crimes in the Beni area is warranted. The ICC opened an investigation in Congo in June 2004, and has jurisdiction over serious international crimes committed on Congolese territory. The ICC can step in when national courts are unwilling or unable to prosecute grave crimes in violation of international law.

The frequent massacres in Beni have fueled popular anger at the Congolese government for failing to stop the killings, prompting numerous city-wide shutdowns or "*villes mortes*" (dead cities), peaceful marches, and some incidents of vigilante violence in the east. Protests against the Beni killings have in some cases been linked to demonstrations against election delays and attempts to extend President Joseph Kabila's presidency beyond the end of his constitutionally mandated two-term limit, which ends on December 19. In many cases, government officials and security forces have [responded](#) to protests with brutal repression.

"With Congo embroiled in a broader political crisis, the government is less capable of keeping the attacks in Beni from spiraling out of control," Sawyer said. "Sustained, high-level international attention is needed now to help end the killings in Beni and to identify and bring to justice those responsible for the attacks."

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