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Millions need urgent humanitarian assistance in eastern DR Congo

This is a summary of what was said by UNHCR spokesperson Boris Cheshirkov – to whom quoted text may be attributed – at today's press briefing at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

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A Congolese family displaced by violence in North Kivu province pictured in Kibarizo village in September 2020. © UNHCR/Justin Kasereka

UNHCR and its partners recorded more than 1,200 civilian deaths and 1,100 rapes this year in the two most affected provinces of North Kivu and Ituri. UNHCR has recorded 25,000 human rights abuses this year. In total, more than a million Congolese have been internally displaced in the east of the country in 2021.

Repeated displacement has put enormous pressure on those forced to flee and the host families that have taken in 94 per cent of DRC's forcibly displaced population. Host families have shown huge generosity towards their compatriots but are exhausted and in need of support if they are to continue as first responders.

Harsh living conditions and a lack of food often trigger a premature return by displaced people to their place of origin, further exposing them to abuse and violence. Returnees account for 65 per cent of the serious human rights abuses recorded by UNHCR and partners.

Attacks attributed to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) armed group have increased in brutality since late 2020, and the frequency of killings of civilians has not abated despite the state of siege declared in early May 2021 to counter the activities of these armed groups. On 3 September, armed men identified as members of the ADF raided a village in Irumu Territory, killed 15 civilians, set fire to 10 houses and kidnapped two women.

On 6 September, an armed group reportedly raped 10 displaced women in Djugu Territory, Ituri province. UNHCR and partners took the women to the nearest hospital where they received psychosocial and medical support.

Following the state of siege, North Kivu and Ituri Provinces are now led by military governments, under which the national army has ramped up its operations and military tribunals have replaced civil courts. Some armed groups, seeing their territory shrink, have surrendered. Others counter military operations with reprisals against villages and individuals they perceive as supporting the government. Despite government efforts to reduce the abuses of armed groups, our teams continue to hear horrific accounts of sexual violence, extortion, and looting.

UNHCR reiterates its call for urgent measures to protect civilians. We support local authorities and civil society groups who respond repeatedly to recurrent forced displacement, and continue to provide lifesaving aid, psychosocial and other support to people in need.

Funding for this humanitarian crisis remains critically low, with the result that UNHCR is only able to respond to a small fraction of the population in urgent need.

UNHCR is calling on the international community for more support. Less than four months from the end of the year, we have received just 51 per cent of the US\$205 million required in 2021 for the operation in DRC.

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