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OHCHR – UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Author)

UN expert expresses extreme concern for safety of human rights defenders in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

GENEVA – As the situation continues to deteriorate in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, a UN expert today called for urgent, practical support for human rights defenders in the region.

“Human rights defenders in the eastern DRC are currently at extreme risk of reprisals for their human rights work. They need help now, including support for temporary relocation along with their families,” said Mary Lawlor, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.

As the Rwanda-backed armed group M23 have continued to advance in the region since their offensive began earlier this year, those who have documented and denounced their violations have been directly targeted.

“In recent weeks I have received countless alerts requesting support and spoken directly with defenders on the ground,” Lawlor said. “They are living in fear and the risks are real. Recently a defender informed me that the M23 rebels had drawn up lists of human rights defenders to apprehend in areas under their control.”

The Special Rapporteur said she had received credible reports of human rights defenders being detained incommunicado, forcibly disappeared and tortured in Rutshuru and Masisi in North Kivu, while at least six human rights defenders are reported missing following their attempt to flee Goma after the city was taken by M23.

“Some human rights defenders have had no choice but to flee their homes. Those who do make it to other cities are left without the resources to find shelter or meet their daily needs,” the Special Rapporteur said. “Others have remained in areas under the rebels' control, but fear greatly for their safety. One defender asked me how they could continue to hide as the M23 began to carry out a census in Goma.”

Since mass breakouts from prisons in Goma, Kalehe, Bukavu and Uvira, thousands of detainees including violent criminals and armed groups leaders condemned for serious human rights violations amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity have escaped. Some of them are threatening human rights defenders who provided medical, psychosocial and legal assistance to victims and witnesses who testified during the trials. Now that human rights defenders are threatened and fear retaliations, victims have no one to turn to.

In an already febrile environment for human rights defenders, the Special Rapporteur emphasised the grave risk of sexual violence faced by women defenders.

“We know that conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence in eastern DRC is rampant, and that women who take a stand against human rights violations in such contexts, and become visible through their work, often bear the brunt of this,” Lawlor said. “It is appalling to think that 25 years on from the groundbreaking Security Council resolution on women, peace and security, these events are unfolding before the eyes of a largely apathetic world.”

The Special Rapporteur also drew attention to the risks faced by human rights defenders in isolated and rural areas, including killings, enforced disappearances and abductions, and highlighted the psychological impact of the situation on those on the ground.

“Defenders were already under threat in the region – from both the government and armed groups – but as one woman human rights defender described it when speaking with me, there is no let-up now, the insecurity is constant, and there is no protection,” the Special Rapporteur said.

“I call upon the international community to recognise our collective responsibility towards these human rights defenders and strongly urge Member States to seek them out and explore all avenues for rapid assistance in order to avoid the situation deteriorating further.”

The Special Rapporteur is in contact with the Government on the issue.

Mary Lawlor is the [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#).

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Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo: Human rights defenders at risk for reprisals for documenting human rights violations; according to reports, the armed group M23 has compiled lists of human rights defenders to be apprehended

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