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Rogue Leaders, Rebels Forcibly Recruit Youth

Tensions Rise as Armed Groups Expand Their Ranks

December 20, 2010

(Goma) - Rogue Congolese army officers and armed groups in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo are forcibly recruiting and training for combat hundreds of young men and boys in new efforts to expand their ranks, Human Rights Watch said today. The wave of military recruitment, which began around September 2010, signals a possible collapse of eastern Congo's peace process.

Human Rights Watch interviewed dozens of escaped recruits, as well as teachers, local leaders, and child protection workers, who described the forced or underage recruitment of more than 1,000 young men and boys since September. At least 261 were under age 18. Many of the children were re-recruited after previously escaping or being demobilized.

"Armed groups in eastern Congo are pulling youth from schools, homes, and fields and forcing them to fight," said Anneke Van Woudenberg, senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The Congolese government should urgently stop this recruitment and prosecute those responsible."

Domestic and international law applicable in the Congo prohibits forced recruitment and the recruitment of children under 18 into armed groups.

Recruitment by Former Rebels

The Congolese army general and former rebel leader Bosco Ntaganda and officers loyal to him, including Lt. Col. Innocent Zimurinda and Col. Baudouin Ngaruye, have been responsible for the forced recruitment of hundreds of young men and boys in recent months in North and South Kivu provinces, witnesses told Human Rights Watch. At least 121 of the new recruits are children, under age 18, although reports received by Human Rights Watch indicate that there are probably many more.

Ntaganda was the military leader of the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), a former rebel group supported by neighboring Rwanda, who fought the Congolese army beginning in 2006. In January 2009, following an agreement between the presidents of Congo and Rwanda, the CNDP agreed to give up its rebellion and integrate into the Congolese army's ranks. The integration of the former enemies has been fraught with continuing tensions.

A 17-year-old boy from the Nyanzale area said that the Congolese army officers who forcibly recruited him previously belonged to the CNDP and told him he was joining Ntaganda's army. He was then put in a prison and only allowed out once a day for military training. "The officers said we wouldn't fight the government until General Ntaganda gives the order," he told a Human Rights Watch researcher, after he managed to escape. "Once Ntaganda gives the order to start the war, we will start. Until then, we wait."

Witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that since early October, former CNDP commanders integrated into the Congolese army had called at least seven meetings for young men and boys in the Ufumandu and Ziralo areas, on the pretext of discussing development issues. Those who attended the meetings soon learned that the real motive was to recruit them into the CNDP to fight the government. They were told they would be given US\$60 each with an increase in salary and other benefits "as soon as the war is won."

In the Kitchanga area in mid-November, officers under the command of Lt. Col. Zimurinda visited schools, making lists of male students, ages 15 to 20. In subsequent weeks, Congolese army soldiers loyal to Ntaganda took the youths away from schools, their homes, fields, or as they walked to and from school. In Charamba village, on November 15, seven young men were taken from a football field before a match and have not been seen since.

Those who resist risk severe punishment or even death. On November 23, in Burungu, former CNDP soldiers shot a 22-year-old man when he tried to escape. He died just after reaching a hospital. In other cases, those who resisted were badly beaten, thrown in prisons for several days or more, and then forced to join.

Many youth in the affected regions are now hiding in the forests or trying to flee to larger towns to escape the forced recruitment, witnesses told Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch research found that Ntaganda and other former CNDP officers loyal to him have been responsible for recruitment in the Ufumandu, Kitchanga, Kalembe, and Mpati areas of Masisi territory (North Kivu); the Bwiza and Nyanzale areas of Rutshuru territory (North Kivu); and the Ziralo area of Kalehe territory (South Kivu). Military training for the new recruits is being conducted in Bwiza, Muheto, Nyamitaba, and Ufumandu.

Ntaganda had previously been implicated in forcibly recruiting and training children and young men for combat. In 2006, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for him for war crimes of enlisting and conscripting children as soldiers and using them in hostilities in the Ituri district of eastern Congo. The Congolese government has failed to act on the arrest warrant, claiming that arresting him would harm the peace process.

Congolese army officers in North Kivu informed Human Rights Watch that they have received reports of new recruitment by forces loyal to Ntaganda and have opened investigations. They said that they have sent warnings to officers under their command that any forced recruitment will not be tolerated.

"It is shocking that an individual wanted by the ICC continues to commit the very crimes for which he is charged," Van Woudenberg said. "The Congolese government should not only end the illegal recruiting, but immediately arrest Ntaganda, instead of hiding behind a facade that he's necessary for the peace process."

Recruitment by the FDLR and Other Armed Groups

Human Rights Watch has also documented recent cases of forced or under-age recruitment by the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a predominately Rwandan Hutu rebel group, some of whose leaders participated in the genocide in Rwanda. Human Rights Watch research identified at least 83 Congolese children under 18, some as young as 14, recently recruited by the FDLR. Many were previously with the FDLR, managed to escape, and were targeted again when they returned to their families.

A 17-year-old boy interviewed by Human Rights Watch who had been a child soldier with the FDLR and allied groups since age 7, managed to escape in August and rejoin his family. Only a few months later, in November, he was forcibly recruited again by the FDLR. He escaped a second time a few weeks later.

"They grabbed me while I was walking home, tied me up, and put me in a prison," he told Human Rights Watch, describing his second forcible recruitment. "Then after three days, they gave me a uniform and a weapon... I was eventually able to flee when they sent me on my own to steal a goat. Many other Congolese children are still with the FDLR, and they want to escape but they're scared. The commanders will kill anyone they suspect of wanting to flee."

have recently been recruited by these armed groups.

Human Rights Watch interviewed a 14-year-old boy who recently escaped the APCLS, after being with the group since he was 6 years old. "There are children my age or younger at each APCLS position," he said. "Children who refuse to become soldiers are killed."

Child Protection Workers Express Alarm

Child protection workers told Human Rights Watch that there has been a significant increase in the numbers of children in eastern Congo fleeing recruitment since September, especially those who were previously demobilized and are once again being targeted. Child protection workers have registered at least 193 such cases of re-recruitment since September.

Many former rebels who were integrated into the Congolese army in early 2009 have hidden children within their ranks rather than demobilize them. According to a recent report from the United Nations Group of Experts on the Congo, child protection officers have not been allowed to screen nearly two-thirds of the Congolese army soldiers involved in joint military operations with the UN, to ensure that child combatants do not take part.

In January 2009, the Congolese government adopted the Child Protection Code, which prohibits recruiting children under age 18 into armed forces and groups. Recruiters face 20 years in prison, but few have been tried on these charges. Congo has also ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which prohibits recruiting people under 18 for armed groups.

"Armed groups and rogue elements of the Congolese army repeatedly prey on boys, pressganging them into military service," Van Woudenberg said. "These children desperately need the protection of their government and UN peacekeepers."