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DRC: inter-ethnic violence in Ituri may constitute “crimes against humanity” – UN report

KINSHASA/GENEVA (10 January 2020) – Killings, rapes and other forms of violence targeting the Hema community in the Democratic Republic of Congo province of Ituri may amount to crimes against humanity, a UN report released on Friday said.

An investigation conducted by the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO)* in the DRC established that at least 701 people have been killed and 168 injured during inter-ethnic tensions between the Hema and Lendu communities, in the territories of Djugu and Mahagi, from December 2017 to September 2019. In addition, at least 142 people have been subjected to acts of sexual violence, the report said. Most of the victims are members of the Hema community.

Since September 2018, Lendu armed groups have increasingly become more organized in carrying out attacks against the Hema and members of other ethnic groups such as the Alur, the investigators said. Among their objectives is to take control of the land of the Hema communities and their associated resources, they added.

The report documents numerous cases of women being raped, of children – some in school uniforms – being killed, and of looting and burning of villages. On 10 June 2019, in the district of Torges, a Hema man who was trying to prevent armed assailants from raping his wife witnessed his 8-year-old son being beheaded.

"The barbarity that characterizes these attacks – including the beheading of women and children with machetes, the dismemberment and removal of body parts of the victims as trophies of war – reflects the desire of the attackers to inflict lasting trauma to the Hema communities and to force them to flee and not return to their villages," the report said.

"The violence documented... could contain some elements of crimes against humanity through murder, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, pillage and persecution."

Schools and health clinics have been attacked and destroyed. The report said most attacks occurred in June around the harvest period, and in December during the sowing season. "This makes it more difficult for the Hema to cultivate their fields and exacerbates their lack of food," the report said.

Since February 2018, almost 57,000 people have taken refuge in Uganda and more than 556,000 have fled to neighbouring regions, according to the UN refugee agency, UNHCR. Several camps and villages where the Hema have taken refuge have been stormed, burned and destroyed by Lendu armed groups, the report said.

UN investigators also documented, between December 2017 and May 2018, acts of reprisal by some members of the Hema communities, including the burning of villages and isolated attacks targeting the Lendu.

Army and police forces deployed since February 2018 have failed to stop the violence, the report stated, adding that the security forces themselves had committed abuses such as extrajudicial executions, sexual violence, arbitrary arrests and detention. Two police officers and two soldiers have been convicted by Congolese courts.

The UN Joint Human Rights Office recommends that the DRC authorities address the root causes of the conflict, such as access to resources including land, and maintain ongoing reconciliation efforts between the two communities. It also calls for a strengthened presence of state institutions and armed forces in the area to ensure the security of all communities and their peaceful cohabitation.

The report urged the authorities to conduct an independent and impartial investigation into the violence, in addition to ensuring the right to reparation for victims and their access to medical and psychosocial care.

ENDS

** The UN Joint Human Rights Office, which was established in February 2008, comprises the Human Rights Division of the UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) and the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights in the DRC.*

Check full report:

<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/RDC/RDCRapportpublicDjugu.pdf>

<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/RDC/CommentairesMDHrapportDjugu.pdf>

UN Human Rights, Country page - Democratic Republic of Congo
(<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AfricaRegion/Pages/CDIndex.aspx>)

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