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Ethnic Militias Attack Civilians in Katanga

(Kinshasa) – The widespread killing and displacement of civilians by ethnic militia in northern Katanga, in southeastern [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), shows the urgent need for the government to protect civilians. The government should act to address the sources of violence in the region.

Human Rights Watch interviewed survivors of one of the worst recent incidents, on April 30, 2015, when ethnic Luba fighters attacked a camp for displaced people outside the town of Nyunzu. The assailants burned the camp to the ground and killed at least 30 men, women, and children from the marginalized Batwa community, known as “Pygmy,” with machetes, arrows, and axes. Dozens of others are missing and feared dead.

“The ethnic fighting in northern Katanga has come at a terrible cost to civilians,” said [Ida Sawyer](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Congolese authorities with UN support should improve civilian protection, investigate and prosecute all those responsible for the atrocities, and address the communal tensions and discrimination that appear to have sparked the fighting.”

Since large-scale fighting broke out in 2013 between ethnic Luba and the Batwa, the United Nations (UN) has reported hundreds of civilians killed, dozens of villages burned to the ground, and tens of thousands of people displaced from their homes.

The fighting in Katanga has received little national or international attention, while the plight of Batwa communities in Congo, indigenous groups that have long been the target of discrimination from local authorities and other communities, is often ignored, Human Rights Watch said.

The Human Rights Watch findings are based on two research missions to remote parts of northern Katanga and research in the former capital of Katanga, Lubumbashi, between May and July 2015. Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 60 victims, witnesses, aid workers, rights activists, local and provincial authorities, army, police, and intelligence officers, and UN peacekeepers.

Simmering tensions between Batwa and Luba in Katanga erupted in major fighting in mid-2013 in Manono territory, after Batwa started demanding respect for their basic rights, including access to land and an end to alleged forced labor or a form of slavery. Both communities formed loosely organized militias and the fighting spread to Kabalo, Kalemie, and southern Nyunzu territories.

In January 2015, over 3,500 families fleeing violence in southern Nyunzu and Manono territories gathered outside of the town of Nyunzu. The site became known as the Vumilia 1 camp. Most camp residents were Batwa, while Luba who had fled the violence largely sought refuge with families in the surrounding community.

In the first few months of 2015, Batwa fighters known as “Perci” armed with bows and arrows and machetes brutally attacked Luba in southern Nyunzu and northern Manono territories, killing and kidnapping civilians and burning entire villages. A 12-year-old Luba boy told Human Rights Watch that during an attack in early 2015, Batwa fighters had killed seven members of his family.

After news of these attacks reached the town of Nyunzu, Luba fighters organized an attack on the Batwa in the Vumilia 1 camp. The Luba fighters, known as “Elements,” were armed with machetes, axes, and bows and arrows, wore amulets and other witchcraft symbols, and allegedly cut off the genitals of some victims.

“People started to flee, not knowing that the Elements were everywhere in the camp,” a Batwa woman told Human Rights Watch. “They started to shoot arrows at us. We had no arms to protect ourselves. They massacred us. They killed so many Pygmies. They killed us like animals, like things with no value.”

All of the makeshift homes in the camp burned to the ground, Human Rights Watch found during a visit to the camp several weeks later. Following the attack, authorities moved several thousand survivors to an abandoned factory building called Cotanga, about two kilometers away in the town of Nyunzu. On May 3, Luba fighters attacked the Cotanga site as well, wounding at least two Batwa.

Batwa have been unable to leave the Cotanga site to look for loved ones missing since April 30 or to participate in burials organized by Congolese Red Cross workers, afraid of being targeted by Luba militia surrounding the site. In early May, two Batwa men who left the Cotanga site to walk around Nyunzu town were wounded by Luba fighters.

Local authorities have warned aid workers and local human rights activists not to speak out about the attack or the number of people killed. In interviews with Human Rights Watch, local and provincial government and army officials – many of whom are Luba – sought to minimize the Vumilia 1 killings. Without backing up their claims, they said the number of Batwa killed ranged from none to four.

In the weeks following the attack, the Congolese army and police sent in reinforcements to increase security around the town. The provincial interior minister, Juvénal Kitungwa, visited the area on May 18 and 19, with Martin Kobler, the head of the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo, MONUSCO. The mission had deployed about 20 peacekeepers to the town in early April. They sent in around 40 reinforcements after the attack on April 30, but they have since been withdrawn..

In early May the authorities arrested three Batwa, including an alleged militia leader, and one alleged Luba militia leader. None have been officially charged, and it is not clear if those arrested were actually involved in the attacks.

On July 16, Katanga province was divided into four provinces as part of *découpage*, the subdivision of Congo’s former 11 provinces into 26. Nyunzu territory is part of the new Tanganyika province, in northern Katanga, an isolated and underdeveloped region that has not benefitted from the vast wealth of resources, including copper and cobalt, in southern Katanga.

“Protecting civilians from all communities who are at grave risk needs to be the government’s priority in northern Katanga,” Sawyer said. “But the issues underlying the violence won’t be resolved so long as the basic rights of the long-oppressed Batwa are not respected.”

For background on the Batwa community in Katanga, and accounts from victims and witnesses to the attack on Vumilia 1 camp and other recent violence in northern Katanga, please see below.

Accounts from Survivors of the Vumilia 1 Attack

A Batwa farmer told Human Rights Watch that Luba fighters killed her husband and other relatives:

My husband returned [to our hut] saying, “Flee! Flee! The Elements want to kill us.” Without hesitating, I took my two children and we fled toward the fields. But the Elements were there already. I saw three of them. You couldn’t see their faces because they were covered in amulets. They followed my husband and caught him. I hid in the grass with my two children, and I saw through the grass how they killed my husband. They shot an arrow into the side of his stomach, and then they hit him with an axe on the head. They cut off his genitals and removed the skin from his stomach. While they were doing this, they cried out: “You Pygmies, we will exterminate you all this year.”

The next day, the [Congolese] Red Cross started to bury the bodies. I saw my niece’s husband. He had wounds on his head and had also been killed with an axe. His daughter was killed with a knife. She had wounds on her ribs and stomach. I also saw the body of another of my brothers, his wife, and their two children.

A Batwa man said Luba militia killed his brother in the bush after the attack on the camp on April 30:

When the Elements came to set fire to the camp, my brother and I fled together into the bush. The Elements saw us and followed us. We split up and hid. The Elements didn't see me but they saw my brother. I heard how they killed him. I was not far from him. I heard when he cried out, "Forgive me! Forgive me!" And they said to him, "You thought we wouldn't catch you. We will exterminate you all."

A Batwa man who was wounded during the attack said that armed Luba killed his wife, two sons, and two daughters:

Before the camp was attacked, the camp leader had convened a meeting. I didn't go to the meeting because I was sick. After some time, I heard people running. My children and my wife also came running and told me that the Elements were in the camp and that they were killing Pygmies. So, we headed for the bush. But when we arrived there, we found ourselves face to face with the Elements. I was lucky, but I lost all my family there. They killed my wife and my two boys – one who was just 3 years old – and my two daughters. All these people were killed by arrows and axes. I was wounded too and I fell unconscious. I learned later that I was taken to the hospital [in Nyunzu] and spent four days there.

A Batwa woman said that she was afraid to look for her loved ones after the attack:

I couldn't go look for their bodies because I was afraid of being killed by the Elements. Nobody among us here can walk around looking for something outside the [Cotanga] site. The Elements can catch and kill you.

Accounts by Survivors of Batwa Militia Attacks

A 12-year-old Luba boy told Human Rights Watch that Batwa militia had killed seven members of his family in an attack on Mutabi village in southern Nyunzu territory, in early 2015:

The Pygmies said that our chief did not want them to receive humanitarian aid so they were planning to come and kill us all. I heard people say that. When they arrived, they found us in our village. They had arrows and they started to shoot at us. My father was killed by an arrow. My small brother was hit by an arrow in his stomach and also died. The Pygmies took my youngest brother, and they hit him against the ground and cracked his head. My pregnant sister was shot by arrows on her neck and hip, and she also died. My mother was also killed by an arrow. Another small brother was also shot by an arrow.

I saw this because I was hiding with one of my other brothers in the house. They told us that they would burn us in this house. We were guarded by other Pygmies, but we tried our best and we fled. Unfortunately, they saw us and shot at us with arrows. My brother was shot on his left hand and in the back. We continued to flee and they stopped chasing us. When we were deep in the forest, I carried my brother on my back. He lost a lot of blood. I didn't know how to care for him, and four days later he died.

An elderly Luba man said that his young relative, a mother of four, was killed during an attack by Batwa fighters in Makunu, a village in southern Nyunzu, in late February:

She was living with her family in Nyunzu town after she had fled attacks by the Pygmies. One day she had to return to her village to collect corn from her field. She left with two of her four children. When they got to the farm, Pygmies came and attacked them. The children were able to flee, but their mother was caught and killed by these Pygmies. Later, when we found her body, she no longer had breasts and her genitals were cut off. I was among the people that buried her.

A 40-year-old Luba farmer said that Batwa fighters attacked his family while they were fleeing their home village of Makusa, in southern Nyunzu, on February 28:

We had started to leave our village, fearing that the Pygmies could attack us like they had attacked other villages. I left with my pregnant wife and my two children toward Nyunzu town, where my parents and four of my children had already fled. On the road, in the Ngoyi forest in Kakonko, we found ourselves face to face with two Pygmies armed with bows and arrows. Without much hesitation, one pulled out an arrow. I asked him, "Why do you want to kill me?" He said, "You have to die today." He hit me on my bottom with an arrow and I fell to the ground. Then they chased my wife and children who were crying, thinking I had died. They left me there without inspecting whether I was really dead. Since then, I haven't seen my pregnant wife and my two children, and I fear they were all killed.

Threats Against Congolese Red Cross Workers and Human Rights Activists

Five health workers, civil society leaders, and human rights activists in Nyunzu told Human Rights Watch that authorities had told them not to talk about the attack on Vumilia 1 or the number of people killed.

One human rights activist said:

The authorities don't want it to be known how many people were killed. When I was collecting information among the Pygmies, I was followed by officials from the ANR [national intelligence agency], and they prohibited me from continuing what I was doing. To save my life, I abandoned it.

A health worker said:

Nobody talks about the number of dead and the authorities don't want to hear anybody reveal the secret. Pygmies can't know who is dead and who isn't dead. Since the day the camp [Vumilia 1] was set on fire, [Batwa] cannot leave the Cotanga site. If anybody dares to leave, he could be caught by the Elements and killed. The [Congolese] Red Cross and the authorities won't say anything or they'll give you a very low number [of people killed] because they don't want to make enemies. The real number of dead is frightening.

The Batwa Community in Katanga

The Batwa are indigenous, traditionally semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers. As in other parts of central Africa, the Batwa and other "Pygmy" communities have suffered systematic discrimination and exclusion from society. During the colonial period, Belgian authorities considered "Pygmies" sub-human, kidnapping their children and transporting them to zoos abroad and to the World's Fair in the United States in 1904.

Today, Batwa in Katanga are denied fair working conditions, have little to no access to land and basic services such as health and education, and have no political representation. Due to deforestation, logging, and cultivation, the Batwa's traditional way of life in Katanga and elsewhere in the country is at serious risk.

Some Congolese officials recognize that addressing the underlying discrimination against Batwa is crucial to ending the intercommunal violence. Kitungwa, Katanga's provincial interior minister, told Human Rights Watch on July 10:

The Pygmies felt like they were living under an apartheid situation. This conflict won't end today or tomorrow. It's a movement for the emancipation of a people. We won't stop the movement, but it needs to be contained. One of the solutions will be in improving access to education and access to land for the Pygmies. They're a nomadic people that lived in the bush as hunters, but with the changes to the ecosystem, they've started to settle in villages, and it's like they're now treated as sub-humans who are forced to work for the Luba. We need to find ways to break the cycle of dependency between the colonizer and the colonized, the dominant people and the dominated people.

Ensuring that the basic rights of the Batwa are met is an important goal, but the government has not put forward a clear and credible plan for ending discriminatory practices against them, Human Rights Watch said. This will be even more difficult in the tumultuous political climate engendered by the July subdivision of Katanga into four new provinces, most of which have very limited resources and infrastructure.