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Congo: U.N. Should Deploy a Rapid Reaction Force in Ituri

(New York, May 21, 2003) — Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International today jointly called on the U.N. Security Council to authorize the deployment of a rapid reaction force to protect civilians in Ituri, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

In an open letter to the Security Council, the two human rights organizations called the situation in Ituri "a critical test" of the Security Council's commitments to prevent mass killings and protect civilians, and noted that the United Nations Observation Mission in Congo (MONUC) has been unable to adequately protect civilians. The Security Council is currently discussing the characteristics and mandate of a possible force.

"In Ituri today, the elements of a devastating crisis are clearly present," said Irene Khan, secretary general of Amnesty International.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said that thousands of civilians continue to be at risk as opposing Hema and Lendu ethnic militia groups remain fully armed and ready to attack again. Tens of thousands of other civilians are believed to have fled Bunia, and their condition is unknown.

The two organizations stressed that any military action should be undertaken with full respect for international human rights and humanitarian law. They emphasized that the rapid reaction force should have a robust mandate to

ensure the maintenance of law and order and to protect civilians in Bunia, to locate and protect those civilians who have fled outside the town, and to ensure that humanitarian assistance can reach civilian populations in need.

Given the urgency of the situation, the two human rights organizations urged that a rapid reaction force be deployed immediately in the Ituri region, pending an agreement by the Security Council on the expansion and strengthening of MONUC's mandate, and the respective deployment of its reinforced troops.

The organizations are following up their appeal to the Security Council with appeals to specific countries to support Security Council action along the lines suggested and to contribute troops to an U.N.-authorized force.

"Thousands of civilians have already died in this conflict," said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. "Only rapid U.N. action can head off continued killings."

At least 5,000 people died from direct violence in Ituri between July 2002 and March 2003. These victims are in addition to the 50,000 civilians that, according to United Nations estimates, have died there since 1999. These losses are just one part of an estimated total of 4.7 million civilians dead throughout the Congo, a toll that makes this war more deadly to civilians than any other since World War II.

The open letter by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International to the U.N. Security Council is available at <http://www.hrw.org/press/2003/05/drc052103.htm>.