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D.R. Congo: Civilians at Risk of Revenge Killings in Ituri

(New York, March 11, 2003) — All parties involved in the renewed combat in northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) must prevent killings and other abuses of civilians by their troops, Human Rights Watch said today.

A coalition of local combatants supported by Ugandan army soldiers ousted the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC) from the town of Bunia on March 6. The UPC, generally identified with the Hema ethnic group, opposes political and military groups associated with the Lendu and the Ngiti.

In years of war to control this resource-rich region, various local forces and their more powerful supporters have frequently targeted civilians seen as supporters of other contenders. Assailants often kill on an ethnic basis: the UPC is generally identified with the Hema while other parties are linked to the Lendu and the Ngiti.

"Many military operations in this area have turned into slaughter of civilians or other kinds of abuses, like rape, torture and pillage," said Alison Des Forges, senior adviser to the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch. "Military commanders and the political leaders who give them orders have the power to prevent such violations of international law and must do so."

The UPC, supported by Ugandan army forces until several months ago, is now allied with the Congolese Rally for Democracy-Goma (RCD-Goma), itself closely identified with the Rwandan government. Uganda and Rwanda have been struggling to control eastern DRC since 1998. To counter the UPC shift to forces allied with Rwanda, Uganda is now

sponsoring a new group, the Front for Peace and Integration in Ituri (FIPI) combining Lendu, Alur and dissatisfied Hema.

The government of Uganda, involved through the presence of its troops, and the government of Rwanda, connected to the struggle through its close partner RCD-Goma, must use their influence to get local actors to protect civilian lives, Human Rights Watch said. Donor nations and other African nations, like South Africa, heavily involved in diplomatic efforts to end the war, should also convey to local actors the importance of avoiding killings and other abuses of civilians.

“Everyone has a responsibility to help prevent further abuse to this devastated population,” said Des Forges.