

DRC - Humanitarian corridor opened for trapped civilians in northeast



Photo: [Richard Pituwa/IRIN](#)

Brothers in arms. Congolese army troops and UN peacekeepers on joint patrol south of Bunia, the capital of Ituri district

BUNIA, 15 April 2010 (IRIN) - The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) government has opened a humanitarian corridor to provide safe passage for hundreds of civilians trapped by fighting between the army and rebel militias in Orientale Province, northeastern DRC.

"We decided on this corridor as we have registered hundreds of deaths and severe disease among the civilian population trapped between the militias and FARDC [Congolese army]. With the corridor they are able to get to safe zones," Rustic Avo, Ituri District deputy commissioner, said.

According to the local authorities, at least 5,000 civilians have been trapped since December 2009 in the Mukato Ngazi area about 100km south of Bunia, following a major government offensive against rebels in Potopoto, Mokato and Tchev, all south of Bunia, the main town in Ituri.

"They have suffered and are continuing to suffer. FARDC mistook them for rebels. and the rebel militias used them as shields - looting, torturing and raping them," said a local Ngity (ethnic group) leader, who preferred anonymity, in Walendu Bindi area.

On 12 March, Walendu Bindi's civil society said soldiers had shot at a group of women among this population who had gone to the fields in search of cassava leaves for food. Six women allegedly died, among them two who were pregnant.

A group of student activists, who went into the area in March, expressed concern.

"We only spent four days [there] and counted 21 dead people and several graves here and there; most of the dead were mothers and children," said Adaba Masumbuko, group leader. The area also lacked sanitary structures and schools.

"I counted about 300 sick people who could not stand..." said Kobvo Angaika, another member of the group. They, and their dependants, are clearly not able to use the humanitarian corridor, he said.

The UN Refugee Agency has deployed two trucks in the village of Ozoba, in Irumu Territory, to transport the displaced who are weakened by trekking long distances.

Deaths along the way

According to Ituri deputy commissioner Avo, about 10 of the civilians have died along the way. Four more died in Aveba, 90km south of Bunia. "We were thinking that the very sick would be evacuated by helicopter," he said.

The Lutheran World Foundation has started distributing food aid to some 47,000 displaced people in the region. Médecins Sans Frontières Swiss has also set up a transit health site in Aveba where care for sexual violence victims is being provided.

So far, Ituri's population movement commission has registered 167,000 displaced people of whom 64 percent are in Irumu, south of Bunia, where the army fought FRPI (Front de Résistance Patriotique en Ituri)/FPJC (Front Populaire pour le Justice au Congo) militias.

An estimated 2,000 FRPI/FPJC militia members are yet to be disarmed, according to the national disarmament programme.

District officials, however, note that the number of displaced is unclear as some people have sought refuge in Uganda.

According to the UN Mission in the DRC (MONUC), rebel militias are seeking to replenish their ammunition and food supplies following recent army and MONUC operations against them.

At present, the area south of Bunia remains dangerous with military escorts required to get there, said the head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Orientale Province, Jean Charles Dupin.