

UN official warns militias DR Congo atrocities will be punished  
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UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's representative in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) on Saturday warned the leaders of five armed groups that atrocities committed in the country's northeastern Ituri region would not go unpunished. "I take this opportunity to stress that the leaders of armed groups in Ituri will be held responsible before the law for the repeated human rights violations and the massacre of civilians observed in Bunia and throughout Ituri," UN representative William Lacy Swing said. "The killings must stop", Swing told the five armed group leaders, who had travelled to the capital Kinshasa for a round of UN-sponsored consultations with the government. He also stressed that Ituri held "dark memories" for the UN mission in DRC, after two UN military observers were killed north of Bunia earlier this year. "I can assure you that the culprits will answer for their actions," he said. Swing further urged all those present to "refrain from participating in, encouraging or provoking the illegal exploitation of natural resources, which is the root cause of the trouble facing the region."

The five groups represented in Kinshasa signed a peace accord to end fighting in the Ituri on May 16 in the Tanzanian capital of Dar-es-Salaam. Talks between the five leaders were due to continue on Sunday, while bilateral consultations were planned between the transition government and the different groups on Monday and Tuesday. Some 50,000 civilians have died and half a million have been displaced in the region since 1999 in ethnic bloodletting between members of the majority Lendu and minority Hema communities -- killings which continued in spite of the deployment of EU peacekeepers in June.

The UN official had earlier thanked the five leaders from making the trip to the UN headquarters in Kinshasa, thus enabling the talks to take place. "This demonstrates your commitment and your will to move away from a logic of war and towards peace and reconciliation. "By taking part in this meeting, you also show your commitment to bringing a complete end to hostilities in Ituri, as prescribed in the various peace accords including the one signed in Dar-es-Salaam," Swing said. The president of the special interim assembly for Ituri, Petronille Vaweka, described the talks a "last chance for peace. "Carry the olive branch instead of the gun. Throw away your weapons and form a circle of peace. It is time for you to become friends, brothers, once more," she said.