

October 26, 2006

D.R. Congo: Halt Growing Violence Ahead of Elections

Presidential Candidates Must Act to Reduce Tensions Ahead of October 29 Vote

Brussels — Presidential candidates in the Democratic Republic of Congo must act to reduce tensions and restrain their supporters from inciting violence ahead of the run-off election on October 29, Human Rights Watch said today. Hostile campaigning by rival candidates President Joseph Kabila and Vice President Jean-Pierre Bemba has underscored ethnic divisions and increased violence in the run-up to the polls.

On October 21, the media regulator, the High Media Authority (Haute autorité des medias, or HAM), ordered radio stations close to the rival candidates, both of whom own private media outlets, to halt campaign messages that incite violence. This followed calls by HAM on October 15 not to broadcast campaign songs that it estimated “called for hatred and violence.”

Local observers warn that a televised presidential debate scheduled for October 26 may be a potential flashpoint for violence if candidates resort to ethnic slurs during the debate. Congo will hold a presidential run-off election since the first round on July 30 failed to secure a majority for any single candidate. Voters will also elect provincial assembly members. The announcement of the first-round results on August 20 led to three days of street battles in the capital Kinshasa between forces loyal to Bemba and Kabila, leaving dozens dead.

“After waiting 40 years to democratically choose their president, the Congolese people deserve to cast their votes in peace and security,” said Alison Des Forges, senior Africa advisor to Human Rights Watch. “The candidates must work to ensure that their campaigns do not incite ethnic hatred or promote violence.”

On October 17, seven people were injured when fighting broke out between supporters of rival presidential candidates in Lodja, in central province of Kasai Oriental. On the same day in Mbandaka, in the western province of Equateur, Kabila supporters beat at least five women during a campaign rally when children taunted their campaign convoy by shouting the name of rival candidate Bemba.

Election violence has also spread beyond Congo, even into Europe. In London, as they entered the parking lot of a television studio on October 11, Kabila’s chief of staff, Leonard She Okitundu, and two others were attacked and beaten by a group of Congolese men. She Okitundu was stripped naked by his attackers and was later hospitalized.

Campaigning for the first round of the elections in July was marred by violence, and campaign messages frequently used discriminatory language. In May, during a rally in support of Kabila in the eastern city of Goma, another of Congo’s four vice presidents, Abdoulaye Yerodia, verbally attacked the minority ethnic Tutsi group, saying: “If you don’t want to go back to where you came from, we will put sticks into your backsides to

make sure you go back.”

Yerodia had used similar language in 1998 to incite violence against Tutsi people resulting in the deaths of hundreds of Congolese Tutsi. He was later charged in Belgium for war crimes and crimes against humanity, but the case was dropped when the International Court of Justice held that as a sitting foreign minister, Yerodia was immune from prosecution in another country’s court system.

Vice-President Bemba also made ethnicity an issue by putting the idea of congolité, or nationalistic purity, at the heart of his campaign message. His supporters have attempted to portray Kabila, who spent much of his youth abroad, as a foreigner.

Intimidation by rival supporters has interrupted election campaigning. On October 18 Bemba’s campaign director in Katanga, Theodore Ngoy, was blocked from campaigning in Lubumbashi when a group of hostile youth loyal to Kabila surrounded his hotel. Ngoy’s delegation was later escorted to safety by the police and United Nations peacekeepers. This followed an earlier attack on October 12 at the office of Bemba’s private media station where armed men destroyed essential broadcasting equipment.

Election campaigning has also heightened ethnic tensions in the volatile eastern province of North Kivu. The governor of the province, Eugene Serafuli, was prevented from campaigning in parts of Rutshuru territory by troops loyal to Laurent Nkunda, a former military officer turned rebel leader who claims to protect the rights of the minority Tutsi community. On October 14 the police headquarters in Masisi was looted and taken over after a firefight by a rival police force loyal to Nkunda, threatening further access by Serafuli and other candidates to the area.

A European force, known as EUFOR, deployed by the European Union in June to support U.N. security efforts for the elections, recently increased its soldiers in the capital ahead of the polls. EUFOR’s mandate expires on 30 November, just as election results are expected. The United Nations is due to request an extension for the force this week, but European Defense ministers have been reluctant to make any commitments.

“The success of these important elections hangs in the balance,” said Des Forges. “The European force must stay in Congo until the newly elected institutions are in place. Kabila and Bemba must take urgent steps to reduce tensions and ensure their supporters campaign on the issues, not on ethnic or language divisions.”