

Media Release: Embargoed until 00:01 Friday 21st November 2008

New Coalition: UK government must back EU peacekeepers for Congo

Friday 21st November 2008. A new campaign launches today calling for better protection of civilians in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The unprecedented coalition is launching the campaign with a series of full page adverts in the national press calling on the UK government to take decisive action to protect thousands of civilians still at risk in DRC.

The coalition of over twenty humanitarian agencies, human rights organisations, think tanks, trade unions and faith groups calls on the Prime Minister to support an EU deployment to protect the people of eastern Congo (full text of advertisement below).

In a letter to the Prime Minister, the coalition - including Oxfam, Human Rights Watch, Mercy Corps and the Mothers Union – warned that “waiting for this crisis to escalate further would be disastrous” and called on the Prime Minister to take immediate action.

“The situation in DRC is getting worse by the day. This government has said that we have a duty to protect civilians from war crimes but not enough is happening on the ground in DRC. Mr Brown has shown he has the ability to be a brave and courageous leader on the financial crisis. He must now be bold once again and act immediately to provide fast and effective protection to the people in Congo,” said Phil Bloomer, Director of Campaigns and Policy for Oxfam, a member of the Coalition.

According to analysts in Congo the ceasefire now exists in name only – there are ongoing battles between the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) and rebel forces and reports from the ground indicate the situation continues to deteriorate, with attacks on civilians occurring every day.

Over 250,000 people have been displaced in DRC since August, and humanitarian access is severely limited. Human rights organisations have documented the killings of at least 50 people in the town of Kiwanja, and it is likely there have been many more deaths.

“The UK government has demonstrated serious concern for the people of DRC. Mr Brown must recognise that, with the UN peacekeepers stretched to the limit, an EU force can deliver the security that is needed in the short-term. The people of the Congo are relying on leaders like Mr Brown to take the lead. We urge him to rise to the challenge,” said Tom Porteous, London Director of Human Rights Watch, a member of the Coalition.

According to the groups involved, the UK is eminently well-placed to secure progress on the DRC as a UN Security Council member, a key member of the EU and as the lead country on one of the EU battle groups. The EU battle group was designed to provide rapid response to crises within ten days. The UK currently leads one of the battle groups. The PM has also committed strongly to the Responsibility to Protect agenda, which urges the international community to act to prevent mass atrocities.

The coalition, speaking together for the first time, says that this is only the first step in a campaign to ensure that the plight of civilians in DRC is not ignored. It comes as the British Congolese community demonstrate outside Downing Street today to call on the UK government to take urgent action.

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Editors Notes:

For further information or to fix interviewees, please contact 020 7269 9450 or 07951 244362.

1. The coalition includes: Aegis Trust, Christian Aid, Foreign Policy Centre, Global Witness, HART, Hindu Council of the UK, Human Rights Watch, British Humanist Association, IANSA, Methodist Church, Mercy Corps, Mother's Union, Muslim Aid, Muslim Council of Britain, National Union of Teachers, Oxfam, The Pears Foundation, Rene Cassin, Saferworld, Waging Peace.
2. Interviewees available

Coalition representatives

Independent spokespeople:

Mary Robinson, Former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner of Human Rights

Juan Mendez, UN Secretary General's Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide

Jan Egeland, former Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs

3. The full text of the advertisement reads:

It's time for a bold decision, Mr Brown

Prime Minister, your Government must act today to get more peacekeeping troops into the Democratic Republic of Congo.

As we write this letter, a humanitarian catastrophe in eastern DRC is unfolding before our eyes. Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced from their homes by violent clashes. Attacks on civilians are occurring daily. Women and girls are being raped on a horrific scale. The situation is deteriorating every day.

The current peacekeeping troops are overstretched and UN reinforcements will take months to arrive. The EU promised that troops would be available to act in conflicts like this. The UK has a responsibility to ensure this promise is met. The people in eastern DRC cannot wait any longer for protection.

The UK Government has said we must "never again" stand by in the face of wide scale atrocities. Over the past five years some five million people have died in the DRC. Now is the time for your Government to uphold its promise. Swift deployment could save thousands of lives.

Prime Minister, we know you are as appalled as we are by the catastrophe in the DRC. But we also know you have the means to act. Today is the day to show courageous leadership.

4. Activists will be demonstrating outside Downing Street at 16:00 on Friday (21 November).
PHOTO OPPORTUNITY: At 16:15 Demonstrators will hold up watches and clocks to signify that time is ticking for the people of the Congo and that the UK government must act now.