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## **Tens of Thousands Flee North Kivu**

by Kim Lewis

The UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, says that since April, its staff on the ground has witnessed tens of thousands of people fleeing their homes in the North Kivu province of eastern D-R-C, due to intense fighting between government forces and armed rebels. Many are seeking safety in neighboring countries such as Uganda and Rwanda, while others are looking for refuge in other parts of the D-R-C.

UNHCR spokesperson Andrej Mahecic said his staff has witnessed widespread human rights violations and abuses.

“We are talking specifically about indiscriminate and summary killings of civilians. We are talking about rape and other forms of sexual abuse; torture; arbitrary arrests; assaults; looting of food and money; destruction of property. We are also talking about forced labor— forced recruitment, including children; and also ethnically motivated violence,” said Mahecic.

He said it is these types of abuses that are fueling a massive displacement within the province and neighboring countries.

As of now, the UNHCR estimates there are more than 470,000 Congolese who have fled their homes in eastern DRC since April. Some 220,000 of them are in North Kivu, while another 200,000 are in south Kivu, and more than 50,000 have fled to Uganda and Rwanda.

“The current estimate of the internally displaced population in the DRC stands at a staggering 2.2 million people,” said Mahecic.

Mahecic said neighboring countries are coping with the influx of refugees. It is not a new experience for the border countries because they have been dealing with the refugee situation for years.

“There are camps and settlements where the UNHCR is working in coordination with the government and other aid agencies,” said Mahecic.

He said the UNHCR is providing protection, shelter, health and medical services, as well as psycho-social counseling for people who suffered from violence.