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FOREIGN DESK

Militia Men Attack Packed U.N. Compound in Eastern Congo

By SOMINI SENGUPTA (NYT) 499 words

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, May 9 -- The compound of United Nations peacekeeping forces in the lawless eastern Democratic Republic of Congo came under attack this afternoon, with militia groups and angry youths hurling insults, then stones and, finally, mortar shells into the grounds. A United Nations area commander suffered a minor stab wound when a mob attacked his car, a United Nations spokeswoman said.

"People are hungry and also very angry," said the spokeswoman, Patricia Tomé, in a telephone interview from the compound in Bunia, where peacekeepers, aid workers and some 2,000 civilians, mostly women and children, have been staying for days for protection.

Warring militia groups have gone on a looting spree in the town, since Ugandan soldiers, under a recently negotiated peace accord, moved out of Bunia, the main town in the Ituri region. Restaurants and shops have been emptied, and food supplies are perilously low. By Saturday, Ms. Tomé said, staples at the compound itself would be exhausted.

Congo, the former Zaire, has been engulfed in war for five years. Armies of several neighboring countries, as well as their militia proxies on the ground, have rampaged through the country, harvesting diamonds, cobalt, gold and coltan -- the staple mineral used in cellular telephones. Over the years, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe have lent a hand to one side or another in the Congo conflict.

Peace deals in the capital, Kinshasa, have done little to stanch the bloodshed in the east. The International Rescue Committee has estimated that 3.3 million people have been killed during the Congolese war, in fighting, massacres and famine and disease.

The attacks today occurred only hours after a number of militia groups gathered at the compound to seal a cease-fire to end the fighting in Bunia. United Nations vehicles and equipment were destroyed in the fighting, and two peacekeepers were injured. "It's hard for us to say who is responsible," Ms. Tomé said. "First they were saying, 'We want peace.' Then, 'We want bread.' "

In New York, the United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, was "extremely concerned," and had telephoned regional leaders, including President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, said Fred Eckhard, Mr. Annan's spokesman.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno, the United Nations undersecretary general for peacekeeping, advised Security Council members that Bunia "is on the verge of a humanitarian catastrophe." Food and water supplies are dangerously low, officials have said. Fighting has made it impossible to deliver aid.

Fighting in the Bunia area began on May 6, as Ugandan troops pulled out, with ethnic militias battling for control and raising fears of massacres, such as those in neighboring Rwanda. Seeking protection from the mayhem, more than 4,000 civilians have poured into United Nations compounds in the center of town and at the airport.

The Ugandan government, appealing for aid, has said that up to 60,000 Congolese have crossed into its territory in the last two weeks.

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