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Pygmies beg UN for aid to save them from Congo cannibals

By Michael Dynes, Africa Correspondent, The London Times

Pygmy leaders have called on the UN to set up an international tribunal to put government and rebel fighters from the Democratic Republic of Congo on trial for acts of cannibalism against their people.

Sinafasi Makelo, a representative of Mbuti pygmies, told the UN's Indigenous People's Forum that during the four-year civil war his people had been hunted down and eaten.

"In living memory, we have seen cruelty, massacres, and genocide, but we have never seen human beings hunted down as though they were game animals," he said. "Pygmies are being pursued in the forests. People have been eaten. This is nothing more, nothing less, than a crime against humanity."

More than 600,000 pygmies are believed to live in the Congo's vast jungles, where they eke out a subsistence existence. Both sides in the war regard them as "subhuman", and believe that their flesh can confer magical powers.

UN human rights activists reported this year that rebels had cooked and eaten at least a dozen pygmies. Some of the worst atrocities took place when the Congolese Liberation Movement, one of the main rebel groups, tried to take the town of Mambasa from the rival Congolese Rally for Democracy last year.

Mr Makelo called on the forum to ask the UN Security Council to recognise cannibalism as a crime against humanity and an act of genocide.

There were reports yesterday of cannibalism against other Congolese in the mineral-rich province of Ituri in the east. Fierce clashes between ethnic Hema and Lendu militias this month are known to have resulted in more than 300 deaths. A mass grave containing the remains of more than 30 men, women and children was found near the town, UN officials said.

Church leaders and residents have accused Lendu militiamen of killing civilians, cutting open their chests, removing hearts, lungs and livers, and eating them.

Father Joseph Deneckere, a Belgian priest who has lived in the Congo since 1970, said that traditional superstitious beliefs, entrenched hatreds and attempts to settle old scores lay behind the atrocities. "Some of the victims had their sexual organs missing after tribal fighters cut them off to use as

charms,” he said. Tribal fighters had also been seen wandering around the bush with human organs “draped from their weapons”. Acquitto Kisebo, a resident of Bunia, the town at the centre of the fighting, said: “The sight of a corpse with a missing liver or heart is horrific, especially when you know those parts were eaten, and that the same could happen to you.” UN officials have opened a formal investigation into the allegations, which they describe as credible.

The region remains dangerously tense, despite last week's ceasefire, the UN says. Gunmen with rocket-propelled grenades roam the streets of Bunia. Eighty per cent of the 350,000 inhabitants have fled.

About 750, mostly Uruguayan, UN peacekeepers are stationed there, but they do not have the authority to use lethal force. Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, has asked France to lead an emergency force to stabilise the region. It has agreed to do so, but has insisted that other countries join. Britain, which is considering contributing, says that it is a “stop-gap operation” to reinforce the existing UN contingent.

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