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U.N. Investigators Find Mass Grave in Army Camp in East Congo

By Reuters

KINSHASA, Congo — United Nations investigators have found a mass grave in an army camp in Congo's eastern Ituri district holding about 30 victims who appeared to have been executed, including women and children, a spokesman said Friday.

"Our human rights division followed up on information it received and has confirmed a mass grave of about 30 people," said Kemal Saiki, spokesman for the United Nations mission in Congo.

Tensions were high in the capital, Kinshasa, to the west, where a former rebel chief was refusing to accept provisional results showing that President Joseph Kabila had defeated him in the runoff presidential election on Oct. 29.

Mr. Saiki said that the military prosecutor was investigating the Ituri grave and that two officers, a captain and a lieutenant, had been arrested so far.

The grave, in the army camp at Bavi, 25 miles south of Bunia, the Ituri regional capital, seemed to be recent, according to the investigators. They believed that the victims had disappeared during army operations against militia fighters in late August or early September. This meant the killings would have taken place after the first round of elections in Congo on July 30.

"Apparently these people were executed," Mr. Saiki said. "Among them are women and children." He said witnesses had directly accused the First Brigade, which was based in Ituri, of being responsible for the killings.

The First Brigade is one of several Congolese Army brigades made up of members of a range of rebel and government factions who fought in Congo's war, from 1998 to 2003.

The elections were Congo's first free voting in more than 40 years. They crowned peace negotiations that ended the war, which led to a catastrophe for civilians that has pushed the death toll to around four million. More than 1,000 Congolese still die every day from violence, hunger and disease.

The army has frequently been accused of human rights violations across Congo's east, where violence has continued despite the peace agreement three years ago and the presence in the country of the world's biggest United Nations peacekeeping force.

Anneke Van Woudenberg, a Congo expert with Human Rights Watch, said her organization had documented about 70 killings or summary executions of civilians in Ituri over the last year.

She said civilians were often taken by the army for forced labor or because they were suspected of being militia members. In Kinshasa, Mr. Kabila has sent Congolese Army troops onto the streets following a riot by supporters of Mr. Bemba, who has challenged the presidential runoff result in the Supreme Court. The court was set on fire during the riot by followers of Mr. Bemba, a vice president in Mr. Kabila's transition government.

Mr. Kabila said Wednesday that he would use the army to move soldiers loyal to Mr. Bemba, estimated around 600, from Kinshasa, unless the United Nations peacekeepers did that within 48 hours.

A first group of about 50 fighters for Mr. Bemba were moved out of the capital on Thursday, as foreign mediators worked to avoid a repeat of the gun battles between Mr. Kabila's and Mr. Bemba's forces in Kinshasa in recent months.

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