

# **DR Congo: ‘New waves of violence’ likely, UN warns, unless State acts to prevent intercommunal reprisals in Yumbi territory**

“New waves of violence” could erupt “at any time” in western Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the UN rights office [warned on Tuesday](#), unless the Government acts to ease “tensions and resentment” between the two communities involved.

Several days of planned and orchestrated killings took place in Mai-Ndombe province, in Yumbi territory at the end of last year, where hundreds of men, women and children were killed. The final assessment of a UN [probe](#) into the events of 16-18 December, says the violence may amount to crimes against humanity.

Preliminary results of the investigation [released last month](#), found evidence of extended attacks carried out between 16 and 18 December 2018, in four locations. Initially, it was reported that 890 people had been killed and thousands displaced as a result of clashes between the Banunu and Batende communities, UN Human Rights Office ([OHCHR](#)) spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani told journalists in Geneva.

“We’ve been able to verify fully that at least 535 men, women and children were killed and 111 others were injured in Yumbi town, Bongende village and Nkolo II village,” Ms. Shamdasani said.

These figures “are most likely an underestimate”, she continued, as the bodies of other victims “are believed to have been thrown into the Congo River”.

## **Thousands still displaced in Republic of Congo**

The [OHCHR](#) spokesperson also explained that it was not possible to confirm the number of persons still missing as an estimated 19,000 people were displaced by the violence, 16,000 of whom crossed the Congo River into the Republic of the Congo.

According to the investigators – who come from the UN’s DRC peacekeeping mission, [MONUSCO](#), and the OHCHR team in the vast country – the violence was triggered by a dispute over the burial of a Banunu chief, reportedly on Batende land.

The attacks were “strikingly similar” and characterized by their extreme violence and speed, leaving little time for people to escape”, Ms. Shamdasani said, noting that Batende villagers were “equipped with firearms, including

hunting rifles, machetes, bows and arrows, and gasoline”.

Among the report’s findings are witness testimonies that victims were asked if they were ethnic Banunu, before being killed.

## **No proof of election link to gruesome attacks**

Ms. Shamdasani highlighted other alleged “horrors” in the report, including how a two-year-old child was thrown into a septic tank and a woman raped after her three-year-old child was decapitated and her husband killed.

Faced with such evidence, the OHCHR officials highlighted the investigation’s conclusion that the crimes documented in Yumbi “may amount to the crimes against humanity of murder, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, as well as persecution”.

Asked whether there was a possible link between the intercommunal attacks and elections that were due to take place in December – but which were postponed to the end of March because of the violence – she said that no concrete proof had been found.

“There are going to be elections held in this territory on 31 March,” she said, “but of course these people who’ve been displaced and who’ve had to flee across the border to the Republic of Congo, will probably not be able to vote because of ongoing fears of violence and reality this impossibility for them to get back to their homes.”

## **‘Police left before attacks began’**

Turning to the responsibility of the DRC Government to protect its citizens, Ms. Shamdasani insisted that there were “clear indications that there were rising tensions”.

She added: “There were police that had been deployed, but they left before the attacks actually took place, so there was a clear absence of preventive action.”

As for now, the final UN report states that “tensions and resentment between the two communities, combined with rumours of reprisals, could give rise to new waves of violence at any time.”

The UN Special Representative, and head of [MONUSCO](#), [Leila Zerrougui](#), called on the Government to take urgent measures to restore State authority in Yumbi territory, and to create conditions for the safe and voluntary return of the displaced.

“The neutral presence of State institutions, including the police, is important to maintain law and order and prevent the risk of further violence”, she added.

In addition to an appeal to hold the perpetrators responsible for their actions, Ms. Shamdasani repeated the call by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Michelle Bachelet](#), for a truth and reconciliation between the Banunu

and Batende communities to prevent further violence.