

Villages 'reduced to ash' amid 'barbaric violence' in DR Congo, reports UN refugee agency

Humanitarian needs are enormous in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where the UN Refugee Agency, [UNHCR](#), has reported accounts of "barbaric violence".

In all, 350,000 people are estimated to have fled months of ethnic clashes between the Hema and Lendu groups, in the eastern part of the country.

Spokesperson Charlie Yaxley told journalists in Geneva on Friday that UNHCR staff had obtained access to Ituri province, in the northeast of DRC, where people are now returning, only to find their villages and homes "reduced to ash".

The development comes amid reports of armed groups attacking civilians with "guns, arrows and machetes", according to the agency.

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Citing one harrowing account after another, the UNHCR spokesperson repeated the testimony of one 59-year-old woman who described how "people are getting chopped in pieces", and how she and her family had fled after assailants killed their neighbours in the night

In addition to the bloodshed, hospitals, schools, and other key infrastructure have been completely destroyed in former communities, raising concerns about the number of children suffering from severe acute malnutrition and in urgent need of medical care.



UNHCR/Anita Cadonau

Aminatha (left) fled violence in Gobo on Lake Albert. She is expecting and is sheltering with eleven other displaced people in Rethy town in Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo. 21 March 2018.

Conditions at displacement sites are just as desperate, the UN agency said in a statement, warning that there is a lack of clean water and no access to healthcare.

At a displacement site near Bunia hospital, the capital of Ituri province, there is also a “significant and rising” risk of diseases spreading, while the number of people suffering from respiratory diseases and anemia is growing fast.

To address needs, UNHCR has provided emergency and transition shelter kits to replace houses that have been damaged or destroyed.

Cash grants are also being made available to the most desperate cases, with 1,500 families set to receive an average of \$210.

UNHCR is also scaling up community engagement to improve social cohesion among different ethnic groups, but its efforts have been hampered by a lack of funding.

“This is a very resource-poor part of the world,” UNHCR’s Yaxley said. “The prospects are incredibly slim, the humanitarian funding is really lacking. These people are being forgotten and left to fend for themselves.”

To date, the agency has received only 17 per cent of the \$201 million requested to provide protection, life-saving aid and assistance inside DRC.