



PRESS RELEASE

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ICC Begins 'Historic' War Crimes Trial of DRC Rebel Leader

The first ever case at the International Criminal Court (ICC) to proceed to trial begins today. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, rebel leader from Ituri, the scene of some of the worst atrocities in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), is accused of war crimes, in particular enlisting and conscripting children under the age of fifteen and using them to participate actively in hostilities in Ituri during 2002-03.

These children were illegally conscripted, kidnapped, used as human shields, sexually violated, drugged and forced to commit countless atrocities. For these children, life will never be the same. Under a groundbreaking procedure, the victims will have the possibility to present their views during the Court process, not only as witnesses for the prosecution but as the victims in their own right, giving their unique perspectives of the devastating impact that these horrific crimes have had on their lives.

93 former child-soldiers will be participating in the trial, represented by Congolese and international lawyers. Their critical statements at the opening of the trial today will put Lubanga's crimes into context. The Judges will not only be determining the guilt of Lubanga, but will be forced to hear what victims think, how they have suffered and their needs for the future.

Carla Ferstman, Director of REDRESS, the human rights NGO which has been working closely with the ICC, local victims' groups and Congolese lawyers to ensure that the victims' voices are heard, hailed the start of the Lubanga trial, ***'This is a more equitable justice, in which victims, typically marginalised and forgotten in criminal trials, have a real say.'***

'It is essential for the Court to understand, from the children's own perspectives, the extreme consequences that participating in armed conflict has on children. The very fact that the ICC's first trial gives these former child soldiers the opportunity to tell the Court of the impact that these crimes have had on their lives, is an important symbol of hope for DRC and for many other child-soldiers and victims of war crimes around the world.'

Background

Thomas Lubanga Dyilo is the President of the Union des patriotes congolais (UPC) and commander-in-chief of the Forces patriotiques pour la libération du Congo (FPLC), the UPC's military wing. Lubanga was arrested on 19 March 2005 and imprisoned in Kinshasa. The ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I issued a warrant of arrest against Mr Lubanga on 10 February 2006. Lubanga was transferred to the ICC and has since been detained in the Netherlands.

See REDRESS' report *'Victims, Perpetrators or Heroes?: Child Soldiers Before the ICC'*

<http://www.redress.org/publications/childsoldiers.pdf>

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