

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 16/008/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 036
24 February 2004

Embargo Date: 24 February 2004 01:00 GMT

Burundi: Urgent need to protect women and girls from rape

The Government of Burundi and the international community should take urgent action to stop widespread sexual violence, including rape, against women in Burundi, Amnesty International urged today in a new report entitled *Burundi: Rape - the hidden rights abuse*.

The growing incidence of rape has been exacerbated by widespread discrimination against women, and its consequences aggravated by poverty, population displacement and a failing health care system. The perpetrators are largely members of the Burundian armed forces and armed political groups, as well as armed criminal gangs who not only rob but also rape.

"Rape, like all human rights abuses, has become an entrenched feature of the Burundian crisis because the perpetrators - whether government soldiers, members of armed political groups, or private individuals - have not been brought to justice. The Burundian authorities and leaders of armed political groups have shown an alarming lack of will to hold their forces accountable," Amnesty International said.

"At a time when Burundi seems poised to make a definitive shift towards peace, institutions and infrastructures, particularly the justice and medical sectors, must be resuscitated, with the support of the international community, to help victims of sexual violence find justice and to assist them to heal physical and psychological wounds," the organization added.

From the evidence available, the scale of rape indicates a deliberate strategy at times by belligerents to use rape and other forms of sexual violence against women as a weapon of war, to instil terror among the civilian population, and to degrade and humiliate people.

In one of the worst affected areas during 2003, government armed forces and the armed political group *Conseil national pour la Défense de la Démocratie - Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie* (CNDD-FDD Nkurunziza) - National Council for the Defence of Democracy - Forces for the Defence of Democracy - committed scores of rapes in Ruyigi province, as well as other human rights abuses and looting, in a pattern of reprisal and counter-reprisal. Many women were also raped in front of their families including their children, adding to the trauma.

Rose N, aged 13, told Amnesty International delegates how she woke up on the night of 3 March 2003 and saw lots of people at the foot of the bed she shared with her brothers and sisters at Ruhwago, Ruyigi province. She thought they were robbers. She could see a man raping her mother who was crying

"Forgive me, forgive me" in the next room. Someone came into the room, undressed her, took her outside and threatened to shoot her. Then he put her on the ground and raped her. Afterwards a second man raped her. They left her and she walked back to the house and took her five-year-old brother from her mother's bed and fled with him. Now Rose is afraid to sleep at home at night and has many nightmares.

Most victims of rape in Burundi currently face insurmountable obstacles in trying to bring suspected perpetrators to justice. Many women who have been victims of rape or other forms of sexual abuse are too intimidated by certain cultural attitudes and state inaction to seek redress. To do so can often lead to hostility from the family, the community and the police, with little hope of success. Those who do seek justice are confronted by a system that ignores, denies and even condones violence against women and protects perpetrators, whether they are state officials or private individuals. The near total impunity granted to members of the armed forces - whatever their crime - discourages many from even attempting to begin legal action against members of the armed forces.

While stigma and fear mean that many cases go unreported, the scale of the violence forced rape out into the open in 2003. The increase in the incidence of rape has been confirmed by national and international organizations working in Burundi and acknowledged by government authorities.

Despite increased attention to the problem, many women still do not have access to appropriate health care in the immediate aftermath of the rape. Additionally, the continuing stigma attached to sexual violence and fear of coming forward prevents some victims of sexual violence from accessing these services. Free post-exposure prophylactic drugs to prevent HIV infection, are not available in many provinces, particularly to women who live far from health centres or in areas of conflict. Sometimes the medicines are just not available at all. Many people still do not know that such care or drugs exist.

Eugenie S, aged 15, and **Lucie N**, aged 16, were raped in separate incidents by soldiers in Bisinde, Ruyigi zone in September 2003. Eugenie was walking back from the market when a soldier stopped her and forced her into the bushes, and raped her. He told her to say that she had been raped by the FDD (CNDD-FDD (Nkurunziza)). Lucie was also raped by a soldier who threatened her with a gun. She was returning home alone from a wedding when she came across a group of soldiers on patrol. She had been raped three months earlier by one of a group of eight CNDD-FDD (Nkurunziza) fighters who broke into her family house demanding money. She and her family were also beaten. Both children say they are shunned by their neighbours who say that they are HIV+ (at the time in fact both were waiting for test results). Both fear they will never be able to get married.

Amnesty International is calling on the Burundian government authorities, civil society and international community to work together as a matter of urgency to protect women and girls from rape.

"As a matter of priority, the political and military leaders of all armed political groups, and the Burundian authorities, must issue immediate public instructions to their combatants to end human rights abuses, including rape," the organization urged.

"Not only must more be done to provide medical care and justice, there is an urgent need to address the proliferation of small arms. Unless this is done, violence against women is likely to continue to increase, whether or not conflict ends," Amnesty International said.

The organization believes that support in four areas would begin to curb the rise in violence against women and open opportunities for redress. These areas are developing and expanding community-based activities designed to reduce stigma and ignorance around violence against women; strengthening the judiciary and law enforcement structures so they are able to investigate and prosecute the crime of rape; increasing access to health care for women who have been victims of rape or other gender-based violence and addressing underlying discrimination against women. The government must also address immediately the proliferation of small arms in the country.

For a copy of the report, see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR160062004>

A web action on Violence Against Women (VAW) in Burundi which will be launched on 24 February. You can access this at:
<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/bdi-240204-action-eng>

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>