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## **Great Lakes: Amnesty International condemns forcible return of Burundi and Rwandese refugees**

Amnesty International today raised the alarm about the apparently coordinated efforts by the Governments of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi -- and reportedly also Rwanda -- to force thousands of Burundi and Rwandese refugees from the DRC back to their own country where they are at risk of grave human rights abuses.

“What is particularly worrying is that Burundi and Rwandese soldiers have systematically sought out these refugees -- with the help of the local Congolese authorities -- and expelled them back to their country where they at risk of being killed,” Amnesty International said today.

The human rights organization is investigating reports that of the 63 Burundi refugees arrested in Uvira, DRC, 38 have "disappeared". It is also investigating reports of extrajudicial executions of unarmed civilians by Burundi soldiers during the operation in DRC.

“It is imperative that the Governments of the DRC, Burundi and Rwanda act now to stop the forcible return of these refugees,” Amnesty International said. “The DRC authorities should also remove the foreign forces involved in their expulsions.”

Since 9 November up to 2,000 Burundi and Rwandese refugees have been forcibly returned from South-Kivu to Burundi, and a further 700 Rwandese refugees forcibly returned to Rwanda in what appears to be a coordinated military operation by troops from the three countries.

“The DRC Government should also recognize its obligations -- under international and customary law -- to guarantee the safety of refugees in the country,” Amnesty International said. “The authorities in Burundi and Rwanda should also ensure that those refugees who have returned are protected from human rights abuses.”

There are unconfirmed reports of similar operations taking place in other parts of the country, including Fizi territory in South Kivu province. Thousands more Rwandese and Burundi refugees in DRC face imminent forcible return or other threats to their safety.

Seven trucks of Burundi soldiers reportedly crossed over into Kihanga, DRC, on 7 November and, with the assistance of local Congolese authorities and members of the security forces as well as Rwandese soldiers, systematically sought out the refugees. Between 7 and 13 November at least seven villages and towns were searched, including the town of Uvira on 9 and 10 November. The Burundi refugees, many of whom had been living in eastern DRC for many years -- some since 1972, others since the early to mid-1980s -- were integrated into the local Congolese population and Burundi soldiers used the local authorities to identify the refugees.

Refugees were picked up wherever they were found and were not allowed to return to their homes to collect their belongings or see members of their families. Some were picked up at night before being transported back to Burundi the next day. Many were separated from their families. Those who tried to resist were beaten. Some were threatened with execution if they did not comply. The refugees were reportedly accused of belonging to a DRC armed group, known as *Mayi Mayi*, or the former Rwandese *interahamwe* militia.

The refugees were forcibly returned to Burundi's northern province of Cibitoke, crossing the Rusizi river, where on the other side more Burundi soldiers were waiting for them.

At least 700 Rwandese refugees have also been forcibly returned from the same area by Congolese soldiers, reportedly with the assistance of Rwandese soldiers, on or around 12 November. The conditions of their identification by soldiers and their return were the same.

Sixty-nine Rwandese refugees forcibly removed from DRC were amongst the 2,000 refugees forcibly returned to Burundi. They are believed to have been transferred to Gatumba transit camp near the capital, Bujumbura. It is not clear whether the Burundi authorities will allow them to stay -- virtually all Rwandese refugees have now left Burundi, the majority having been either forcibly returned or coerced into leaving.

## **BACKGROUND**

Refugees within the Great Lakes region constantly face the threat and fear of *refoulement* to their country of origin, or to a country where their safety cannot be guaranteed. Internationally binding standards of protection for refugees have been systematically overlooked by the countries involved. In some cases, international agencies such as UNHCR, have succumbed to pressure by host governments to compromise these principles.

Returning Burundi refugees are in danger of grave human rights abuses in their home country. They risk being deliberately and arbitrarily killed by Burundi government forces or armed opposition groups as widespread insecurity persists in many parts of Burundi, including Cibitoke province, which is often inaccessible to humanitarian agencies due to widespread violence. It is virtually impossible for independent observers to monitor the safety of returnees.

Hundreds of Burundi refugees have been forcibly expelled from the DRC in late 1996 and 1997; many were subsequently extrajudicially executed soon after their return to Burundi.

Many Rwandese refugees who have been forcibly repatriated from the DRC and other countries have also been subjected to grave abuses in the past. Some have been killed, others "disappeared". More than 6,000 people -- the majority unarmed civilians -- are reported to have been killed in Rwanda since 1997. Many unreported deaths mean that the real figure may be considerably higher. The victims include many returnees from the DRC.

Killings and massacres have been carried out both by the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA) and armed opposition groups believed to be allied to the former army of Rwanda. Thousands of unarmed civilians, including young children and elderly people, have been shot dead during RPA operations, following reported attacks by armed opposition groups.

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