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Burundi: International donor conference needs to focus on human rights

Representatives of international donor governments and organizations such as the World Bank and UN Development Program, together with leaders of Burundi's government, political parties and some armed opposition groups, are meeting today in Paris to discuss a program of international aid for the reconstruction of Burundi in the event of a final peace settlement to the country's seven-year-old civil war.

"The discussions in Paris on possible international financial and material assistance to Burundi could help immensely to lay the foundations for a sustainable peace," Amnesty International said. "Lasting peace in Burundi relies ultimately on effective measures for protecting human rights and for this, international support will be vital."

The collapse in respect for human rights in Burundi, the near-total impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of human rights abuses, and the glaring inequalities in the country's justice system have been major factors feeding the violence and insecurity. "Rebuilding human rights needs to be a central aim of any program of reconstruction in Burundi, and a focus of today's Paris conference," the organization urged.

In an Amnesty International appeal last week to participants at the conference, the organization highlighted key areas where international aid and assistance could have a decisive effect on ensuring improved respect for human rights in Burundi:

Strengthening the country's judicial system, with an emphasis on improved human rights training and the impartial functioning of the judiciary. The present system does not

guarantee fair trials, and it is under-resourced and prone to political interference and ethnic discrimination.

Training in human rights and independent monitoring of the police service and armed forces. Particular attention should be paid to programs aimed at preventing torture, extrajudicial executions and arbitrary detentions.

Providing financial support for refugee protection and assistance to Tanzania and other states in the region hosting large numbers of Burundian refugees, and ensuring that refugees are not placed at risk of forcible return to Burundi or of premature voluntary repatriation.

Supporting programs to protect refugee women from sexual violence in and around the refugee camps, and in the process of repatriation.

Ensuring the protection of the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people in Burundi and the provision of their basic humanitarian needs, now and as they return to their homes after implementation of a peace agreement.

Supporting programs to rehabilitate child soldiers and other child victims of the conflict.

Supporting with financial and material resources the work of independent national human rights organizations as well as the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Burundi.

Improving conditions in prisons and detention centres in Burundi where conditions are harsh and in some cases life-threatening.

For further details see the Amnesty International publication Burundi: International assistance is needed to protect and promote human rights (AI Index: AFR 16/19/00, December 2000).

Background

A peace agreement was signed in August 2000, after two years of negotiation. In particular, the absence of two of the main Burundian armed opposition groups from the peace negotiations that took place in Arusha, Tanzania, leaves the ultimate durability of any agreement in question. The calendar for and implementation of the August 2000 agreement has so far not been respected, but there have nonetheless been steps towards its implementation. The commission to monitor its application was established in November in Arusha, and the agreement was ratified by the Burundian parliament on 1 December.

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