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BURUNDI: PLIGHT OF RETURNING REFUGEES SHOULD NOT BE FORGOTTEN

Refugees forced by Tutsi-led armed groups in eastern Zaire to return to Burundi are in danger of further atrocities, Amnesty International said today, as it called on United Nations member states to ensure their safety.

The human rights organization has documented cases of killings, "disappearances" and ill-treatment occurring almost daily throughout Burundi, with women, children, babies and the elderly among the victims. According to the UN Secretary-General's latest report, there have been at least 10,000 casualties since Major Pierre Buyoya took power in July 1996.

"These refugees are being forced back to Burundi to face the same terrible human rights abuses that caused them to flee in the first place," Amnesty International said. "No refugees should be forcibly returned to a country which has seen as many as 500 returnees reportedly killed by the Burundi security forces in recent weeks."

"It is completely unacceptable for governments to remain silent and refuse to condemn this appalling situation. While these governments concentrate on events in Rwanda and their desire to resolve the current 'refugee problem', the fate of those refugees who have fled Burundi should not be ignored."

Many of these refugees fled the mass killings in Burundi which have been part of a deliberate political strategy by the Tutsi elite to eliminate potential Hutu opposition. This policy has led to the expulsion of Hutu from whole swathes of the country, while others have been hunted down and massacred by government forces and armed Tutsi groups.

Burundi refugees returning home have to go through roadblocks set up in Burundi to screen identity cards. Many Hutu are reportedly arrested at these roadblocks on the grounds that a corner cut off their identity cards indicates that they are members of Hutu opposition groups. However, Amnesty International has learned that the corners were cut off by officials of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to prevent refugees from being registered more than once.

People are also arrested because of the colour of the stamp in their identity cards, since cards with a green stamp are said to have been issued by the opposition groups. However, many identity cards issued by officials in Bujumbura bear the same green stamp.

Amnesty International has documented numerous massacres of refugees returning to the country. These include:

- 22 October: At least 400 returnees from Zaire were reportedly rounded up by members of the Burundi security forces at Muramba Seventh Day Adventist Church, Cibitoke Province. The adult males were then shot dead or bayoneted to death.

- 27 October: 20 people who were returning from Zaire by canoe on Lake Tanganyika were reportedly arrested in Kabezi and taken to Bujumbura and tortured after being forced to give 200,000 Burundi francs to soldiers. They were allegedly taken back to Kabezi in a government bus but nobody has seen them since that day. Amnesty International believes they have “disappeared.”
- 27 October: 40 returnees from Zaire were reportedly killed before reaching the Gatumba transit camp. Among the victims were Isaias Barasengeta and his children, Hakizimana, aged 10, and Viateur Bukuru, aged five, Clotilde Nizigiyimana and her three young children, Spès Maninzana, aged two, Odette Habumuremyi, aged four, and Vestine Bigirimana, just eight months old.
- On or around 10 November 1996: At least 46 Burundi nationals who had just returned from Zaire are reported to have been shot and bayoneted to death by the security forces in the Bwiza district of Bujumbura.

The human rights abuses suffered by refugees who have been forced back to Burundi form part of a continuing pattern of atrocities taking place in the country, which has seen more than 150,000 men, women and children killed since 1993.

Amnesty International is calling on governments to condemn the Tutsi-led armed groups in eastern Zaire for forcing the refugees to return home, and the Zairian authorities for stating that they may not remain. These actions are a flagrant violation of the fundamental principle of *non-refoulement*, the organization said.

“While the world focuses on the plight of refugees returning to Rwanda, it must not forget that refugees are also being forced to return to an uncertain fate in Burundi,” Amnesty International said. “The dangers of ignoring what is happening in Burundi are obvious, and if this silence continues, Burundi refugees may quite justifiably conclude that the international community is unconcerned for their lives.”

Background

During 1996, Hutu armed groups have deliberately and arbitrarily killed civilians in almost all the provinces of Burundi, leaving virtually no part of Burundi unaffected by the civil war. In particular, the *Conseil National pour la Défense de la Démocratie*, (CNDD), National Council for the Defence of Democracy, the *Parti pour la Libération du Peuple Hutu*, (PALIPEHUTU), Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People and the *Front pour la Libération Nationale*, (FROLINA), Front for National Liberation, have carried out attacks against camps for displaced Tutsi.

Since August 1996, the authorities have introduced military service for Tutsi youth, including students. Thousands of members of Tutsi armed groups who have been responsible for widespread human rights abuses have been incorporated in the government forces. Virtually no action has been taken against Tutsi who have perpetrated human rights abuses, leading many to believe that they will continue to enjoy impunity for further killings.

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