

AI INDEX: AFR 47/28/98
13 JULY 1998

Rwanda: UN Human Rights Field Operation must keep investigative role

The Rwandese Government should demonstrate that its commitment to human rights is more than just rhetoric and allow the United Nations Human Rights Field Operation for Rwanda (UNHRFOR) to expand its human rights monitoring and reporting role in the country, Amnesty International said today.

“The UN Human Rights Field Operation is one of the very few international organizations left monitoring, and publicly reporting, the human rights situation in Rwanda. For years it has, in extreme difficult circumstances, documented human rights abuses by both government forces and armed opposition groups,” the organization said, pointing out that even five of the UNHRFOR staff were killed in February 1997.

“It would be disastrous if the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (HCHR) now agrees to remove or dilute this essential part of the operation's mandate.”

The Government of Rwanda and the High Commissioner for Human Rights are due to begin negotiating the future of the UNHRFOR. The Rwandese Government wants to remove one of the main roles of the UNHRFOR – the monitoring and reporting on human rights violations. Since May, the government has unilaterally suspended the operation's activities. The Rwandese Government has announced that it will close down the operation if no agreement has been reached by 27 July 1998.

“The human rights situation in Rwanda is critical. We receive almost daily reports about killings and ‘disappearances’ and the UNHRFOR is indispensable for investigating and documenting these cases on the ground,” Amnesty International said.

“The negotiations between the UN Human Rights Commissioner and the Rwandese Government should be about expanding the work of UNHRFOR and not the reverse.”

The UNHRFOR was set up by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. According to the agreement between the Rwandese Government and the UN, its tasks include carrying out investigations into violations of human rights and humanitarian law, implementing programs of technical assistance to the judiciary and rebuilding institutions of civil society to prevent future violations.

The UNHRFOR is threatened with the same fate as the UN Secretary General's Investigative Team in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where the authorities there obstructed the work of the investigators. The UN Secretary General withdrew the team in April 1998. The team nevertheless verified that there is evidence of serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, crimes against humanity, and that some of the killings possibly constitute genocide. Some of the atrocities that were being investigated by the team were reportedly carried out by Rwandese government forces.

“Since December 1997, thousands of civilians in Rwanda have been killed by members of the Rwandese security forces and by armed opposition groups. Hundreds and possibly thousands of others have ‘disappeared’ across Rwanda and it is vital to determine responsibility,” Amnesty International said.

“In this current context of mass human rights abuses, it would be inappropriate to limit the operation’s task to mere technical assistance.”

The Rwandese Government is instead arguing that the task of monitoring should be carried out solely by local organizations, including a newly-established National Commission for Human Rights. Yet, those who speak out about human rights abuses risk becoming a target. Members of impartial and independent Rwandese human rights organizations have been subjected to harassment and human rights abuses. It remains also unclear whether the National Commission for Human Rights or other government bodies will be able to function freely, independently and impartially.

“The Rwandese Government should allow and facilitate monitoring of human rights abuses in Rwanda by both local and international human rights organizations, whether committed by armed opposition groups or by the security forces,” Amnesty International said.

“The authorities should allow them unrestricted access to civilian and military detention centres and provide their full cooperation in investigations into killings of unarmed civilians, ‘disappearances’ and other human rights abuses. The international presence is important for signifying the international community’s support for human rights in Rwanda.”

ENDS.../