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Rwanda: massacres of unarmed civilians escalate

Thousands of unarmed civilians are being deliberately and arbitrarily killed in Rwanda and massacres have intensified since May 1997, while the international community looks the other way, Amnesty International said today.

During May, June and July, more than 2,300 unarmed civilians are estimated to have been killed. "These are just the specific cases which have been reported to us -- the real number is probably much higher," the human rights organization said.

Among the victims of these killings are many returnees who had been living in the former Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) until the refugee camps there came under attack by the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaire* (AFDL), Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire.

"Given the persistent and grave human rights violations taking place in Rwanda, it cannot be considered safe for refugees to return," Amnesty International said.

The organization is receiving daily reports of killings of men, women and young children by soldiers of the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA), especially in the northwestern regions of Ruhengeri and Gisenyi which have become virtual no-go areas. Armed opposition groups believed to be composed of soldiers of the former Rwandese army and militia responsible for the genocide of 1994 are also carrying out attacks on civilians as well as on RPA personnel.

"Caught between the threat of arbitrary violence on both sides, the population of the western regions is living in terror," Amnesty International said. Local sources say that many families have left their homes and some villages are virtually empty.

Testimonies from these regions consistently affirm that most of the victims of the violence in recent months have died at the hands of the RPA, especially during military "cordon and search" operations intended to hunt down armed opponents. These operations usually take place following attacks by armed opposition groups.

"Counter-insurgency operations can never be a justification for the army to extrajudicially execute unarmed civilians," Amnesty International stated. "Contrary to what the government sometimes claims, these victims are not killed accidentally in cross-fire. Whole families -- including many children -- have been hunted down in their homes."

The organization again urges the Rwandese authorities to take immediate measures to prevent further loss of civilian life by prohibiting unlawful killings by its armed forces. Serious attempts must be made to investigate reports of massacres with a view to bringing those responsible to justice. Although the government has announced on several occasions that it was investigating these killings, it has so far failed to publish the findings of these investigations.

Some of the examples of recent massacres include:

- During June and July, hundreds of people were reportedly killed in many different locations in the *sous-préfecture* of Ngororero, Gisenyi *préfecture*. Initial reports indicate that as many as 955 people may have been killed during this period. These include 349 reportedly killed in Musagara *secteur*, Satinsyi *commune*, on 6 July and 212 reportedly killed near Ruhunga forest on 29 June. All these killings have been attributed by local sources to RPA soldiers.

- On 5 July, 16 people were killed in Nyakabanda *commune*, Gitarama *préfecture*. The victims included the coordinator of a local non-governmental organization, his wife and five of their children, all killed in their home. The authorities have blamed the killings on *interahamwe* militia; however, local residents believe RPA soldiers were responsible for the killings.

- On 24 June, at least 68 people were reportedly killed by RPA soldiers in Rukoko *secteur*, Kivumu *commune*, Kibuye *préfecture*. The victims included members of four families who were reportedly killed in their homes. These killings occurred after an ambush carried out by unidentified armed assailants in which one Chinese national and three Rwandese were killed.

- On 8 June, at least 120 people were reportedly killed by RPA soldiers inside a Protestant church in Nanga *secteur*, Karago *commune*, Gisenyi *préfecture*. The soldiers then went on to attack nearby houses and reportedly killed a further 38 people in their homes, including an 85 year-old man and a 90 year-old woman.

- Between 9 and 11 May, more than 520 civilians, including many women and elderly people, were reportedly killed by RPA soldiers in seven different *secteurs* in Nkuli *commune*, Ruhengeri *préfecture*. These killings followed several days of fighting between the RPA and armed opposition groups around military camps nearby.

- Between 3 and 17 May, at least 82 people were reportedly killed by RPA soldiers in several locations in Karago *commune*, Gisenyi *préfecture*.

- On 27 April 1997, a group of armed men reportedly attacked several educational institutions and houses in Muramba, Satinsyi *commune*, Gisenyi *préfecture*. A total of 22 people - most of them women - were killed, including 16 female students shot dead in a school dormitory; a 14 year-old girl killed in a convent; and a 62 year-old Belgian nun and school director killed in a primary school. The assailants, believed to be members of an armed opposition group, also attacked an RPA military post nearby.

“These cases represent just a fraction of those reported to us,” Amnesty International said.

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