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Rwanda: "The Dead Can No Longer Be Counted"

The quote above -- from a testimony received from the Gisenyi region -- illustrates the despair of the civilian population trapped in Rwanda's northwestern regions.

Unarmed men, women, young children and babies are being targeted by both sides in an intensifying conflict between the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA) and armed opposition groups believed to be allied to the former Rwandese armed forces.

"Everyday we are receiving reports of new massacres of civilians, and behind each massacre, we uncover another," Amnesty International said today, as it published an urgent new report describing killings by government forces and armed opposition groups throughout October, November and early December 1997.

"We want this report to shake the international community out of its indifference to the plight of the civilian population in Rwanda -- and to highlight the fact that both RPA soldiers and armed opposition groups are responsible for grave human rights abuses," Amnesty International said. "The massacres of the last three months appear to be the largest-scale killings by both the RPA and armed opposition groups for at least two years."

Foreign media and diplomats rightly condemned last week's appalling massacre of around 300 mainly Tutsi Congolese refugees carried out by Hutu armed opposition groups in Mudende, Gisenyi, on 11 December. However, the large-scale reprisals which followed the same day in which hundreds of Hutu civilians were reportedly killed by Tutsi civilians in collaboration with RPA soldiers -- remain cloaked in silence.

"Whatever the scale of atrocities committed by one side, they can never justify similar atrocities by the other," Amnesty International said.

The organization welcomed the US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's initiative to ask US war crimes envoy David Scheffer to investigate the massacre of refugees at Mudende, but also urged him to investigate reports of massacres of hundreds of civilians by RPA soldiers.

The increasing insecurity, the climate of fear and the restrictions imposed by the Rwandese authorities on access to sites of reported massacres have created difficulties for independent human rights organizations and media to verify the details of these reported atrocities. Many areas in the northwest where most of the killings are taking place are inaccessible to independent investigations.

"As the truth continues to be suppressed, no preventive action is taken, and the despair of the population is aggravated," Amnesty International said. "We are being told that on average at least one whole family is killed everyday."

The incidents described in Amnesty International's report represent only a fraction of those which have occurred since October. Killings in Rwanda in the last three months have escalated dramatically. Local residents in areas affected by the armed conflict are living in

terror of both RPA soldiers and armed opposition groups and have nowhere to run to for safety. Neither side appears to be making any attempt to spare civilian lives.

The report provides details of almost daily reports of killings attributed to RPA soldiers, mostly during military search operations. For example:

- On 21 November, RPA soldiers reportedly killed at least 539 civilians -- and possibly many more -- in Jenda, Nkuli, Ruhengeri.
- On 16 November, RPA soldiers surrounded Kirehe *cellule*, in Gatonde, Ruhengeri, and reportedly shot dead more than 300 people.
- Between 13 and 23 November, military helicopters reportedly fired on several areas in Gisenyi. An unknown number of civilians are reported to have died and many houses were burned.
- On 9 November, RPA soldiers shot indiscriminately at civilians in Gashyusha, in Kibilira, Gisenyi. At least 150 people were killed. Many bodies were buried in mass graves and others thrown into the river.
- Between 23 and 28 October, several thousand people were reportedly killed by RPA soldiers in a large cave at Nyakimana, in Kanama, Gisenyi. The total number of victims is still impossible to confirm, as the authorities have denied access to the site to independent investigators.

Since October, armed opposition groups have also become bolder and more ruthless in their attacks. For example, in addition to the massacre of around 300 Congolese refugees at Mudende:

- On 17 November, armed groups killed between 20 and 30 civilians from seven families in Mukamira, Ruhengeri.
- On 14 October, 37 civilians, most of them Tutsi, were reportedly killed by an armed group in Mutura, Gisenyi.

“The threat posed by the armed insurgency in the northwest should not be underestimated,” Amnesty International said. “However, the Rwandese security forces have a duty to protect the civilian population in its entirety, regardless of ethnic, political or other affiliation. Non-combatants should not be targeted, under any circumstances.”

Amnesty International also appealed to the Rwandese Government to ensure unrestricted and safe access to the sites of reported killings to independent local and international human rights organizations and local and foreign journalists.

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