

0001 hrs gmt Wednesday 9 September 1992

UGANDA: TIME FOR ACTION
TO SAFEGUARD HUMAN RIGHTS

Six years after coming to power pledging to protect human rights the Ugandan government has still not seriously tackled the army's continuing gross violations, Amnesty International said today.

"The army still acts as if it is above the law, arbitrarily arresting, torturing and even killing civilians," Amnesty International said. "The government's measures to curb violations so far have simply not addressed the real, long-term problems."

In a report released today the human rights organization documents year after year of human rights violations by the National Resistance Army (NRA) and the excuses used by the government for its failure to halt them.

Although many thousands of prisoners have been released since the National Resistance Movement (NRM) came to power in 1986, killings, torture and arrests continue on a large scale and the action the government has taken on human rights issues has often not been sustained. Indeed last month a government human rights monitor, known for his outspoken criticism of ongoing violations, was fired.

"The government says a legacy of violence and disorder caused by previous governments limits its capacity to improve the situation. But Uganda's bloody history should not be allowed to dominate its future".

Since the government started waging war against several groups of insurgents in 1986, Amnesty International has received reports of hundreds of civilians killed by the army in dozens of separate incidents. In April 1992, for example, soldiers killed four men and disposed of their bodies in a pit latrine. In this case the authorities arrested the soldiers, but in countless others no action has been taken.

Thousands of people have been arrested since 1986 and detained illegally, often in military barracks where many have faced torture. As the government has restricted rebel activity more and more, the majority of detainees have been released, including recent releases of criminal and political detainees, but hundreds of political prisoners remain in custody, many of them with little evidence against them. The authorities also appear to be using treason charges to crack down on the opposition including non-violent critics of the government, with at least 185 people now in prison on such charges.

Amnesty International is calling on the government to take practical steps to clamp down on human rights violations. Despite the scores of reports of abuses the government has proved unwilling to investigate violations thoroughly or to bring those responsible for them to justice.

When investigations are announced they are slow and inconclusive and not a single report has yet been published. When the government does appear to take decisive action it piles violation on violation by executing soldiers - often after unfair military trials with no chance of appeal.

"The death penalty is a human rights violation in itself," said Amnesty International. "The government executes people but takes no real action to prevent human rights violations by soldiers. Its belief that the death penalty is a deterrent prevents it from seeing the need for effective practical measures. And what is more, it is clear that by and large the authorities are only taking action

against crimes committed by soldiers when off-duty. Of the 40 soldiers executed since 1987 barely any have been those guilty of killing civilians while on counter-insurgency operations.” Although human rights violations are being reported across the country, the worst reports of human rights violations come from the north and east where the army is fighting insurgents, many of whom were originally soldiers in former government armies. In the war zones, soldiers and rebels alike have sunk to depths of human rights abuses against civilians and detainees not seen elsewhere in the country.

Amnesty International said that armed rebels have been guilty of flagrant abuses since the early days of the government. Deliberate and arbitrary killings have resulted in hundreds of deaths of ordinary villagers. Violence is used to terrorize people into providing support for rebel forces and many victims of rebel abuses have been mutilated, abducted or raped. In July last year 43 school girls were abducted by rebels - two were killed and all were repeatedly raped.

“There is no doubt that rebels are not living up to their obligation to respect humanitarian standards. But their failure to do so is no reason for the army to respond in kind. It is time the government and the army started taking human rights seriously. And that means taking responsibility and taking long-term action.”

The organization said the government must take and sustain preventive measures to stop human rights violations. For example, all detentions should be regulated and formally recorded and urgent steps should be taken to bring those responsible for abuses to justice.

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