

28 August 2001

AI Index AFR 16/038/2001 - News Service Nr. 151

Burundi: Preparing for peace - one year on

*As Burundi prepares to start, on 1 November 2001, a period of transitional government and institutional reform, Amnesty International today, in an eight-page appeal, *Burundi: Preparing for peace*, highlighted measures which should be implemented now by the current government, political leaders, leaders of armed political movements, civil society and the international community to protect human rights.*

The move towards the period of transitional government, a period of significant institutional reform, provides both opportunities and challenges for increasing protection, the organization said. The year-old Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi provides, in the main, a legal framework which could ensure better respect for human rights. However, its negotiation and signature generated a spiral of political tension and an upsurge in political violence and human rights abuses. Significant obstacles must be overcome if a durable solution to the political and military crisis is to be found, in which human rights can be better respected.

Many abuses in Burundi have been carried out by individuals who feared that they themselves, or their families, would become victims of abuse, or political or ethnic violence. These fears have often been cynically and openly manipulated by some political and community leaders, leading to inter-communal violence. The prospect of imminent implementation of the Peace Agreement, especially the inauguration of new institutions such as a reformed armed forces may, for some, reactivate and intensify these fears. This may be particularly dangerous given the current government policy of arming the civilian population to defend themselves.

Recent serious human rights abuses include the deliberate and unlawful killing by an armed political group, the *Forces nationales pour la libération*, (FNL) National Liberation Forces, of eight civilians, all farmers, and two *Gardiens de la Paix* (a government militia) from Masama in Kabezi commune, Rural Bujumbura Province, between 20 and 28 July 2001. The men were reportedly accused by the FNL of collaboration with government forces. In reprisal for these killings, on 1 August 2001, the government forces extrajudicially executed at least 13 unarmed civilians in Masama. The victims included a woman and her two small children, **Hervis Mugisha**, aged two, **Fiston Uwizeye**, aged six. The government armed forces reportedly accused the population of Masama of collaboration with the FNL.

Amnesty International calls on the current Government of Burundi to:

ensure that members of the security forces who carry out human rights violations are held accountable for their actions, both now and during the transition;

organize and encourage debate on key human rights issues around the conflict and transitional arrangements, including on the question of impunity and justice, with a view to promoting a central role for human rights in the transitional process and preventing human rights violations;

ensure that freedom of expression and of the media are respected during this period;

cease arming the population and take urgent measures to prevent abuses by the *Gardiens de la Paix*, a government militia;

take prompt action against any incitement to political or ethnic violence or human rights abuses by political or community leaders.

Commanders and political leaders of armed political movements

to ensure that ongoing talks in which they are involved discuss ways of preventing human rights abuses in the current situation, and in the future.

to issue strict instructions to their forces not to carry out human rights abuses. Any abuses should be publicly acknowledged and condemned and those responsible should be held accountable. They should be removed from positions where they may be able to carry out such abuses.

Leaders of political parties and movements and Burundian civil society should promote debate on key human rights issues around the conflict and transitional arrangements, including the question of impunity and justice, with a view to promoting a central role for human rights in the transitional process and preventing human rights violations. These groups should also refrain from manipulating acknowledged fears and inciting violence or human rights abuses and to actively engage in human rights education programs aimed at building trust and reconciliation between ethnically divided communities.

Amnesty International believes that the **international community** should play a key role in ensuring that human rights concerns are given a central place in on-going negotiations and in planning for the future. To this end, governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in working for a resolution of the conflict should:

support independent and impartial national human rights groups and human rights defenders, in recognition of the important role they could play in the current context; and

ensure that international peace-keeping forces have the mandate and capacity to protect persons belonging to all ethnic communities and political groups in Burundi from human rights abuses. The duty to monitor and report on human rights abuses should explicitly be included in their mandate.

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