

1 November 2001

AI Index AFR 16/040/2001 - News Service Nr. 193

Burundi: The transitional period: a new opportunity for the respect of human rights

As the transitional period begins in Burundi today, in a context of on-going armed conflict, it is essential that human rights issues are at the forefront of the transitional government's policies and any debate on institutional reform, Amnesty International said today.

"The urgency to better protect and promote human rights is underlined by new reports of human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions by members of the government armed forces," Amnesty International said.

Scores of civilians have been killed in the last month by members of the government armed forces, following clashes between government forces and two armed opposition groups, who are not included in the transitional arrangements and who were not involved in negotiation of the August 2000 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi. The same armed opposition groups continue to commit human rights abuses including the unlawful killing of unarmed civilians.

*Information is still emerging on the extrajudicial execution of at least 31 unarmed civilians on 25 October in the Buzige and Migereka II collines (local administrative units), Buhororo, Bubanza Province, northwestern Burundi. It appears the killings, carried out by members of the 15th Mobile Battalion based in Bubanza Province were in reprisal for an ambush carried out by an armed opposition group, the *Conseil National pour la Défense de la Démocratie - Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie* (CNDD-FDD), National Council for the Defence of Democracy - Forces for the Defence of Democracy, in the Buhororo area on 24 October. Two government soldiers and a civilian were killed in the*

ambush. First reports suggest that most of the 31 people killed were women and children, who were bayoneted or shot as they fled.

At least 11 civilians, including two students, Joseph Nzeyimana and Edouard Sindakira, were also killed in a reprisal by members of the armed forces in and around Muzinda in the same province earlier in October. Up to 14 soldiers were killed in Muzinda on 4 October by armed men in military uniform, presumed to be members of another armed opposition group, the *Forces nationales pour la libération* (FNL), National Liberation Forces. Over 200 buildings, including homes, schools and local administration buildings were also deliberately destroyed or looted by government forces on the three collines, in what appeared to be a punitive measure. Over 9,000 people were displaced following the attack.

AWe do not underestimate the challenges to be faced by the new transitional institutions, nor the difficulties of ending decades of human rights abuse and institutionalized impunity, but it is crucial that the transitional government takes immediate steps to address the human rights crisis, or there will be no durable end to the conflict.@ said the organization.

On 20 October, Alexis Sinduhije, a reporter with an independent radio station, *Radio publique africaine*, was arrested and beaten by members of the gendarmerie at the *Brigade spéciale de recherche* (BSR), Special Investigation Unit. He was released after payment of a fine the following day. His arrest and ill-treatment followed a meeting he had with an advance party of South African military officers who were in Burundi to prepare the arrival of an international protection force, composed, at least initially, of South African troops. The government armed forces and gendarmerie are generally hostile to the idea of the international protection force and prospect of further peace-keeping

troops. A number of Tutsi-dominated political parties or movements have also publicly opposed the protection force, calling for the population to protest against and resist Aforeign occupation@.

Recommendations

Amnesty International calls on **the new Transitional Government of Burundi** to ensure that allegations of human rights violations by its own forces are investigated impartially and independently, and those responsible are brought to justice in accordance with international law.

The organization further calls on the new authorities to 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. Prompt lawful action should be taken against any political or community leaders who incite political or ethnic violence or human rights abuses.

Leaders and representatives of political parties or movements should use their influence to encourage respect for human rights during the transitional period and make special efforts to promote a conducive environment for the respect of human rights of all citizens regardless of their ethnic identity or political affiliation.

"All commanders of armed political movements should ensure that ongoing talks in which they are involved establish ways of preventing current and future human rights abuses," the organization said.

Amnesty International appeals to the **international community including inter-governmental organizations and government aid donors** to encourage the Transitional Government of Burundi to increase protection for human rights and provide financial and other support for

human rights initiatives, including by providing human rights training within the security services and also by supporting independent human rights organizations and providing resources for human rights defence activities

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>

