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Burundi: Massacres and abductions of children continue

Whilst the world's attention is directed towards Afghanistan and the wider fall-out of the events of 11 September in the United States of America, Amnesty International today urged the international community not to ignore Burundi, where the short period since the commencement of a government of transition on 1 November has been marked by massacres of civilians by government forces and the abduction of hundreds of children by an armed political group.

"Two weeks into the new transitional government and the key players in the Burundi conflict are showing little sign of strengthening their commitment to the protection of human rights," Amnesty International said.

"Human life continues to be treated with contempt, while cynical efforts are made to drag children as young as 12 into the horrendous cycle of violence that has plagued the country in recent years," the organization added.

*Between 2 and 4 November 2001, at least 93 civilians are reported to have been massacred by government forces at Maramvya in Rural-Bujumbura province. The killings reportedly began at around 1pm on 2 November, apparently in reprisal for an incident the previous day in which combatants, believed to belong to the armed political group the *Forces nationales pour la libération* (FNL), National Liberation Forces, opened fire on a government army vehicle. Some of the civilians were shot as they worked in the fields, while others, who took refuge in their homes when they heard the gunshots, were bayoneted to death. The*

bodies were buried some days later in mass graves, with as many as six bodies to a grave.

The Maramvya killings followed the extrajudicial execution by government forces of at least 31 unarmed civilians, including at least six women and two children, on 25 October in the Buzige and Migereka II collines in Bubanza Province.

In a separate and disturbing new development, another armed political movement, the *Conseil National pour la Dfense de la Djmocratie - Forces pour la Dfense de la Djmocratie* (CNDD-FDD), National Council for the Defence of Democracy - Forces for the Defence of Democracy, has begun abducting school-children and students from schools.

In the early hours of 6 November four teachers and around 54 children, aged between 12 and 15, were forcibly abducted from a primary school in Ruyigi, while on 9 November some 250 children, aged between 15 and 18, were abducted from Musema boarding college in Kayanza province. The college itself was burned down.

All of those abducted from Musema are understood to have been subsequently released or to have escaped, and the four teachers and 25 of the children abducted from Ruyigi have also returned home. However, as many as 29 of the children abducted from Ruyigi remain unaccounted for and their current whereabouts are unknown.

Claims by the CNDD-FDD that the children were taken away in order to protect them from reprisals by government troops appear to be misleading. Some of the children were reportedly made to carry military equipment or assist wounded soldiers, and it is feared that one of the motives in abducting the children may have been to forcibly recruit them as child soldiers for the CNDD-FDD.

On 13 November the United Nations Children=s Fund (UNICEF) reported that over the previous three days 107 children had also been abducted from refugee camps in Tanzania by Hutu armed political groups. The fate of these children is currently unknown.

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate release of all the abducted children and is renewing its appeal to all parties to capitalise on the start of the transitional government by establishing a new era of respect for fundamental human rights in Burundi.

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