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Burundi: On the threshold of disaster

Burundi is on the verge of a humanitarian and human rights crisis Amnesty International warned today, in response to the escalation of the internal conflict over the past few weeks.

"Failure to take immediate meaningful steps to protect the civilian population could have catastrophic repercussions on the human rights situation in the country," Amnesty International said.

"With the peace talks due to resume shortly, all parties to the conflict have an opportunity to prevent a further slide into disaster," the human rights organization added. "The search for a new facilitator should be used as an opportunity to put human rights protection on the agenda of the peace process."

Reports of "disappearances" and incidents of torture in the capital, Bujumbura have increased in recent weeks and serious human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, have been reported in the regroupment camps. Members of the armed forces claim that armed opposition groups have infiltrated the camps, which, if true, further endangers the lives of civilians. Armed opposition groups have also stepped up their attacks against civilians in many provinces of the country.

Furthermore, a number of parties in Bujumbura, angry at the perceived failure of the government and security forces to adequately protect the capital, are deliberately inciting ethnic tension and making veiled calls for violence.

During three weeks in September, the predominantly Tutsi army forcibly relocated more than 320,000 people, mainly Hutus, from the province around the capital into around 50 temporary sites or camps, some of which are still inaccessible to humanitarian organizations. Conditions are appalling and many have no access to shelter or water. In the first week of the regroupment at least 30 people, mostly women and children, are reported to have died as a result primarily of dehydration.

The killing of two expatriate UN workers in Rutana province on 12 October has further exacerbated the situation in the camps as international organizations have withdrawn most personnel.

"The government has claimed that the operation to forcibly relocate civilians into camps was carried out to protect the lives of the civilian population, but in reality it has exposed them to famine, disease, fear and human rights violations."

Reports indicate that up to 36 people, including 22 women, may have been executed by members of the armed forces near the Kibembe regroupment camp, Rural Bujumbura province on 29 October. The soldiers were apparently angry that the civilians had complained about the conditions in the camps. The government claims that those killed were members of the armed opposition.

Repeated attacks on Bujumbura, by Hutu dominated armed opposition groups, resulting in hundreds of deaths, have led to a security crackdown by the government. Scores of people have been

arrested, many arbitrarily, and accused of collaboration with armed opposition groups. Dozens of people have "disappeared" in recent weeks in Bujumbura.

Juvénal Niyonzima and Michel Manirambona "disappeared" following their reported arrest by soldiers in the Cibitoke area of the capital, Bujumbura, on 26 September. Léovin Nzeyimana, who "disappeared" on 19 September, was extrajudicially executed by soldiers and buried in a secret grave in the Kamenge district of Bujumbura. At least 15 other bodies are reported to be buried in the immediate vicinity.

Amnesty International is concerned at increasing reports of torture. Déo Nzeyimana was arrested by soldiers on 22 September 1999 and tortured while detained at the *Brigade spéciale de recherche* (BSR), Special Investigation Unit, in Bujumbura. He is reportedly accused of threatening security and passing information on human rights violations and the population displacement in the area around the capital to the international media.

At night screams of pain, groaning and cries can be heard coming from the headquarters of a military intervention squad Bujumbura, *groupement d'intervention de Bujumbura*, which appears to be used as a secret detention centre. All access to the building is denied to independent observers, and no one knows how many people are held there.

Armed opposition groups also committing serious human rights abuses. While the province around the capital has been particularly affected by conflict, there are recent reports of renewed activity by the armed opposition in the northern provinces of Cibitoke and Kayanza and along the Burundi-Tanzania border.

On 6 October, a regroupment camp in Mubimbi commune was attacked by an armed opposition group and reportedly killed ten civilians and injured three others. Six people were killed including two soldiers in an ambush on an aid vehicle in Kabezi zone, Bujumbura rural south, on 10 October, reportedly by members of the armed opposition wearing military uniforms. On 20 October, over 25 people were killed by members of the armed opposition on Busimba colline, Muramvya province.

"The international community must ensure that all parties to the conflict take all necessary measures to ensure the safety of the civilian population and prevent yet another human rights disaster in Burundi," Amnesty International concluded.
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