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BURUNDI: ARMED GROUPS KILL WITHOUT MERCY

Armed political groups in Burundi have deliberately and arbitrarily killed tens of thousands of unarmed men, women and children. They raped and inflicted other torture on captives, destroyed and looted properties and uprooted from their homes several hundred thousand people. In 1996, armed groups extended their attacks to the southern provinces of Bururi, Makamba and Rutana which resulted in further killings, looting and increased the numbers of refugees and displaced people.

In a report issued today, Amnesty International describes the development of armed groups in Burundi, details human rights abuses committed by them, and urges the Government of Burundi, the armed group leaders, the Burundi political leaders and the foreign governments and inter-governmental organizations to act to stop the bloodshed.

“Everyone has a responsibility to end the death toll in Burundi. Most of the victims are ordinary people who were just in the wrong place at the wrong time,” the human rights organization said.

Armed groups have generally been organized along ethnic lines among the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi communities. However, it is often difficult to tell which group has committed a specific killing or other human rights abuse. Armed groups very rarely claim responsibility for attacks on civilians. The confusion increases when government forces commit human rights violations at about the same time as attacks by armed groups in the same area.

On 26 October 1995 soldiers and armed Tutsi civilians deliberately and arbitrarily killed at least 250 Hutu civilians in Tangara district. On 5 November 1995 Tutsi gangs killed at least 14 unarmed Hutu civilians, including a child, around Mubanga health centre in Mubanga district. On 6 December 1995, a Tutsi armed group attacked a bus which was carrying Hutu civilians in Bujumbura’s Cibitoke suburb who were returning after spending months hiding in the hills. They killed at least seven people and injured 20. At least three hundred people were killed by soldiers in the Kivyuka market on 3 May 1996.

At the same time, Hutu armed groups have been killing government soldiers and Tutsi civilians, who were mostly in camps for the displaced and have been assaulting Hutu opponents. On 23 February 1996, 16 civilians were killed when armed Hutu attacked Buganda in Citibioke province. On 26 February 30 more civilians were killed and two soldiers wounded when a Hutu gang attacked a camp for the displaced and a military post. The following day, the Burundi army reported that Hutu rebels killed 46 people in camps for the displaced in Citiboke province. 51 people were reportedly killed by Hutu rebels at Butezidusti displaced people camp in May 1996.

Armed groups have also attacked foreign nationals most of whom were working for aid organizations. They have accused foreign humanitarian organizations of supporting their opponents as they distributed food and medical aid, or because they have allegedly criticized human rights abuses. Such attacks have not only resulted in loss of life and injury to staff of these organizations, but have also deprived the people of Burundi of vital humanitarian assistance.

Armed groups have also targeted journalists, apparently due to their work in revealing human rights abuses. South African Vincent Francis, head of the Johannesburg office of World Television News, died from his wounds in April 1995 after he was shot in an ambush in northwestern Burundi. His Burundi driver and interpreter were also killed in the ambush. Many Hutu journalists have also been killed.

Armed groups have assassinated dozens of prominent citizens of Burundi, apparently in order to eliminate and intimidate educated or wealthy people who might play a leadership role. Many were Hutu politicians or government officials. Some of those assassinated appear to have been targeted because they exposed human rights abuses by government forces.

In October 1995, Bède Nzobonimpa, governor of Ngozi province, revealed that about 250 Hutu civilians had been killed by government forces in Ngozi's Tangara district. In December, he himself was killed by unidentified gunmen. In May 1996, Sylvestre Mvuse, governor of Citiboke province was killed at an army roadblock after he had denounced the role of the army in the assassination of Bibiane Ntamutumba, a Hutu MP, along with her entire family and at least 20 other people.

"Armed groups leaders should make it clear to their members that attacks on unarmed civilians will not be tolerated," Amnesty International said.

Armed groups have not been the only perpetrators of such atrocities, members of the security forces and other state agents have regularly participated in or condoned human rights abuses. Many members of Hutu armed groups detained in the jails of Burundi were reportedly unlawfully executed. A further cause for worry is that government officials have been encouraging the formation of armed groups among the Tutsi community.

In the rare cases where leaders of Tutsi armed groups have been arrested, they were held for short periods and released without charge or trial. Nevertheless, measures taken by the government to prevent abuses by Tutsi armed groups are few and far between and have so far achieved little.

"This climate of impunity encourages further abuses and increases the fears of Hutu and Tutsi," Amnesty International said.

The organization stressed that these fears will not be removed unless the killings stop and reconciliation begins and those responsible for human rights abuses are held to account. Any political dialogue and settlement between the two groups should be underpinned by human rights safeguards, ensuring that the rights of both Hutu and Tutsi are fully guaranteed.

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