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ZAIRE: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS REFOULEMENT OF RWANDESE AND BURUNDI REFUGEES IN OPEN LETTER TO ZAÏRIAN PRIME MINISTER

Amnesty International has condemned the forcible repatriation or *refoulement* of at least 10,000 Rwandese and Burundi refugees from camps in eastern Zaïre since 19 August.

In an open letter to Zaïrian Prime Minister Kengo wa Dondo, the human rights organization has called for an immediate halt to further forcible return of Rwandese and Burundi refugees from Zaïre.

"These acts of *refoulement* constitute a clear violation of international law by the Zaïrian authorities and are certain to contribute to an escalation of tension in the region," Amnesty International said today.

As a party to United Nations and Organization of African Unity treaties protecting the rights of refugees, Zaïre has pledged itself to respect the principle of *non-refoulement*.

To make matters worse, no efforts are being made to protect the most vulnerable people. Young children have been separated from their parents in hurried and random rounding-up operations.

"We are concerned that some refugees may be killed in the panic and that those who have fled may be denied access to humanitarian assistance," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is concerned about reports that some Zaïrian soldiers have ill-treated refugees in the process of forcing them onto trucks and buses which transport them to the border. There are reports of soldiers looting refugee property and burning housing in Mugunga camp.

Amnesty International's Secretary General has appealed to the Prime Minister to make clear to the commanders of the Zaïrian army units in the area that ill-treatment of refugees is a violation of human rights which will not be tolerated. He has also urged the Zaïrian Prime Minister to ensure that those found responsible for such violations are brought to justice.

"Humanitarian organizations and journalists must be allowed in the camps where refugees are being rounded-up for deportation so that Zaïrian soldiers won't be able to ill-treat refugees without the international community knowing," Amnesty International said.

Rwandese refugees have been reluctant to return home. They have seen how over the last year, many people in Rwanda have been subjected to arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention in notoriously overcrowded prisons where more than 1000 detainees have died, "disappearances" or killings. They also fear that they may be victimized by sectors of the local population.

The escalating violence and insecurity in Burundi also present a grave threat to the security of Burundi nationals forced back to their country. Those refugees who are voluntarily choosing to return should be allowed to do so but none should be forced back against their will.

Among these refugees are those who took part in the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. The Zaïrian Government should adopt the necessary legislation to enable Zaïre to surrender such suspects to the International Tribunal for Rwanda. Amnesty International believes that this would be a positive step towards creating conditions necessary to enable other refugees to return voluntarily.

The organization appreciates that the prolonged presence of such large numbers of refugees is placing a huge burden on the local population in Zaïre and that the overcrowding is having a negative impact on the environment in the area.

In recent months, the security situation has deteriorated with reports of increased cross-border attacks by Rwandese armed groups using the camps in Zaïre as a base for incursions into Rwanda, and allegations of attacks by Rwandese government soldiers on Rwandese refugees in Zaïre. Amnesty International is concerned about continued human rights abuses and intimidation by Rwandese refugee leaders within the camps.

However, none of these factors justify the forcible return of refugees -- including children -- many of whom have not played any part in hostilities. On the contrary, such actions are likely to exacerbate the tensions and escalate the conflict.

Amnesty International is also calling on the international community to help end the humanitarian and human rights crisis in the Great Lakes Region.

"Governments should offer assistance to enable the refugees to be moved voluntarily to where they can live peacefully and without fear of human rights abuses," Amnesty International said. "Without respect for the human rights of refugees and citizens of their host countries, there can be little hope for long-lasting peace."

Amnesty International has repeatedly appealed to the Governments of Rwanda and Burundi to respect human rights and to create the climate of trust and security needed to encourage refugees to return. This must include protecting refugees upon their return and ensuring that they are not subjected to human rights abuses. However, the Zaïrian government is still responsible for ensuring the safety of the refugees in Zaïre until they wish to return and can do so in safety and dignity.

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