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RWANDA/ BURUNDI: URGENT STEPS NEEDED TO RESOLVE REFUGEE CRISIS

GENEVA: A mass return of refugees to Rwanda and Burundi could lead to further large-scale human rights abuses, Amnesty International warned at a press conference in Geneva today.

“A mass return, especially if forced, could lead to a significant increase in arbitrary arrests, detention without trial, “disappearances” and extrajudicial executions,” Amnesty International said.

More than 200,000 Burundi refugees and about 1.7 million Rwandese are still in camps in Zaire and Tanzania; other Rwandese are in camps in Burundi.

According to recent reports, the Zaïrian authorities are planning the progressive closure of refugee camps. These refugees should not be forced to return unless their safety is guaranteed, the human rights organization said in a report released today.

“The governments of the Great Lakes region and the international community should act now to solve this refugee crisis,” Amnesty International said. “All the signs of a further human rights catastrophe are present in the region.”

Measures by Zaire to step up repatriation are creating intense pressure on refugees to return. Under these conditions, there are no guarantees that the resulting return would be truly voluntary in all cases.

“The tragic reality is that these refugees often have nowhere to go,” Amnesty International said. “Six months after the forcible return of around 15,000 Rwandese and Burundi refugees from Zaire, very little has been done to seek a long-term solution to the crisis.”

Amnesty International stressed that respect for human rights is the key to any resolution of the refugee crisis. The organization called on all states to respect their international obligations to protect refugees from human rights abuses

Amnesty International recognizes that the refugee crisis has led to a difficult situation for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations. However, the priorities of these organizations and the host countries should be the voluntary nature of any return and the human rights situation in the country of destination.

Amnesty International is appealing to the governments of Zaire and Tanzania to keep their borders open to those fleeing from human rights violations, and called on the international community to make available adequate human and material resources to enable host countries to shoulder the burden.

In its report, “*Rwanda and Burundi - the return home; rumours and reality*”, Amnesty International highlights the three main factors which are preventing most refugees from returning voluntarily: the absence of security, the absence of justice, and manipulation of information about the real situation in the two countries.

“The human rights situation remains critical, especially in Burundi, where refugees are caught in the middle of the violence,” the organization said. “Survival has become a question of luck.”

In Burundi, increasing violence continues to cause thousands to flee, while Rwandese refugees in the country are threatened by Burundi government security forces and armed groups.

Since October 1993, more than 100,000 people have been killed in Burundi by security forces or armed opposition groups, at a rate of around 1,500 each month during 1995. Violence has become a daily phenomenon in the capital Bujumbura and in the rest of the country.

The country has become divided along ethnic lines and fear prevents people from one ethnic group or political affiliation from transgressing into areas dominated by the other. The justice system is paralysed and the government is unable to control the security forces, who continue to carry out massacres with impunity.

In Rwanda, approximately 66,000 people held in connection with the genocide are detained in grossly overcrowded prisons without charge or trial. Around 2,300 have died since 1994 as a direct result of inhumane conditions and detention and ill-treatment have become a substitute for justice, the organization said.

Members of the former Rwandese government army and militia known as *interahamwe* still control refugee camps, using intimidation and propaganda to discourage refugees from returning.

Amnesty international believes that an essential pre-condition for a voluntary return must be the establishment of a fair system of justice, at the national and international levels.

The organization is calling for the deployment of a sufficient number of independent and competent human rights observers in Rwanda and Burundi as an important contribution to the creation of a climate of security for returnees.

BACKGROUND

The mass movement of populations linked to widespread human rights abuses is not a new phenomenon in the Great Lakes region, but it has reached unprecedented proportions since the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, which claimed as many as one million lives. In its aftermath, two million Rwandese fled their country for Zaire, Tanzania and Burundi.

As a result of the massive human rights abuses in Burundi since 1993, around 200,000 Burundi refugees are still living outside their country. Around the same number are internally displaced within Burundi. Thousands of people continue to seek refuge in neighbouring Zaire and Tanzania.

Sometimes, the only place these refugees feel safe is in a refugee camp. Amnesty International delegates spoke to a plumber from Bubanza (who cannot be named for security reasons) in northwestern Burundi, who fled to Zaire in May 1995 after his village was attacked by militia. In August 1995, he was among those forcibly returned to Burundi by the Zairian army.

One month after his return, he still preferred to remain in the relative security of the transit camp set up at the border. He could not return to his village as his house had been destroyed, but he was prepared to go anywhere he could live in peace. He felt abandoned on all sides; unable to go home, forcibly returned from Zaire, and unable to go to Tanzania because the border had been closed since March 1995.

On 17 January 1996, 15,000 Rwandese refugees fled the camp of Mugano in northeastern Burundi and entered Tanzania, following clashes between the Burundi security forces and armed groups. Several refugees who crossed the border reportedly had gunshot wounds. On 20 and 21 January, a further 16,000 also tried to flee Burundi. They were initially turned back at the Tanzanian border. Some were eventually let in; others began making their way back to Rwanda; others remain in Burundi.

In Rwanda, Amnesty International delegates interviewed returnees who had not been specifically targeted by the authorities. However, there are still no reliable mechanisms to ensure that human rights are protected in the event of a mass return. Despite statements by the Rwandese authorities that refugees are welcome to return, very few refugees who fled in 1994 have chosen to do so.

Rwanda remains the scene of serious human rights violations, even though these are not on the scale of those committed during the genocide of 1994. The massacres by the Rwandese Patriotic Army at Kibeho in April 1995 and Kanama in September 1995 claimed several hundreds, if not thousands, of civilian lives. Extrajudicial executions and “disappearances” continue. On 27 July 1995, Placide Koloni, former administrator of Ruhango, and several members of his family were assassinated. He had just been released from Gitarama prison on the recommendation of a screening committee which found that there was insufficient evidence against him. Disputes over property and personal vendettas are also common.

Armed groups from the refugee camps in Zaire, Tanzania and Burundi have killed unarmed civilians during cross border attacks, in villages close to the border. Some of these incursions appear aimed at eliminating witnesses of massacres during 1994 for fear that they might denounce those responsible.

Amnesty International welcomes the efforts to set up the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, but said that the international community should intensify initiatives to bring to justice individuals suspected of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

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