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GREAT LAKES REGION: REFUGEES VICTIMS OF CURRENT CRISIS

Refugees are not the cause of the problem in the Great Lakes region, but rather are amongst the victims of the current crisis, Amnesty International said in an appeal released today

Amnesty International is concerned that the current emphasis of the international community on the return of refugees to Rwanda is short-sighted and evades the fundamental issue of human rights protection.

Proposals for international or regional intervention to protect human rights, such as calls for "humanitarian corridors," must be premised on providing protection and assistance for those at risk of human rights abuses, whichever country they are in. Attempts to induce, persuade or pressure population groups to move against their will are likely to result in a further serious escalation of human rights abuses if measures are not first introduced to ensure effective protection of their human rights in the places they return to or where they presently are.

"Humanitarian corridors" should not become one-way valves to funnel people back to the country they have fled. They should provide protection, food and other essentials to those who are still too afraid to return to their countries.

Amnesty International is calling on the international community to take urgent steps to provide guarantees for the effective protection of refugees and other groups at risk. Protection should be provided to those who choose voluntarily to return or flee to Rwanda or Burundi and for those who choose to remain in Zaire. It is the absence of such guarantees which feeds the current humanitarian crisis affecting refugees.

Returnees or Zairians fleeing to seek refuge in other countries should also be protected. Amnesty International is concerned that several hundred refugees have reportedly been killed in the last few days on arrival in Burundi where there is no international presence.

A strong international presence in eastern Zaire, Burundi and Rwanda is needed now to monitor human rights and protect all non-combatants. Human rights monitors must have freedom of movement throughout the region and the authority to intervene when human rights are violated. The long term presence of human rights monitors is especially important to ensure the safety of any refugees who return to Rwanda or Burundi. The international community should provide the necessary resources to enable the human rights monitors' work to be effective.

Refugee and returnees camps must be places of safety. They should exclusively be a refuge for non-combatants and unarmed civilians. Effective international supervision will be needed to exclude combatants. The camps will need an impartial law enforcement force to keep them safe for civilians. Refugee camps are to have an exclusively civilian and humanitarian character and this should be enforced. Those who are armed or members of militia and armed groups should not be given entry to camps.

Amnesty International is calling on the Rwandese Government to demonstrate visibly that refugees have nothing to fear on return. There must be real political will and clear measures to put an end to the pattern of arbitrary arrests, killings and “disappearances” and the detention without charge or trial of around 84,000 people in life-threatening conditions. The UNHCR and the United Nations Human Rights Field Operation for Rwanda (UNHRFOR) should play a key role in monitoring the safety of returnees on a long term basis.

“The international community should share the burden in assisting countries hosting and protecting refugees to ensure that responsibility does not fall solely on the neighbouring states,” Amnesty International said .

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