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RWANDA: RETURN OF REFUGEES TO RWANDA DOES NOT SIGNAL END TO HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN GREAT LAKES REGION

KIGALI -- In the context of the rapidly evolving human tragedy in eastern Zaire, an Amnesty International delegation currently in Kigali and led by the organization's Secretary General Pierre Sané called on the international community and governments in the Great Lakes region to focus on the continuing threats to human rights throughout the area.

"Urgent attention must be paid to ongoing human rights violations which are being left in the shadow of the relief operation," said Mr Sané.

During high level meetings in Kigali this past week, including with senior government ministers and foreign ambassadors, Amnesty International spelled out its concerns about the current human rights situation and the impact of the massive movement of refugees and other populations in Zaire, Rwanda, and Burundi.

Meetings were held with Rwandese Vice President Paul Kagami, the Minister of Rehabilitation, Minister of Justice and Minister of Foreign Affairs, and with ambassadors from Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the USA.

"The highest priority must be the protection of the human rights of all people in the region -- those of the returning refugees but also of all those who continue to face human rights abuses in Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi," said Mr Sané.

The increased challenges now facing the Rwandese authorities demand that immediate steps be taken to ensure that a fair justice system begins functioning promptly. Extrajudicial executions, "disappearances", arbitrary arrests, prison conditions which constitute cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment for more than 86,000 men, women and children, and a complete absence of trials for human rights offenders and perpetrators of the genocide constitute the human rights background against which the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees must be addressed.

"Assurances of good intentions made by the Rwandese government must become a visible reality, otherwise there could be an immediate and dramatic deterioration in the human rights situation," declared Mr Sané.

Although Rwandese government authorities have stated clearly that returning refugees would not be arrested during transition at the border, Amnesty International fears that the number of arbitrary arrests may increase significantly as a result of the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees in the communities from which they fled in 1994 in the aftermath of the genocide. Unacknowledged arrests and "disappearances" may also result from the inability of the authorities to register refugees returning in such large numbers.

“The struggle against impunity means that those responsible for grave human rights violations in Rwanda during and following the genocide must be held fully accountable for their crimes but attention is needed to ensure full respect for international standards of justice which cannot yet be said to exist in the country,” said Mr Sané.

While the international community focuses on the refugees returning to Rwanda the situation inside Burundi is fast deteriorating and demands immediate action if further human rights disasters are to be averted. Recent reports received by Amnesty International testify to a steady escalation of widespread killings at the hands of the Burundi security forces and armed opposition groups. Hundreds of civilians are still being killed in many parts of the country. Returning refugees from Zaire have been among those targeted at the border and in Burundi’s northwestern province of Citiboke.

“The perpetrators of these crimes must not be allowed to take advantage of the diversion of attention onto events in Zaire and Rwanda to continue to slaughter unarmed civilians in Burundi away from international scrutiny,” said Mr Sané.

While many refugees may be ready to return to Rwanda, their mass return in the present context should not be seen as the long awaited solution to the problems of the Great Lakes region. There is still a question mark over the long term safety of these returning refugees.

“This is not the end of the story,” said Mr Sané. “The international community must remain vigilant and use this opportunity to ensure that long term human rights guarantees are put in place across the Great Lakes region.”

Inside Zaire, the international force has a responsibility to ensure the protection of those Rwandese and Burundi refugees who have not returned and of the local populations in eastern Zaire who remain at great risk of human rights abuses in the context of violence fuelled by fighting between various armed factions.

“It should be remembered that attacks by armed groups on refugee camps and other displaced populations are among the significant factors which have prompted refugees to return,” said Mr Sané.

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