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BURUNDI: THE KILLINGS CONTINUE AS THE
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY WATCHES
AND WAITS

NAIROBI – Immediate action is needed to stop the army and armed opposition groups in Burundi from continuing their daily deliberate and arbitrary killings, Amnesty International delegates just returned from Burundi and Rwanda told a press conference today.

"The fact that killings continue with no one brought to justice is fuelling the tensions and setting the stage for more human rights abuses," according to Andrew Clapham, Amnesty International's representative to the United Nations. "Ending this cycle of impunity is crucial."

One of the key recommendations of the Amnesty International delegation is that the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations (UN) should immediately set up an international commission of inquiry to identify the perpetrators and bring them to justice. The commission should also study the causes of the widespread violence and make recommendations on

other measures required to end the killings and other abuses.

At the press conference, Amnesty International is also releasing a new report, *Burundi: Struggle for Survival -- Immediate action vital to stop killings*, which details how the Burundi armed forces are pursuing a ruthless policy of reprisals against the civilian Hutu population, killing and displacing thousands from neighbourhoods of Bujumbura, such as Bwiza and Buyenzi, in March 1995. Virtually all the victims of the Tutsi-dominated armed forces are Hutu. Armed Hutu and Tutsi groups also kill those outside their ethnic group or political persuasion.

While the latest Amnesty International delegation was in Bujumbura in early June, they could hear the fighting in another suburb called Kamenge. There, the army first surrounded that suburb and then emptied it, forcing civilians to flee for their lives. Thousands of people fled to the hills. Observers later allowed into parts of Kamenge reported finding bodies of the elderly and children who could not flee, apparently shot or bayoneted to death.

An information blackout on events such as in Kamenge allows the Burundi army, as well as armed Hutu groups, to carry out killings with little prospect of accountability. The OAU Observer Mission (MIOB) has a mandate to observe army operations, yet in practice it

cannot independently investigate events as they happen nor report publicly on its findings.

At the heart of the present crisis is the failure of the international community to respond to a call by Burundi's president to carry out an inquiry into the coup attempt of 21 October 1993, which resulted in the deaths of not only the president and other political leaders, but also more than 50,000 civilians.

"It is 18 months since the Burundi authorities requested this inquiry and everyone we spoke to in Burundi stressed how central such an inquiry is to breaking the impasse over impunity," Mr Clapham said.

For the international commission of inquiry to work, it must have the strong backing of the UN Security Council, with a clear role in the follow up to its conclusion, so that the perpetrators are brought to justice promptly and in accordance with international standards for fair trials.

Amnesty International is recommending that the commission be composed of independent, professional investigators. They should be seen in Burundi as neutral in the context of the country's history and as impervious to political pressure. Such an international commission of inquiry, established and conducted along international guidelines, should go beyond merely reporting the truth, but should collect evidence usable in subsequent trials.

Journalists cannot work in Burundi in a professional and independent way without risking their lives. On 7 June, it was reported that Pamphile Simbizi, a Hutu journalist from Burundi national radio, was bayoneted to death by a soldier in the vicinity of Kamenge. "This killing of an independent Hutu journalist illustrates the problem of being seen to act impartially in such a divided society," Mr Clapham said.

The media in Burundi, particularly newspapers, are becoming increasingly partisan. Some are even publishing "death lists" and other incitements to ethnic violence with no prospect of prosecution by the authorities.

"Knowing what's happening in Bujumbura and the countryside is actually very difficult," according to Mr Clapham. "Not even the government ministers we spoke to on the recent mission were adequately informed about the latest killings."

Plans for UN human rights experts and observers for the country have been on the table for months but remain unimplemented. Such a presence could play a deterrent role, but the UN and the government both need to define clearly the aims of such a mission and ensure that the observer field officers can travel independently and report publicly.

Amnesty International said it was important that the director of such an international expert observer mission have the autonomy and authority to select and rotate the field officers, who will have to work under very difficult conditions. The OAU observers now in Burundi, together with any other independent observers which are sent, can play a vital role in restraining the army and building confidence and diffusing tension within the terrorized population.

Lack of an independent and impartial judiciary and police has ensured that virtually no credible attempts are made to investigate human rights abuses and bring perpetrators to justice. Suspicion surrounds the prospect of justice at the hands of Burundi's Tutsi-dominated judiciary and the legal profession, and security forces. Law enforcement and arrests are carried out by members of the armed forces who in practice are not answerable to the judiciary. Most of those arrested arbitrarily or detained unlawfully are Hutu who are often subjected to torture or other forms of ill-treatment, extrajudicial execution or "disappearance". The judiciary has failed to protect the rights of victims, and in some cases it has colluded with the security forces. Governments, the UN and the OAU should commit themselves to assisting in the reform and training the present judiciary and security forces to create an independent and impartial judiciary and non-partisan security forces which will respect international standards.

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