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Burundi: Regional summit should give priority to protection of human rights

Amnesty International is appealing to regional Heads of State or their representatives meeting on 20 July 2003 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to inject a renewed momentum to ending the armed conflict in Burundi and to give protection of human rights priority on their agenda.

"The gap between paper agreements and the situation of Burundian civilians in constant fear for their lives, property and security grows ever larger," said Amnesty International.

In a letter to the Heads of State and those facilitating negotiations, aimed at preventing further mass human rights abuses, Amnesty International is calling on the participants:

to give due consideration to human rights abuses which are being committed by all parties to the armed conflict and to measures which can be undertaken in the immediate and longer term to ensure protection for human rights;

in relation to any discussion of peace-keeping forces or other possible military intervention which may be considered during the summit, to consider the situation in the wider Great Lakes region, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Should any peace-keeping force lose or be perceived to lose its impartiality or should a partisan military intervention take place, the risk of the conflict escalating across borders within the region as well as within Burundi itself is considerable. Such an escalation would dramatically affect the human rights and humanitarian situation within the region;

to exclude from any peace-keeping operations forces with a known record of human rights violations in their own countries or abroad;

to support Amnesty International's call on the UN Security Council to impose an arms embargo on all parties to the conflict;

to intervene as a matter of urgency with the Government of Burundi to prevent reprisals against the Hutu population in the wake of the recent PALIEPHUTU-FNL (Rwasa) attack on Bujumbura;

to call for the mandate of the African Union peace-keeping force to be urgently amended to include specific reference to protection of the lives and other fundamental rights of unarmed civilians, and for the force to be given the resources to enable it to carry out these tasks effectively. The current crisis demonstrates the urgency of this issue.

Amnesty International is appealing, again, to all parties to the conflict to take immediate steps to prevent further human rights abuses, including killings of unarmed civilians, torture including rape, hostage-taking, and use of child soldiers, by their forces.

Background

The week-long attack on the Bujumbura, launched on 7 July 2003 by the Hutu armed political group, PALIPEHUTU-FNL (Rwasa) is a dramatic illustration of the escalating armed conflict within Burundi, in which human rights abuses by all parties continue unabated, fuelling the conflict and hindering attempts to attain its resolution.

While a resolution of the political crisis and armed conflict has progressed on paper, in reality armed conflict has escalated substantially since the signing of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi (Peace Agreement) in August 2000. The human rights and humanitarian crises have deepened simultaneously. All parties to the conflict share responsibility for this.

The chances of a successful resolution of the armed conflict and related human rights crisis through implementation of the Peace Agreement were undermined not least by the non-participation in negotiations of the two main active armed political groups, the CNDD-FDD and PALIPEHUTU-FNL, the reasons for which remain contested. This flaw has proved costly in terms of human rights abuses and lives lost since then, in the context of on-going armed conflict and political rivalry.

The eventual signing in December 2002 of a cease-fire agreement between the Government of Burundi and the CNDD-FDD (Nkurunziza), albeit with significant outstanding issues, represented an important step towards potentially ending conflict between them, and thus potentially improving the human rights situation dramatically. However, since then, the initiative appears lost; both parties have violated the cease-fire agreement repeatedly, and armed conflict and human rights abuses have escalated.

Other armed political groups, including the CNDD (Nyangoma), CNDD-FDD (Ndayikengurikye) and PALIPEHUTU-FNL (Mugabarabona), are either signatories to the Peace Agreement and/or have since signed cease-fire agreements. However the real status of their military leaders and the nature and size of their forces is the subject of debate. These groups are actively recruiting new combatants including from the *Gardiens de la paix* (an armed but unpaid government militia responsible for unlawful killings and other grave human rights violations) many of whom are former child soldiers.

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