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BURUNDI: LEADERS MUST STOP USING CIVILIANS AS PAWNS IN THEIR DEADLY POWER GAME

Amnesty International strongly condemns this weekend's massacre of more than 300 people at Bugendana, Burundi, and urgently calls on the Burundian authorities and leaders of armed groups to stop subjecting unarmed and defenceless civilians to death and suffering.

"There is no justification for subjecting women, children and the elderly to deliberate and arbitrary killings, maiming and displacement. Burundi citizens and Rwandese refugees are being used as pawns in a deadly power game," Amnesty International said today.

"We appreciate that the Government of Burundi has declared a week of mourning for the victims, however the occasion should also be used to remember the thousands of other people who were killed in Burundi during the past two months and more than 100,000 since 1993."

In May, there were reports of massacres apparently perpetrated by the Burundi armed forces which claimed at least 1,200 lives in Kivyuka, Buhoro and Mugina. The killings were never investigated. The military authorities have claimed that insecurity in the region makes investigations impossible and the government has remained silent about these massacres.

The same pattern repeated itself in June with massacres in Gishubi, Makebuko, Mumuri and Maramvya -- with at least 100 people killed in each incident. Soon after the massacre of at least 90 people by Hutu armed groups in Teza in July, the army reportedly retaliated in Bukeye and Kiganda areas, killing at least 500 people.

"Organizing mourning for one category of people while belittling or ignoring the deaths of thousands of others is not going to deter what has become a killing competition in Burundi. Instead it will exacerbate the tensions between Hutu and Tutsi communities of Burundi," Amnesty International said.

Since the massacre in Bugendana on 20 July, Amnesty International has received reports of killings by the army in Rushubi, Mutumba and Muhuta in Rural Bujumbura province. At the same time, arbitrary arrests and unlawful detentions, political assassinations, "disappearances" and unfair trials -- whose victims were mainly Hutu -- have been going on unabated, without international scrutiny.

Amnesty International is concerned that Burundian authorities hide killings by government forces and Tutsi militia, while selectively providing journalists with information and access to massacres carried out by Hutu-dominated armed groups.

The organization is calling on all parties to the conflict in Burundi to take immediate measures to prevent killings of unarmed and defenceless civilians, to exercise restraint and to take measures to prevent reprisal killings.

Amnesty International is also calling on the Governments of Rwanda and Burundi to live up to their international obligations related to the protection of refugees by immediately stopping the forced repatriation of Rwandese refugees from Burundi to Rwanda. Since 19 July, more than 11,000 Rwandese refugees have been forcibly returned from Burundi to Rwanda as the Burundi security forces proceed with their plans to close down refugee camps. Many other refugees have fled into the hills for fear of being forced back to Rwanda. It is reported that five Rwandese refugees were shot dead in Burundi on 20 July. Three more reportedly died from suffocation and exhaustion after being transported to the border.

“We know from reliable sources that very few people volunteered to return and that coerced consents by refugees cannot be said to constitute an informed decision to return,” Amnesty International said. “We have no doubt that the Governments of Burundi and Rwanda have connived in this flagrant abuse of human rights.”

“Given the interaction of events in these two countries, we have reasons to worry about continued collusion in the use of violence between the two governments which could lead to further human rights violations in both countries.”

Amnesty International believes that the threat of insecurity and the worsening human rights situation in Rwanda are among the factors which prevent refugees from returning voluntarily. Arbitrary arrests are continuing and killings by the Rwandese security forces and armed opposition groups are on the increase. Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Rwandese Government to ensure that a climate of human rights safeguards exists in the country to build confidence within refugees outside.

“We fear that such an atmosphere is not yet in place and that forced repatriation will only exacerbate the situation. We fully support the call of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that the forced repatriations stop now,” Amnesty International said.

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