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Burundi: the cycle of killings continues

Hundreds of unarmed civilians are still being killed in Burundi with almost complete impunity, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

“Burundi’s human rights crisis will continue unless both the military and armed opposition groups are held to account for their abuses and learn to respect human rights,” the human rights organization added.

Following an Amnesty International mission to Burundi earlier this year, the report, “*Burundi: No Respite without Justice*”, cites hundreds of examples of the killings of unarmed civilians, between November 1998 to March 1999.

“In one province only -- *Rural Bujumbura* -- over 600, and possibly many more, unarmed civilians were deliberately killed by members of the armed forces, during this period. Scores of others were killed in other provinces still experiencing conflict,” the organisation said.

The army’s prime response to activity by Hutu-dominated armed opposition groups appears to be indiscriminate reprisal killings against a population which they regard as suspect. Attempts to protect civilians are clearly ineffective, non-existent or undermined by suspicion or revenge.

While much of the report looks at violations carried out, or attributed to members of the armed forces, and at the response -- or lack of it -- of government and military officials, the document also details abuses by armed opposition groups - and at their response to these abuses. During this same period, armed opposition groups have also been responsible for high numbers of human rights abuses, particularly killings of civilians. Soldiers too have been arrested and summarily executed.

At least 36 civilians, including nine children, were killed by the FDD, *Front pour la défense de la démocratie*, Front for the Defence of Democracy, in Mabanda and Kibago communes on 13 and 14 January. Armed opposition groups have also been responsible for the summary executions of soldiers who are *hors de combat*. Young children have been recruited into the armed opposition.

The CNDD-FDD, the *Comité national pour la défense de la démocratie - Front pour la défense de la démocratie*, National Committee for the Defence of Democracy - Front for the Defence of Democracy, responded to Amnesty International’s enquiries regarding certain abuses. However, there was no indication that any of the abuses had been investigated.

“The existing mechanisms for bringing soldiers accused of human rights violations to justice are seriously weak. Although the government has proposed a number of reforms designed

to address some of the fundamental flaws in military justice system, they do not go far enough,” Amnesty International added.

There are several causes for such abuses:

Years of contempt by the armed forces for the system of justice.

Poor quality of trials. Judges are not adequately trained, nor are they independent. In the majority of cases they are still subject to military hierarchy.

Poor knowledge of procedures and even the law. Immaculée Nindorera was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment by Bujumbura military court in 1995, although, as she was aged 15 at the time of the offence, the maximum penalty she should have incurred through law was 10 years. Tried without a lawyer, she did not appeal against her sentence. She now has no recourse.

· Many allegations of human rights abuses are simply dismissed, not investigated. Despite substantive evidence of the involvement of soldiers in the killing of 14 men on 4 March in Kabezi, *Rural Bujumbura*, no one has been prosecuted. Soldiers who had forced the men to accompany them, returned and told the waiting women to begin mourning. They were later told by a delegation of soldiers and members of parliament, that in the interests of reconciliation, they should forget the past.

Since the period covered by the report, killings by both the armed opposition and armed forces have continued and no one has been brought to justice.

On 25 May 1999, 11 people were extrajudicially executed in Ruziba, *Bujumbura rural*. Four of those killed were reportedly children under the age of four who were pulled out of their houses at night, stood against a wall and shot in the head at close range. The killings occurred when a group of soldiers came to the area with the local administrative official looking for a man who was accused of collaboration with the armed opposition. Not finding him, they identified people with a family link to him, taking them out of their houses and killing them. Four women and three men are reported to have been extrajudicially executed.

In July, on day after his trial by Bujumbura military court, Corporal Bonaventure Ndikumana was summarily executed, in contravention of Burundian legal procedures. Corporal Ndikumana, who was represented by the head of the Burundian Bar, had submitted an appeal against his sentence. It was not heard.

In late June and July 1999, armed opposition groups are reported to have killed at least 30 civilians - often summarily executed after ambushes. Over 10 people were killed in an ambush on a bus in Rutana province in July.

“Unless all parties to the conflict introduce accountability there will be no peace, and the right to life will be continually denied,” Amnesty International concluded.

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