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Burundi: Accountability protects human rights

The Government of Burundi must lift the blanket of impunity and take effective action to end the escalating pattern of killings of civilians by the armed forces, said Irene Khan, Amnesty International's Secretary General, in Bujumbura today.

Speaking at the end of an official visit to Burundi, Irene Khan said that the military commanders of units suspected to be responsible for human rights violations must be suspended pending full and independent investigations to establish individual responsibilities for such killings.

Irene Khan welcomed the assurances from the Government of Burundi to Amnesty International to prosecute the military commanders responsible for the recent massacre in Itaba Commune, Gitega province. "For the sake of the women, children, and men who were killed brutally in Itaba, the words of the Government must now be matched by action", she added. "Previous promises by the authorities to investigate massacres and bring those responsible to justice have seldom materialised. Predictably, this has bred a culture of impunity that is manifested in a cycle of killings, of which Itaba is only a recent dramatic and tragic example. Sadly further killings of unarmed civilians have taken place since".

Expressing her deep concern at the dramatic increase in killings of civilians by the Burundi army in recent months, Irene Khan said, "Only firm action by the government to investigate and bring to justice those responsible will end this blatant disregard for human life, human rights and international humanitarian law".

Amnesty International is particularly concerned that the dramatic increase in killings by the armed forces followed public statements by the spokesperson of the Burundian armed forces justified attacks on civilians caught in conflict zones. The activities of armed political groups can never justify human rights violations against the civilian population.

She also expressed concern at the violence which armed political groups continue to inflict on the civilian population, disregarding their most basic rights.

Amnesty International called on the Government to institute prompt, independent and impartial investigations of all unlawful killings of civilians; make the findings public; to bring to justice those suspected of all involvement at all levels in accordance with international standards and without recourse to the death penalty; to protect fully all witnesses against any threats or reprisals; pending investigations, suspend military commanders of units responsible for human rights violations.

"The people of Burundi are looking for courageous and principled leadership, respecting human rights. History has shown that there can be no peace in Burundi without justice and respect for the human rights of all people. I call on the Transitional Government as well as the political armed groups to end the cycle of killings and impunity, and to respect the principles of international humanitarian law", Irene Khan said.

"I urge the international community not to ignore the situation in Burundi", she said.

Background

The Secretary General of Amnesty International led a high-level mission to Burundi from 22-26 September 2002 to discuss with the Government of Burundi grave violations of human rights, massive killings of civilians, torture and prolonged detention as well as the situation of children in detention.

In addition to Bujumbura, the delegation visited Gitega and Ngozi and met with senior government officials, including the President, the Vice-President, the Ministers for Interior, Justice and Home Affairs, and the Army Chief of Staff. The delegation also met with human rights activists, members of civil society, and victims of human rights abuses.

The delegation collected information indicating that a large number of civilians, including women and children, were deliberately killed in Itaba commune, Gitega province by the Burundi army on 9 September. The Government of Burundi has acknowledged the responsibility of the armed forces for these extrajudicial executions.

The killings in Itaba were sadly, predictable. In a report published in June 2002, Amnesty International catalogued a systematic pattern of extrajudicial killings by government troops in reprisal for the activities of armed political groups, who are themselves responsible for scores of unlawful killings of unarmed civilians. Very few of these killings have been investigated and no one has been held to account for these killings. The Government has not responded to the report and appears to have failed to take any effective measures to prevent further killings.

Public Document

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