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Burundi: Torture again on the rise!

Amnesty International expressed concern today at the significant increase in cases of torture and unlawful detention in Burundi.

"Since the Forces nationales de libération (FNL), National Liberation Forces, attacked and occupied parts of the capital, Bujumbura, in late February and early March, there has been a noticeable escalation of torture by members of the Burundian security forces. We are also investigating a number of cases where people arrested have been taken to unknown places of detention and may have been extrajudicially executed", the organization said.

All detainees, including children, are vulnerable to torture and ill-treatment in the early stages of detention by the military or gendarmerie in Burundi. This risk is increased if they are held incommunicado or accused of a political offence, such as suspicion of participation or collaboration with an armed opposition group.

"We are calling on Burundian President Pierre Buyoya and other top civilian and security force authorities to intervene immediately to prevent further torture, deaths in custody, and "disappearances" and to release those against whom there is no evidence to substantiate the accusation.

One of Bujumbura's most notorious places of detention is a gendarmerie building which belongs to an elite unit known as the Groupement d'intervention, Intervention Squad. Torture and cases of "disappearance" or suspected extrajudicial execution are routinely reported from this building, and people living nearby report hearing

screams at night. It is virtually impossible for human rights groups, and even members of the civilian justice system, such as the State Public Prosecutor, to gain access to detainees held in the building.

"Most of the people whose cases we are monitoring at the moment have been severely beaten with gun butts, metal rods or sticks, on the legs, back, head and face. Some have been tied for hours or days leaving gaping flesh wounds. Others have been threatened with execution, or denied food and water," the human rights organization said.

In all the recent cases documented by Amnesty International since late February, detainees have been arrested on suspicion of collaboration with the FNL and have been tortured in military and gendarmerie custody. However, in most cases, the basis of the accusations seems to be largely unfounded.

Matenga, a farmer was arrested by soldiers on 18 March as he visited friends in Maramvya, Mutimbuzi commune near Bujumbura. The soldiers accused him of collaboration with the FNL apparently solely because he was not from Maramvya but from a nearby village.

"This is a typical case, where the detainee is held outside the framework of the law, and the protection it offers, he is extremely vulnerable to torture or even extrajudicial execution."

In similar cases, the detainee may eventually reappear. However, the failure of soldiers and gendarmes to abide by lawful arrest and detention procedures, sometimes refusing to acknowledge a detention, aggravates the situation.

Amnesty International has also been raising concern for a group of men who were arrested by soldiers on 16 March, in the Maramvya area. They were briefly held and severely beaten at a nearby military facility, before being transferred to a military camp in Cibitoke province, northern Burundi. All but one of them, Emile Masabo, have now been released. He is still at risk of torture.

Background

According to Amnesty International's information, at least three people are currently detained by the *Groupement d'intervention*. They reportedly include a teenager, Léonidas Ntakahutimana, aged 16, who is reported to have been severely beaten. He is accused of collaboration with the FNL. He had been forced by FNL combatants, as they retreated to their bases, to carry property they had looted during an attack on his home district of Kinama in late 2000. When he returned to Kinama he was accused of collaboration with the FNL. On 29 March, he was returned to the *Groupement d'intervention*.

A man, known as "Safari" who was arrested in connection with an attack, attributed to the FNL, on a civilian aircraft landing at Bujumbura airport in November 2000, was reportedly tortured to death at the *Groupement d'intervention*. The State Public Prosecutor set up a government commission of inquiry to investigate the attack on the aircraft and the people arrested, two of whom were also tortured at the *Groupement d'intervention*.

On 22 March 2001, Amnesty International published a report, *Burundi: Between hope and fear* (AI Index: AFR 16/007/2001) which looked at the human rights situation prior to and since signature of the peace agreement in August 2000, and challenges facing those intent on restoring respect for human rights.

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