

PUBLIC

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To: Health professionals
Copy: CAFRAN groups, Burundi coordinators
From: Medical Office / Central Africa Subregional Team
Date: 22 December 1999

MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION

**Conditions in “regroupment” (forced relocation) camps
BURUNDI**

Theme: forcible relocation / unlawful killings / ill-treatment / lack of medical care

Summary

Since September 1999, the Tutsi-dominated armed forces and government of Burundi have forcibly moved approximately 80% of the population of the province of Rural Bujumbura from their homes, forcing most into various “regroupment” camps throughout the province. Similar camps have also been established in the southern province of Rutana. Those affected by the regroupment operation are overwhelmingly Hutu. Conditions in the regroupment camps are appalling: outbreaks of disease have been reported and the risk of a major epidemic is growing daily. Many serious human rights violations have been reported to have been committed in, or in the vicinity of, the camps. Amnesty International is calling on the Burundian authorities to end the practice of forcibly relocating people and restricting their freedom of movement, to protect those inside and outside the camps from human rights violations, to prevent the spread of disease and to ensure that those in the camps have access to humanitarian aid.

Recommended Actions

Appeals are requested, preferably in French, from health professionals to the addresses below:

Letters should call

- for an immediate end to the practice of forcibly relocating people and restricting their freedom of movement;
- for people to be immediately allowed to leave the camps, if they so wish;
- for immediate steps be taken to prevent the spread of life threatening disease and to improve conditions in the camps, including by allowing NGOs and international organizations full access to the camps; and
- for impartial and thorough investigations of human rights violations which are reported to have occurred in or near the camps.

In your letter you may if you wish refer to the mounting international concern at and condemnation of the regroupment operation -- in particular to the Organization of African Unity's demand of 17 December 1999 that the regroupment camps be dismantled.

If you receive no reply from the government or other recipients within two months of dispatch of your letter, please send a follow-up letter seeking a response. Please check with the medical team if you are sending appeals after 1 March 2000, and copy any replies you do receive to the International Secretariat (att: medical team).

Please note that it can be difficult to get faxes through -- please keep trying. If you are unable to get letters through by fax, please send by post. However you should check first with your post office to see whether there is currently a postal service to Burundi (postal services to the country are frequently disrupted).

At the time of writing, the political and human rights situation in Burundi is critical. In October AI launched a Rapid Response Action in response to the deteriorating situation -- see AI Index: AFR 16/25/99 and AFR 16/31/99 for further information. Recent public documents on Burundi include *Burundi: Appeal to protect civilians* (AFR 16/26/99, October 1999) and *Burundi: No respite without justice* (AFR 16/12/99, August 1999). The last document can be found on the Amnesty International website <http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/aipub/1999/AFR/11601299.htm>

ADDRESSES

Minister for Internal Affairs and Public Security
Col. Ascension TWAGIRAMUNGU
Ministre de l'Intérieur et de la Sécurité Publique
Ministère de l'Intérieur
Bujumbura, Burundi
Telegrams: Ministre Intérieur, Bujumbura, Burundi
Faxes: + 257 22 19 82
Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

Minister of Defence
Lieutenant-Col. Alfred NKURUNZIZA
Ministre de la Défense Nationale
Ministère de la Défense Nationale
BP 1870 Bujumbura, Burundi
Telegrams: Ministre Défense, Bujumbura, Burundi
Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

President
Major Pierre BUYOYA
Président de la République
Présidence de la République
BP 1870 Bujumbura, Burundi
Telegrams: Major Buyoya, Bujumbura, Burundi
Fax: + 257 22 74 90
Salutation: Monsieur le Président / Dear President

Letters (in English, preferably) are also requested to former South African President Nelson Mandela who has agreed to mediate between to parties to the conflict in Burundi.

Letters should politely request Mr Mandela to use his good offices to intercede with the authorities in Burundi and to raise with them the points mentioned above.

Nelson Mandela
Mediator to the Burundi Peace Process
c/o The President's Office

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Private Bag X1000

Pretoria 0001

South Africa

Fax: +27 12 319 1500

Salutation: Dear Mr Mandela

COPIES TO:

Minister for Human Rights

Eugène NINDORERA

Ministre des droits de la Personne humaine, des réformes institutionnelles,
et des relations avec l'Assemblée nationale

Ministère des droits de la Personne humaine

Bujumbura, Burundi

Faxes: + 257 21 75 49

and to diplomatic representatives of Burundi accredited to your country.

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Since September 1999, the Tutsi-dominated armed forces and government of Burundi have forcibly moved approximately 80% of the population of the province of Rural Bujumbura from their homes, forcing most into various "regroupment" camps throughout the province¹. Similar camps have also been established in the southern province of Rutana. Those affected by the regroupment operation are overwhelmingly Hutu. Conditions in the regroupment camps are appalling: outbreaks of disease have been reported and the risk of major epidemic is growing daily. Many serious human rights violations have been reported to have been committed in or in the vicinity of the camps. Amnesty International is calling on the Burundian authorities to end the practice of forcibly relocating people and restricting their freedom of movement, to protect those inside and outside the camps from human rights violations, to prevent the spread of disease and to ensure that those in the camps have access to humanitarian aid.

Escalation of the crisis

For several months there has been increased military activity in Rural Bujumbura, with frequent attacks by armed opposition groups on the capital, Bujumbura, and in a number of provinces. Reprisals by the government armed forces for military activity by the armed opposition has often led to mass killing of unarmed civilians, who they accuse of collaborating with, or supporting, the armed opposition. The armed opposition groups have also carried out deliberate and arbitrary killings of unarmed civilians.

Although the government has claimed that the regroupment operation is to protect the lives of the civilian population in the context of sustained internal conflict, in reality the government has created the conditions for humanitarian disaster and mass human rights violations, putting the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in jeopardy by making those outside the camps potential targets for military action and placing those inside the camps at risk of disease.

Massive regroupment started in mid-September 1999. In many cases people were told to leave their homes immediately and were unable to bring possessions with them. In the first week of the regroupment in September 1999, at least 30 people, mostly women and children, are reported to have died as a result primarily of dehydration. In less than three weeks over 260,000 people were forcibly displaced, and moved from their homes. Virtually all those affected are Hutu.

¹From February 1996, the rural Hutu population in areas of conflict in Burundi was forcibly rounded up by the armed forces and relocated into camps, commonly referred to as regroupment camps. By the end of 1996, up to 500,000 Hutu were reported to have been moved and put into such camps. Although this was ostensibly for reasons of protection, it is clear that it was a military strategy aimed at keeping tighter control over the Hutu population and removing potential support for the Hutu-dominated armed opposition. Some of these original "regroupment" camps, particularly in northern Burundi, where armed conflict had ceased, were closed and the population has been allowed to return to their homes, or has been moved to smaller sites nearer to their homes. However, with the intensification of the conflict the government has resorted to large scale population displacement.

There are now about 50 camps in Rural Bujumbura province and three others for internally displaced persons, currently estimated to number 800,000². Between them, these camps held 316,700 people at the end of December. There is another related regroupment site in Bujumbura town holding 12,000. Some regroupment camps commonly hold around 10,000 people, although the regroupment camp in Ruyaga, Rural Bujumbura, is said to contain around 30,000. Humanitarian assistance is currently only being provided to 24 sites, although others are being evaluated. Some sites are inaccessible to independent agencies. The extremely limited access of independent witnesses to the camps must heighten fears that human rights violations could be going on unrecorded.

In the southern province of Rutana, also experiencing an intensification of the conflict, both Hutu and Tutsi civilians have been forced into regroupment camps. However, they have been separated, so that Hutu are in one site, Tutsi another. In the past when this has occurred, there has been a striking degree in the difference of protection offered on separate sites and in the conditions in camps, with the sites holding Hutu being much less protected and with worse conditions.

Human rights violations in the camps

The camps are under military control and eye witnesses speak of a high degree of intimidation, and voice fears of ill-treatment and punishment in the camps, by members of the armed forces. Many homes have been destroyed and looted in the province reportedly by members of the armed forces, often accompanied by armed Tutsi civilians.

The evacuation of such large areas of Rural Bujumbura in particular has created a military zone -- effectively a free fire zone -- where everyone outside the camp will be considered a member of the armed opposition, and as such a military target. In the past, hundreds of people have been killed in such zones, including unarmed civilians, women and young children.

The camps are vulnerable to human rights abuses by both the government armed forces and armed opposition groups. On 6 October, a regroupment camp in Mubimbi commune, Rural Bujumbura, was attacked by the armed opposition. Ten people are reported to have been killed and three injured during the attack. On or around 10 October 1999, up to 13 people were killed in a regroupment camp in Ruyaga, Rural Bujumbura, by members of the armed forces. According to people in the camp, in which around 30,000 people are contained, soldiers came to the camp and asked if members of the armed opposition were there, then started shooting. The government admitted the shooting but said that only six people had been killed. One soldier was subsequently arrested.

In the southern province of Rutana, there were reports - difficult to verify in the current circumstances - that on or around 21 September up to 18 civilians were taken from a camp in Mpinga Kayove commune and killed by members of the armed forces.

Conditions in the camps

Conditions in the camps are appalling. They are overcrowded, with poor hygiene and little or no infrastructure. Some camps have no water, and the nearest clean water may be kilometres away. The death rate remains high and as little or no medical care is available, and people who were already ill were also forced to move, many more deaths are likely. There is also a self evident risk that epidemics could break out. Freedom of movement is severely restricted. The camps may be several hours from fields making access to crops very difficult. Some sites are very isolated, accessible only on foot, making access and the provision of humanitarian assistance very difficult. In many of the camps there

²In Burundi this divides into three categories; those who flee to camps controlled by the armed forces, known as "déplacé", the displaced population, and those who flee their homes but are afraid of the armed forces so try to hide in the country side. They are known as "dispersé", the dispersed population. The third category is made up of people who have been forced by the government to leave their homes. In Burundi, this category of displaced person is called "regroupé", the regrouped population. "Regroupment" of the population is a forcible relocation of the population by the authorities to a given area. This population displacement is not spontaneous as is the movement of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), but it is controlled by the government and armed forces. It occurs primarily in areas of conflict. Of these categories, at the current time, the dispersed and the regrouped (as well as refugees who have fled Burundi altogether), are primarily from the Hutu ethnic group, while the displaced are primarily from the Tutsi ethnic group.

is no shelter and people are exposed to rain. Some of the camps are at quite high altitude and temperatures are cold at night. In some camps, where there was sanitation infrastructure nearby, including clean water, the regrouped population was denied access.

In late September 1999, the Burundian government appealed to the international community for help in providing assistance. In early October, however, approximately half the camps were still inaccessible to humanitarian workers for a variety of reasons, including the difficult terrain. Some organizations are reluctant to provide aid which they regard as facilitating a military strategy. Other organizations were initially prevented or unacceptably delayed from providing aid to some camps. Others have received "warnings" that it would be safer not to work in Rural Bujumbura. Following the assassination of two UN workers in a camp for the displaced in Rutana province on 12 October 1999, the UN and international humanitarian organizations drastically cut back their work for security reasons and evacuated non-essential staff, further reducing the possibility that even minimum aid can be given to these uprooted populations.

In November and December 1999 the health and security situation remained poor and the lack of access to the camps by impartial observers has blocked much information about the situation coming to light. However in early November at least 10 people a day were reported to be dying in the most accessible camps nearest to the capital. In December it was confirmed that cholera has broken out in several camps and there is also reported to be an epidemic of dysentery. The risk of a rapid spread of disease is self-evident amongst a population already weakened by malnutrition, and as there is little aid as yet, the situation could quickly become disastrous.

A report in the South African *Mail and Guardian* (17 December 1999) noted:

"Cholera has struck some of the camps in recent days. About 40 people have died of the disease in Ruziba. More than 100 cases have been reported in Kabezi, but foreign aid workers have managed to keep the death toll down to just two. In about half of the camps, however, residents are struggling on without aid. Little is known about conditions in these camps, and there is no record of the numbers of dead."

Violations of international human rights treaties and humanitarian law

The forcible relocation violates a number of international human rights treaties which Burundi has ratified, including the African Charter on human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter). Under the African Charter, the authorities are obliged to protect the rights enshrined in that treaty including the right to life, the prohibition of torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of a state.

Article 17 of the 1977 Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions prohibits the forced movement of civilians "*unless the security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand*". In cases where a population is forcibly relocated in either of these two exceptional cases, all possible measures must be taken to provide the relocated population with "satisfactory conditions of shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition". Any forcible relocation should not single out one ethnic group. Forced displacement of a civilian population as a punitive measure or to obtain a more effective control of an ethnic group is prohibited. Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) allows for forced displacement only in time of public emergency which threatens the life of the nation. The principle is that there must be an exceptional threat and that a state of emergency must be declared. The Burundian government has not declared a state of emergency. Furthermore, fundamental human rights principles should still be adhered to even in cases of national emergency. The killings in and around the camps, and cases of ill-treatment violate Articles 6 and 7 of the ICCPR.

International condemnation of the regroupment operation

International pressure is growing on the Burundi authorities to dismantle the camps. The camps have been criticised by, amongst others, the World Food Program, the European Union and the UN Special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Burundi on her return from Bujumbura in October 1999. On 17 December the US government urged the government of Burundi "to stop the forced relocation of its citizens into regroupment camps and to end the regroupment program". On the same day the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) called on the government of Burundi to dismantle the regroupment

camps "without delay". In its statement the OAU expressed its "worries over the regroupment of populations and the humanitarian consequences it leads to".

Amnesty International's appeal

Amnesty International is appealing to the government of Burundi to end the practice of forcible relocation of populations and to allow those in the camps to leave them if they so wish. It expresses serious concern at the deteriorating conditions faced by those held in the camps and urges the immediate implementation of measures to control disease and illness. Amnesty International is also calling on the authorities to conduct thorough and impartial investigations into human rights violations which are reported to have occurred inside or near relocation camps.