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BURUNDI: CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY CONTINUE AS THE WORLD REMAINS SILENT

Amnesty International has received shocking new details of a massacre by the Burundi security forces of up to 500 men, women and children in and around the Pentecostal Church of Nyarurama, on 3 December.

Members of the local population had been persuaded by the army that they would be protected from ongoing violence if they took refuge in the church in Butaganza commune, Kayanza province. However, at around five o'clock in the morning soldiers surrounded the church, threw grenades inside and shot at those trying to escape, and reportedly bayoneted to death the wounded.

At least 243 were killed in the carnage, including Ruben Ntibacakamere and 15 of his relatives, Onesphore Mpawenimana, Francois Karibwami, Emmanuel Ntaseswa, Mayini Ntibanezerwa, Munyarire and Molando.

The soldiers reportedly set the church on fire to hide their actions and then searched for people hiding in the Mufumya, Nyamushanga, Nkokoma and Ruvubu river swamps during which they killed at least 300 hundred people.

“What is particularly dreadful about this latest atrocity is that religious premises were used as a slaughtering place,” Amnesty International said. “The local people believe that places of worship offer symbolic protection. But clearly no place appears to be too sacred for the army to carry out massacres.”

“Major Pierre Buyoya, who came to power promising to end human rights abuses in Burundi should be held personally accountable for these killings if he fails to stop them and ensure that all those responsible are brought to justice.”

“What is happening in Burundi appears to be a deliberate policy of systematic extermination of a section of the population, with Major Buyoya presiding over more than 10,000 killings since August.”

This is the second massacre to take place in a church in Burundi in recent weeks. On 22 October, around 400 returning Burundi refugees were killed in Murambi. These killings form part of a campaign of atrocities waged by the Burundi security forces, who have killed at least 1,000 unarmed Hutu civilians in four provinces since November 1996. Amnesty International has documented other massacres including:

- On 5 November, Melchior Bigirimana and nine other returnees from Zaire “disappeared” after they had been taken away by members of the armed forces, reportedly to the *Brigade Speciale de Recherches* (BSR), Special Investigation Brigade. From there, a BSR Captain accompanied by a group of gendarmes, handed them over to a group of young Tutsi militia who executed them by strangulation. In spite of the fact that these details were sent to the government of Burundi no investigation of the allegations has been carried out.
- At 2 am on 25 November at least 1,000 troops were sent to the Mutumba College of Management from where they indiscriminately shelled Mutumba, Bwelage and Muhuta collines. At least 150 people were killed on these collines. The shelling followed an attack on the college by an armed group.
- On 27 November members of the security forces took an unspecified number of prisoners from Muyinga prison, allegedly so that they could be tried in their villages. One of the prisoners’ shoes was later found in a bush near the gendarmerie station in Muyinga town. None of the prisoners have been seen since, and Amnesty International fears that they may have been extrajudicially executed.
- On 6 December, six prisoners of Bujumbura’s Mpimba Central Prison escaped from the detention centre after one of them had killed a warder. They were captured and taken back to the prison where the deputy director allegedly asked warders to kill them. All four were beaten and stoned to death.
- On 13 December members of the armed forces from Bujumbura joined those of Buhonga, Kiyange and Mugere dam positions and cordoned off Gasigo, Nkombe and Kanyosha collines in Kanyosha commune as well as Ruvyagura colline in Mutambo commune. They reportedly killed 94 people.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned that the authorities are confining Hutu people in “special camps” allegedly for their own safety. Those who attempt to leave are frequently termed “assailants” and killed. These same camps have been attacked on several occasions by the security forces in reprisals for attacks on the army by Hutu armed groups.

Amnesty International is also urging governments, international organizations and all those with influence in Burundi to stop the killings by exerting pressure on Major Buyoya’s government. Despite all the mounting evidence of crimes against humanity, no government has publicly raised concerns at the United Nations General Assembly or put forward a resolution condemning the atrocities.

“As 1996 draws to a close Amnesty International is calling on governments, spiritual and religious leaders, to spare a thought for those still suffering in Burundi and the African Great Lakes region as a whole by observing a minute’s silence and reflection,” the organization said.

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