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Rwanda: "Disappearances" reach alarming proportions, say Amnesty International delegates

Amnesty International delegates who returned earlier this month from a three week visit to Rwanda have reported a steep rise in the number of "disappearances" across the country, including in the capital, Kigali.

These "disappearances" are taking place alongside continuing massacres of unarmed civilians in the context of armed conflict between the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA) and armed opposition groups in the northwest.

"'Disappearances' are sadly not a new phenomenon in Rwanda, but over the last few months, they have reached alarming proportions," Amnesty International stated. "Wherever we went, people were telling us about the "disappearance" of their family members or friends."

In some cases, evidence points to the involvement of members of the security forces; in others, the identity of those responsible is not known. People from the northwest appear especially at risk, as they are often viewed as collaborators of armed opposition groups.

Emmanuel Tuyishime came from Gisenyi to Kigali to look for work on 10 December 1997. He was last seen in Kigali on 16 December. His relatives have been searching for him ever since, have inquired in detention centres in different areas, and have travelled up to the northwest several times, all in vain.

Amnesty International also gathered detailed testimonies of killings of unarmed civilians by the RPA and by armed opposition groups in the escalating conflict in the northwest. People described massacres of hundreds of unarmed civilians in January and February alone.

"Houses are standing empty with their doors hanging open; the fields are deserted; the crops have been cut down or burned," Amnesty International delegates said, describing the countryside surrounding Gisenyi town.

The army has ordered the population to cut down their banana plantations to deprive insurgents of their hiding place. The army is facing a significant insurgency and many soldiers have reportedly been killed during battles. However, this does not give a licence to either side to deliberately kill civilians who are taking no part in the hostilities.

Amnesty International held talks in Rwanda with senior government and military authorities about the current human rights situation. Government officials provided assurances that cases of "disappearances" were being investigated but in difficult conditions. They also claimed that any

reports of unlawful killings by members of the security forces are investigated and those found responsible brought to justice.

“We would like to believe claims by some Rwandese and foreign government representatives that the human rights situation is improving,” Amnesty International said. “But evidence of daily killings and “disappearances” throughout January and February points to the contrary.”

“We welcome the investigations and trials which have taken place, but until these become systematic, members of the security forces will continue to believe they can kill and abduct with impunity,” the organization added. “The authorities should also allow access to all civilian and military detention centres to families of detainees and to human rights and humanitarian organizations.”

Examples of Amnesty International’s investigations

Amnesty International carried out research into abuses by government forces and armed opposition groups in several regions, including in the northwestern region of Gisenyi, the northern and eastern regions of Byumba, Umutara and Kibungo, and in and around Kigali.

“Disappearances”

The human rights organization collected the names of scores of people who “disappeared” in the eastern region of Umutara in late December 1997 and January 1998, in particular in the *communes* of Kahi and Gabiro. Some had reportedly been rounded up by government soldiers and led away to an unknown destination. Around the same period, more than 30 unidentified dead bodies were found in at least three separate locations in the area.

Dead bodies have also been discovered in various locations in Kigali. In most cases, neither the identity of the victims nor that of their killers has been established.

A number of prominent people have also “disappeared” -- for example the prosecutor of Gisenyi, Ladislav Mutabazi, who was last seen on 18 January at Base, near Ruhengeri. The results of official investigations into this case are not yet known.

Only in a small minority of cases are the “disappeared” found -- sometimes too late. For example, Jean-Damascène Ndagijimana “disappeared” from Bicumbi, in Rural Kigali, in early January; his dead body was found, mutilated, two weeks later.

In one recent case, it was revealed that a Presbyterian pastor and five other people who had disappeared in Kigali on 14 February had been released safely, after being detained for two weeks without charge. Their families had not been given any information about their whereabouts or their well-being until their release.

It is likely that some of the other “disappeared” are being held in military detention centres or unofficial places of detention; Amnesty International has been informed of several cases of civilians detained in military camps. However, because the authorities deny access to these detention centres, it is virtually impossible to ascertain who is being detained there.

Killings of unarmed civilians

On 11 January and in the days that followed, more than 300 civilians -- men, women and children -- were shot dead by RPA soldiers during a military operation at Keya and surrounding areas in Rubavu *commune*, in Gisenyi.

On 24 January, more than 120 people were reportedly killed by RPA soldiers in Nyabirehe, in Mukingo, Ruhengeri. Some of the victims were killed with bayonets or knives; others had their heads crushed with large stones. Yet others, mainly women and children, were burned alive in their homes.

Armed opposition groups were responsible for the deliberate and arbitrary killing of around 40 civilians at Jenda, in Ruhengeri, on 5 February and between 50 and 60 civilians at Byahi, in Gisenyi, on the night of 6 to 7 February. Many more were seriously wounded in these attacks. Armed opposition groups are also believed to have been responsible for the death of around 40 people in an attack on a bus carrying workers of a brewery in Gisenyi on 19 January.
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