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RWANDA: AMNESTY DELEGATES BACK FROM RWANDA REPORT NEW WAVE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

There has been a significant increase in incidents of human rights abuses in Rwanda since the forced mass repatriation of refugees from Zaire and Tanzania in November and December 1996, an Amnesty International delegation returning from a visit to Rwanda said today.

The delegation reported a series of worrying developments, including an increase in unlawful executions by the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA) -- especially in the context of reprisal operations, deliberate and arbitrary killings of civilians by armed groups believed to be composed of soldiers of the former Rwandese army and *interahamwe* militia, killings of Hutu civilians by Tutsi civilians and "disappearances".

"There have been killings in Rwanda on an almost daily basis, especially in the northern and western regions, and several hundred people are estimated to have been killed since the beginning of the year -- the majority unarmed civilians including young children," the Amnesty International delegates said.

The northwestern region of Ruhengeri has been especially affected by the recent upsurge in human rights abuses. For example, in Kinigi, at least 20 Tutsi civilians were killed on 25 January by armed men believed to be soldiers of the former Rwandese army or militia. The following day, at least 140 people lost their lives in what is believed to have been a reprisal attack by Tutsi civilians in the presence of RPA soldiers who appeared to do nothing to protect the victims.

Following the killing of three Spanish members of the organization *Médecins du Monde* in Ruhengeri on 18 January, scores of unarmed civilians were reportedly killed by RPA soldiers during military search operations in the surrounding areas.

On 4 January, in Nkumba -- also in Ruhengeri -- at least 55 unarmed civilians were reportedly killed by RPA soldiers after they surrounded a house where there were suspected infiltrators.

At least 60 returnees from Tanzania were beaten to death by Tutsi civilians in two separate incidents in Rusumo, in the eastern region of Kibungo, in mid January. Some of the bodies were reportedly found in ditches, others in latrines. Several people have reportedly been arrested in connection with the killings. In a separate incident, in the same area and around the same period, approximately 20 people were reported "disappeared".

Tutsi families as well as Hutus believed to be collaborating with the current authorities in denouncing infiltrators have been targeted by groups allied to the former Rwandese army. For example, in Taba, Rural Kigali, around 20 people were killed in two separate incidents on 23 December and 5 January. On 9 February, at least 11 Tutsis were reportedly shot dead after being forced to get out of vehicles on the road at Tare, also in Rural Kigali.

Several members of the former Rwandese army recently returned from Zaire have also been killed, in some cases while in detention, in other cases in their homes along with their families. The identity of the perpetrators is not always known. Between 18 and 23 January, a former Major, Jean de Dieu Bizabarimana, his wife and their children were killed in Nyarutovu, Ruhengeri, and former Major François-Xavier Uwimana and his six children were killed in Nyamyumba, Gisenyi.

The recent increase in violence is spreading fear among a population already tense and suspicious of reprisals on both sides in the aftermath of the return of more than one million refugees, many of whom are suspected of having participated in the 1994 genocide.

“The fear in Rwanda is tangible. People are terrified to speak and many told us that they no longer dare travel to certain regions. We were informed of cases of unexplained killings and ‘disappearances’ occurring even in the capital Kigali,” the delegates said.

These fears are affecting the local population and foreign organizations alike. The killing of five United Nations human rights workers in Cyangugu, in the southwest, on 4 February has had a particularly devastating effect, preventing international and local organizations from carrying out independent investigations into human rights violations in certain parts of the country.

Amnesty International believes this could herald the start of a dangerous situation where the perpetrators can carry on killing defenceless civilians with no independent observers left to testify.

“The government of Rwanda must take immediate measures to prevent a situation where such acts of extreme violence become a fact of a daily life,” Amnesty International said.

“The government should exercise control over its own security forces and ensure that officials involved in human rights violations are suspended from their duties and brought to justice. All incidents of human rights violations should be the subject of an independent and impartial investigation and the results should be made public.”

Amnesty International is also urging armed opposition groups to immediately stop carrying out deliberate and arbitrary killings of unarmed civilians.

Rwanda’s government cannot be held accountable for the actions of armed opposition groups; however, it has a responsibility to ensure that there are no reprisal killings by its own forces, the organization said.

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