

UA 134/95

Fear of further deaths in custody

9 June 1995

RWANDA Thousands held in appalling conditions in Gitarama Prison

Conditions in Gitarama Prison are reported to be killing up to four prisoners a day. More will die unless immediate measures are taken to relieve the situation. Amnesty International delegates based in Rwanda visited the prison on 7 June and confirmed the appalling conditions there.

Amnesty International had tried unsuccessfully to visit the prison twice, but had not been given the necessary authorization. This time they were allowed inside the prison where they spent almost one hour. The delegates confirmed that prisoners are suffering extreme cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment as a result of severe overcrowding.

Gitarama prison is built for 600 inmates, but it now houses 6847, including 102 children who appear to be under the age of 14, and 218 women. In addition, there are 20 babies with their mothers. There is a total absence of hygiene and basic sanitary facilities, leading to serious health problems. The authorities have announced a temporary halt to further arrests as there is literally no more space for further prisoners. Prisoners cannot lie down due to overcrowding. The inmate security guards held sticks and made room for the Amnesty International delegates to be able to walk through the prisoners.

An extension to the prison is currently being built, but it is likely that it will take several weeks to complete. The extension is around twice the size of the main prison, and will therefore only partly relieve the overcrowding.

The vast majority of the prisoners have been arrested on vague charges of having taken part in the genocide. Only around 2,500 of the total number of prisoners have had arrest warrants issued. The government has set up "*commissions de triage*" (screening committees) to examine the dossiers of the prisoners and release those against whom there is insufficient evidence. However, so far this process has led to the release of only two prisoners from Gitarama prison.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since July 1994, when the present government of Rwanda took power, prison conditions in many official prisons and unofficial detention centres have been the cause of great concern as the authorities began arresting massive numbers of people suspected of taking part in the genocide. In June 1995, there are thought to be over 40,000 people held without charge or trial, often on the basis of unsubstantiated denunciation. The fact that neither the national justice system in Rwanda nor the International Tribunal set up to try those responsible for crimes against humanity are functioning yet means that innocent prisoners are likely to languish in seriously overcrowded prisons for some time unless urgent measures are taken. Soon after their arrest, prisoners are often ill-treated and tortured in detention centres before being transferred to official prisons.

The conditions in Gitarama prison are notorious for being the worst in Rwanda.

However, earlier in 1995, Amnesty International delegates also witnessed serious overcrowding in several other prisons, including Butare, Rilima and Kigali. On 6 April 1995, Amnesty International published a report entitled "*Rwanda: Crying out for justice*" which documents the current human rights

situation and highlights the plight of the tens of thousands of prisoners suffering inhuman prison conditions and being held without charge or trial.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/airmail letters either in French or English or in your own language:

- expressing deep concern at the dehumanizing prison conditions suffered by detainees at Gitarama prison, as witnessed by the Amnesty International delegation which visited the prison on 7 June 1995. State that these conditions constitute an extreme form of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment;
- expressing particular concern for the children under the age of 14, including babies, being held in such conditions;
- asking for immediate measures to be taken to institute basic sanitary facilities in the prison and for prisoners to be transferred to other locations to relieve the overcrowding;
- asking for the "*Commission de triage*" to accelerate their work and to be given the necessary resources to examine the charges against the prisoners and immediately release those against whom there is insufficient evidence to bring them to trial;
- asking for assurances that prisoners suffering ill-health be transferred to a hospital where they can be given adequate medical treatment.

APPEALS TO

Président Pasteur Bizimungu
Présidence de la République
BP 15, Kigali, Rwanda

Faxes: +250 83975; +250 84769

Telegrams: President Bizimungu, Kigali, Rwanda

Salutation: Monsieur le Président de la République/ Dear President

Maitre Alphonse-Marie Nkubito
Ministre de la Justice
Ministère de la Justice
Kigali, Rwanda

Faxes: +250 86396; +250 74915; +250 74583

Telegrams: Ministre de la Justice, Kigali, Rwanda

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

Monsieur Jacques Bihozagara
Ministre de la Réhabilitation nationale
Ministère de la Réhabilitation nationale
Kigali, Rwanda

Telegrams: Ministre de la Réhabilitation nationale, Kigali, Rwanda

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

NOTE: It is still sometimes difficult to get through to Rwanda by fax. It can be easier via the International Operator.

Please also organize some appeals via the Rwandese embassy in your country or in neighbouring countries. Ask them to forward your appeals to the relevant authorities in Rwanda

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Rwanda accredited to your country.

You could also send this Urgent Action to non-governmental organizations in your country, such as humanitarian organizations, medical organizations and organizations concerned about the welfare of prisoners.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 25 July 1995.