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Rwanda: Thousands killed while the world remains silent

At least 6,000 people -- the majority unarmed civilians -- are reported to have been killed in Rwanda between January and August this year, according to Amnesty International's latest evidence. Many unreported deaths mean that the real figure may be considerably higher.

Testimonies given to the human rights organization describe the daily reality for thousands of ordinary Rwandese women and men: *"It is dark here." "We are waiting to die." "We breathe a sigh of relief when 24 hours go by then we worry about the next 24 hours. It is like a 24-hour contract." "We go to sleep knowing from one day to the next that we may not be here..."*

The human rights organization expressed its grave concern that neighbouring governments continue to repatriate refugees to Rwanda where many face a dangerous fate.

"They are suffering in silence, their fate largely ignored by the outside world. The apparent indifference of the international community only serves to encourage the security forces and armed opposition groups to continue killing with little fear of censure."

In a 55-page report released today, Amnesty International documents massacres of unarmed civilians and other unlawful killings by soldiers of the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA), deliberate killings by armed opposition groups believed to be allied to the former army of Rwanda, "disappearances", arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment of detainees in grossly overcrowded detention centres.

Whole regions of Rwanda, particularly in the northwest, are now virtually inaccessible because of the widespread insecurity and media reports on the current human rights situation remain rare. Killings of foreigners and of Rwandese nationals working for international organizations have forced human rights and humanitarian organizations to withdraw their personnel from the worst affected regions and to severely cut back their programs.

Refugees forcibly repatriated to Rwanda from surrounding countries have been among the victims. Some have been killed, others have "disappeared". The government has denied access to others such as scores of refugees forcibly repatriated from Gabon on 12 August, who are still being held incommunicado in military detention and denied visits from humanitarian organizations.

"Incredibly, many governments continue to accept that it is safe for refugees to return to Rwanda -- something which is patently untrue. No government should be forcibly repatriating refugees to Rwanda -- and any which do should be aware of the consequences," Amnesty International said.

Several governments such as the USA and South Africa have transferred military equipment or training to Rwanda during 1996 and 1997, apparently with little regard for the human rights record of the Rwandese security forces. There have also been reports that armed opposition groups have continued to receive illicit supplies of arms and ammunition through the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The USA army, in particular, has been involved in a training program for the RPA. Despite being one of Rwanda's closest political and military allies -- capable of exerting pressure for positive

changes in the human rights situation -- the US Government is not known to have publicly condemned or demanded an end to persistent human rights violations in Rwanda.

“The international community has allowed death to become a banality in Rwanda once again”, Amnesty International said. “The USA and other influential governments must publicly denounce the continuing killings and demand action which will put an end to the violence directed at unarmed civilians.”

In its report, Amnesty International calls on the Rwandese Government to provide public information on the circumstances of human rights violations, including the identity of the victims and the perpetrators, the status of investigations and the action taken against those found responsible. The government should publicly condemn extrajudicial executions and ensure strict control over the chain of command in the RPA to prevent further unlawful killings, it adds.

Background

In the undeclared war in the northwest between the army and armed opposition groups believed to be allied to the *Forces armées rwandaises (FAR)* -- the former Rwandese army -- most of the victims on both sides are unarmed civilians. The government claims that most of the civilians have been killed by armed opposition groups. However, independent sources confirm that RPA soldiers have been responsible for the majority of killings of unarmed civilians in recent months.

Thousands of unarmed civilians, including young children and elderly people, have been shot dead during military operations following reported attacks by armed opposition groups. For example, on 8 August 1997, security forces reportedly killed several hundred people at a busy market place at Mahoko, in Kanama, Gisenyi. In the following two days, at least 95 detainees in nearby Rubavu and an unknown number of detainees in Kanama were reportedly killed by government forces. A number of RPA officers were arrested following these events. However, in the vast majority of cases, no judicial action is taken against those responsible.

At least 1,430 civilians were reportedly killed by RPA soldiers in Nkuli, Ruhengeri, between 9 and 11 May. In Cyabingo, also in Ruhengeri, more than 300 people were reportedly killed in the second half of May and more than 130 -- including many children -- in June. No action is known to have been taken to bring to justice those responsible for these killings.

Armed opposition groups have also deliberately and arbitrarily killed civilians. The single largest massacre occurred on the night of 22 August 1997, when at least 130 refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo were killed in Mudende refugee camp, in Gisenyi. The victims included young children killed as they slept. Government forces and armed civilians reportedly killed an unknown number of people in reprisal attacks the following day.

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**For a copy of the report, *Rwanda: Ending the Silence*, or to arrange an interview, please call:
Press Office, International Secretariat: (44) 171 413 5566/5810**