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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR EFFECTIVE ACTION TO STOP ARMS FLOWS TO THE AFRICAN GREAT LAKES REGION

JOHANNESBURG -- Given the way that weapons have been used in the Great Lakes region of Africa, Amnesty International is calling on the international community to stop and prevent the transfer of weapons and ammunition to the armed forces, militia and other armed groups in Zaire, Burundi and Rwanda.

“The situation is an explosive and catastrophic one affecting countless refugees and civilians in these countries. It has been widely acknowledged that the area is awash with small arms despite previous commitments by the international community to restrict them,” Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International, said during a visit to South Africa.

“Reprisal killings by all sides mean that further arms supplies will exacerbate the conflict and lead to further atrocities.”

The organization said that arms of various origins, including Belgian, Chinese, Chilean, Egyptian, French, German, Israeli, Russian, Romanian, South African, US and Yugoslav, have reportedly been found in the area.

There have been arms deliveries to Zaire, Burundi and Rwanda despite serious human rights abuses by the armed forces and associated militia, especially in the border areas. In Rwanda, members of the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA) have extra-judicially executed several hundred unarmed civilians in 1996 during military operations against armed insurgents. In Burundi, the largely Tutsi-dominated security forces and militia are continuing to massacre hundreds of unarmed Hutu civilians, including returnees from Zaire. Furthermore, Burundi armed opposition groups have also carried out arbitrary killings of Tutsi civilians.

The United Nations (UN) Security Council last year set up an International Commission of Inquiry to investigate allegations that the exiled former Rwandese armed forces and militia, many of whom led or participated in crimes against humanity during 1994, were obtaining arms and continuing military training near refugee camps despite a UN arms embargo. Despite limited resources and a lack of cooperation by many governments, especially the Government of Zaire which denied entry to its investigators, the Commission has reported that such arms deliveries and military training have been continuing.

“Recent reports of deliberate and arbitrary killings and other grave abuses committed by Zairean soldiers and the Banyamulenge armed opposition in eastern Zaire are part of a much broader pattern of atrocities carried out to a greater or lesser extent by all sides in the conflict along the Zairian border with Rwanda and Burundi,” said Mr Sané.

Amnesty International is also calling on the Government of Zaire and other governments in the Great Lakes region to cooperate fully with the UN and to allow the independent

international monitoring of all cargo entering Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire by land, sea and air to ensure that no deliveries contain weapons or ammunition.

“If these governments want the world to believe that their armed forces do not condone or assist militia which commit grave violations, then they should allow international investigators complete access to demonstrate this is not so,” said Mr Sané.

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