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Burundi: Civilians dying around the capital while hundreds of thousands are forcibly moved

Amnesty International today expressed concern for the safety of the hundreds of thousands of Burundians who have recently been moved from their homes by the military in the area around the capital, Bujumbura.

“Virtually the whole population of Rural Bujumbura has been forcibly moved from their homes as a counter-insurgency measure,” the human rights organization said.

Since November 1998, there has been intense activity by armed opposition groups in Burundi, particularly in the province of Rural Bujumbura and the southern provinces of Makamba and Bururi.

Reprisals by the armed forces have been brutal and indiscriminate. Hundreds of unarmed civilians are reported to have been killed by the armed forces in Rural Bujumbura rural as a result. In the last few weeks, the capital has also been frequently attacked by armed opposition groups, who have deliberately and arbitrarily killed civilians.

Some reports claim that as many as 260,000 people have now been moved into sites, many since mid-September. At least 30 people, mainly women and children, are reported to have died since then because of the harsh conditions and the lack of humanitarian aid.

Some of the sites are also reported to be in isolated areas aggravating existing poor conditions of living; some sites are far from water points or health centres. People at one site in Kanyosha are reported to have been denied access to clean water even though it was available. Furthermore, the sites may be vulnerable to attacks by both the security forces or armed opposition groups.

“We are concerned that the authorities have not taken the necessary precautions to ensure the protection of these displaced people. According to information we have received, people living in these areas were given very little time to leave and were therefore unable to collect some basic belongings,” Amnesty International said. “We are also investigating reports of people being ill-treated in the camps.”

In addition to the failure to provide for basic humanitarian needs, there are reports that non-governmental organizations may have been prevented in some cases and unnecessarily delayed in others from giving aid or having access to sites. Unless these issues are addressed urgently further deaths are likely to occur.

The government has frequently employed the technique of clearing areas during counter-insurgency operations, effectively creating war zones. The practice has, on numerous occasions, led to the killing of hundreds of unarmed civilians by members of the armed forces.

Government officials have openly stated in the past that civilians found in areas which are supposed to have been evacuated will be considered to be military targets.

“This has been interpreted as a licence to kill with impunity and has resulted in the deaths of unarmed men, women and children, in circumstances where it is clear they presented no threat. We are very concerned that the army may be carrying out killings of unarmed civilians in these areas with complete impunity and disregard for human rights,” the human rights organization added.

Amnesty International is appealing to the government to take the necessary steps to allow humanitarian aid to be given to displaced populations and to protect them from human rights violations.

It is also appealing to the government to issue strict orders to its troops involved in counter-insurgency operations to refrain from extrajudicial executions and to make every effort to distinguish non combatants from combatants, and to investigate and prosecute those who fail to do so, and as a matter of urgency to take measures to prevent a further escalation of violence.

Amnesty International is also appealing once again to members of the armed opposition and their leaders to refrain from attacks on unarmed civilians, including the displaced population and to take action against their own members who violate human rights.

Background

The situation in Bujumbura is reportedly to be extremely tense, with rumours of attacks or infiltration by Hutu-dominated armed opposition groups. On the night of 28 September, a number of homes were attacked in the capital, in the areas of Gasenyi and Mutanga Nord, and at least 5 civilians, including three children were killed. The killings are reported to have been carried out by armed Tutsi gangs - in retaliation for attacks by Hutu armed opposition groups or as a form of intimidation in the escalation of violence.

Amnesty International is also investigating reports that over 30 people were killed on 26 September by government soldiers. Those killed had been attending mass in a chapel in Nyambuye. Soldiers are reported to have shot people as they fled from the chapel. The reason for the killings is not clear. The people attending mass had come from nearby displaced camps.

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