

AI INDEX: AFR 16/23/97

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 HRS GMT 15 JULY 1997**

## **Burundi: Ethnic "regroupment" takes place in the context of massacres**

Since February 1996, the Burundian authorities have forced hundreds of thousands of civilians to leave their homes and live in camps, creating a new category of displaced persons known as *regroupés*. This terrible process has led to massacres of hundreds of men, women and children, Amnesty International said today as it launched a new report on Burundi.

"This regroupment policy applies almost exclusively to the Hutu ethnic group which is effectively trapped in appalling and life-threatening conditions in the camps or which becomes a military target outside the camps," the human rights organization said.

The new report, *Burundi: Forced relocation, new patterns of human rights abuses*, documents human rights abuses which have characterized the policy.

The Government of Burundi claims that the camps are for the inhabitants' own protection, that they are voluntary, that regroupment applies to all ethnic groups equally, and that it is a short-term measure. However, Amnesty International has received numerous testimonies which show that, in the majority of cases, the local Hutu population was moved into the camps by force or coercion.

The first regroupment camp was set up in February 1996 by the governor of Karuzi province. Subsequently, camps have been set up in a number of other provinces where armed opposition groups have been active. There are strong indications that the camps are part of a long-term military strategy of forcible relocation to undermine support for Hutu rebel groups.

"A pattern of mass human rights violations committing during or after the process of regroupment undermines any argument that this regroupment provides protection," Amnesty International

In late June, Major Pierre Buyoya, the president of Burundi, announced on state radio that those in regroupment camps should go home where security permitted. However, there is little evidence that there has been a change in the policy and with the exception of Kayanza province where inhabitants of one camp have been allowed to return home, the population remains confined to the camps. Those who have left the camp have been resettled along roads; some sources fear this is a continued attempt to control the population. Estimates for the total number of people confined in regroupment camps vary; independent estimates range from 350,000 to 500,000.

During regroupment operations, security forces and allied Tutsi militia have been accused of killings, house destruction, looting and rape. In January and February up to 122 people, including a 70-year-old man and six children are reported to have been killed in Rutegama commune, Muramyva Province. At the same time, 272 people who had not regrouped, including an 81-year-old woman and a six-year-old child, were reportedly killed in Butaganzwa commune, Ninga zone. Whole families were slaughtered.

In many cases house destruction, carried out by soldiers sometimes accompanied by members of Tutsi militias, appears to have taken place to make it impossible for the inhabitants

to return to their homes. In other cases, particularly in Karuzi and Bururi provinces, Hutu have reportedly been forced to burn down their homes before being shunted to regroupment camps.

“This policy of segregation will serve to increase political, social and economic disparities and tensions between the two ethnic groups,” Amnesty International said. “If regroupment continues it will have a disastrous impact on the human rights situation in Burundi.”

Inside the regroupment camps, movement is restricted for inhabitants. In some cases, as in Kayanza province, initially people were not allowed to leave the camps at all. Restrictions on freedom of movement show the crucial difference between the regroupment camps, whose inhabitants are mainly Hutu, and the displaced camps, whose inhabitants are predominantly Tutsi. For instance, in Kayanza Province two such camps are effectively divided by a tiny barrier, yet those in the camp for the displaced may, if they wish, move freely in and out of the camps and leave to return to their homes.

Unconfirmed reports allege that in several instances, people trying to leave regroupment camps without authorization have been shot.

Amnesty International has received consistent reports of a number of apparent “disappearances”. On arrival in the camps, many people were allegedly asked to denounce those who may be involved in armed opposition. As a result, “disappearances” and extrajudicial executions may have routinely occurred. Furthermore, conditions inside the camps are appalling and have led to rises in the incidence of malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and respiratory tract infections. A typhus epidemic which broke out in Burundi earlier this year appeared to be concentrated in regroupment camps in affected provinces, its transmission facilitated by the conditions.

“In a war which is being played out largely on ethnic lines what effectively amounts to the isolation of ethnic groups into definable areas makes them vulnerable to attack,” Amnesty International said.

In the last few months, hundreds of people were killed or wounded in attacks on regroupment camps. It is sometimes difficult to confirm the identity of the attackers. While the government accused members of Hutu armed groups, other credible sources have reported that some attacks were committed by government soldiers, sometimes in reprisal for attacks by Hutu dominated armed opposition groups.

While Tutsi civilians may see the Tutsi-dominated security forces as a source of protection, the security forces have a 30-year history of massacring unarmed civilians, mostly members of the majority Hutu ethnic group. Since October 1993, more than half a million people have been forced to abandon their homes. While displaced Tutsi have largely fled to displaced people’s camps protected by the military, Hutu who have fled their homes have mostly sought shelter away from camps. Conditions in camps for the displaced are also harsh, and have been attacked on several occasions by armed groups.

“This inhuman policy may in part be motivated by a desire for revenge, or collective punishment, by members of one ethnic community on another,” Amnesty International said. “Human rights violations can’t be disguised as protection.”

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