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UGANDA - @ARMY VIOLATES HUMAN RIGHTS, GOVERNMENT EVADES RESPONSIBILITY

The army in Uganda is torturing, executing and detaining people and the government is evading its responsibility to prevent such human rights violations, according to an Amnesty International report released today.

"The army seems to have been given a free hand in the north of Uganda. The government occasionally announces investigations into alleged violations by soldiers, but these rarely have any result," said Amnesty International.

"Only soldiers who commit crimes off duty are punished -- their trials and executions are a further violation of human rights."

Abuses have been particularly widespread in the north, where the army is fighting armed rebels, and the report details dozens of cases of human rights violations by the National Resistance Army (NRA) there. In one incident in the northern district of Gulu in April 1991, villagers were rounded up for "screening" to try to identify rebels. Three women are reported to have been raped and seven men killed, four of them suffocated in a "torture pit" - trapped in a hole two metres deep, covered with logs and earth and filled with smoke from a fire lit overhead.

"The government of Uganda must act now," said Amnesty International. "It must make the army operate within the law, or these outrages will once again become the norm in Uganda."

Amnesty International's report documents a four-month "counter-insurgency" operation in the north in 1991 that saw civilians deliberately killed, thousands detained illegally without charge, 1100 sentenced to five or ten years in prison after administrative hearings and reports of rape and beatings.

The NRA was also responsible for the arrest, illegal detention and beating of 18 prominent political leaders, who later faced charges of treason. Seventeen are still held -- although a High Court judge ruled that the charge was defective. The 17, who are prisoners of conscience, could be held for 480 days without bail on the treason charge, even though the authorities have yet to present details of their alleged treason.

"This incident underscores how the NRA routinely abuses the rule of law, and how the authorities have failed to enforce it", said Amnesty International. "The armed forces are allowed to interfere with the judicial process and even the High Court feels unable to overrule the NRA."

Amnesty International has been reporting on human rights violations by the NRA since 1986. In the south of the country there have been some improvements, but in the north the army has free rein.

Now Amnesty International is pressing for immediate and thorough inquiries into human rights violations. Although the government has announced investigations into several reports of violations by the NRA, most have been internal inquiries by the army itself, rather than impartial hearings. These inquiries have not been reported publicly and few soldiers have been brought to justice for gross human rights violations.

In the few cases where the government has acted against its soldiers, usually for off-duty crimes, the result has been death sentences -- 14 have been executed so far in 1991 and another two were sentenced to death on 31 October 1991.

"The government claims these executions show its concern to uphold

human rights, but executing people is another violation of human rights," said Amnesty International. "In reality, the government is just contributing to the continuing cycle of violence in Uganda."

The army's human rights violations often take place in a context of armed opposition by rebel groups, who are also responsible for human rights abuses. There are reports of abductions, killings and mutilations by insurgent groups, including the abduction of 43 schoolgirls in July 1991. Many of them were reportedly raped and one was killed.

"Human rights are the responsibility of government, even in times of armed conflict," said Amnesty International. "Abuses by rebels do not justify violations by the army.

"The government of Uganda must make the NRA toe the line, not by executions, but by prompt, public inquiries followed by action to bring the offenders to justice."

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