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ZAIRE: CRISIS FACING RWANDESE REFUGEES CANNOT BE SOLVED IN ISOLATION

At a time when Rwandese refugees are under attack in Eastern Zaire, the plight of other victims continues to be ignored by the international community, Amnesty International said today.

“More attention should be paid to the scale of human rights abuses that have given rise and continue to fuel the crisis in Eastern Zaire. Violations in Zaire affect not only refugees -- they also affect civilians who are Zairian nationals, and local and foreign humanitarian workers,” the human rights organization said.

“The United Nations (UN) and others have been appealing to Rwandese refugees to return home and have behaved as if several hundred Burundi refugees and displaced Zairians do not also deserve protection. The fact that the refugees fear human rights violations if they return to Rwanda and Burundi is being ignored, as are the abuses they and unarmed civilians in Zaire face.”

Amnesty International is disturbed by reports that attacks on unarmed civilians have, in addition to causing loss of hundreds of lives since September 1996, forced humanitarian workers to abandon refugees to their uncertain fate.

“Attacks by Zairian government troops and members of the Banyamulenge Tutsi armed group deserve no less than the condemnation of the whole world,” Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is calling on the Tutsi armed group leaders immediately to instruct their fighters not to attack any civilians.

World governments and inter-governmental organizations should seek guarantees that the parties to the conflict will respect human rights and the impartiality of humanitarian workers. Amnesty International is calling on the international community to ensure the provision of adequate humanitarian assistance for refugees and internally displaced civilians as a matter of urgency.

Hundreds of unarmed civilians were reportedly arbitrarily and deliberately killed in recent weeks during fighting between Zairian government troops and the Tutsi-led armed group in South-Kivu region. Hundreds of thousands of Rwandese and Burundi refugees are fleeing from camps in the region. Fighting has resumed in North-Kivu region where more than 10,000 people have been killed by armed groups and government forces, and hundreds of thousands displaced during the past three years. Nearly 20,000 Zairian people have fled to Rwanda.

Amnesty International is appealing to the Zairian Government to end the long-standing impunity of members of its armed forces and local government officials who are responsible for human rights violations against unarmed civilians, local non-governmental organisations and members of various ethnic groups.

Amnesty International fears that members of the Zairian armed forces are likely to carry out further attacks on civilians, judging from their past record of involvement in human rights violations, their lack of discipline and the fact that many are not even paid.

“The government should make it clear to its forces and officials that human rights abuses, including disturbing reports of deportations of Zairian and Tutsi refugees, will not be tolerated,” Amnesty International said. “Officials known to have ordered or incited human rights abuses should immediately be brought to justice -- only then will the cycle of impunity end.”

Indeed, there should be an international condemnation of those who, like the former deputy governor of South-Kivu, have made public statements that incite ethnic hatred.

The organization is also calling on all armed opposition groups to honour their obligations under international humanitarian law not to harm civilians.

Incitements to racial or national hatred violate Zaire’s legally binding obligations under human rights treaties it has ratified.

“Reports that Rwandese government officials have said that they will not allow Zairian Tutsi men to seek refuge in Rwanda, but that the men should rather stay in Zaire to fight, are likely to encourage further killings and other human rights abuses in Zaire,” Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International believes that this is a violation of regional and international conventions for the protection of refugees.

“The Rwandese authorities should resist from making statements likely to exacerbate tensions,” Amnesty International said. “Statements suggesting that the Rwandese Government will only accept the refugees if the Zairian Government also gives them the Zairian territories they occupied, are likely to exacerbate the tensions.”

The organization released a report today that documents gross human rights violations by government forces that have been a persistent feature of both North and South-Kivu.

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