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Burundi: Need for an independent international investigation of the Gatumba massacre

"It is essential that the killings of more than 150 Congolese refugees in Burundi are the subject of an independent impartial investigation, the findings of which should be made public and acted upon so that the perpetrators can be brought to justice," said Amnesty International today.

"These actions are crucial also to counter any manipulation of the killings by political and military actors within the region, and to pre-empt any resulting actions likely to lead to further human rights abuses against the civilian population."

More than 150 Congolese refugees were deliberately killed during an attack on a transit centre, four kilometres from the border, housing predominantly Banyamulenge refugees, during the night of 13 August 2004. Over 100 refugees were also wounded in the attack, which was reportedly launched from neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Many of the victims were women and children.

"There can be no justification for the deliberate and systematic slaughter of unarmed civilians, some of whom were reportedly killed as they slept," Amnesty International said.

A Burundian armed political group, the National Liberation Forces (FNL), has claimed responsibility for the attack, while others, including the Governments of Burundi and Rwanda, have accused Congolese and Rwandese armed political groups based in DRC of also being involved. The Burundian armed forces as well as the Rwandese government have already publicly announced the possibility of military intervention in DRC in response to the attack, and the United Nations (UN) have suspended their mediation with the FNL, the only armed political group not to have signed cease-fire or peace agreements with the Government of Burundi, or begin serious negotiations. The FNL has bases around the capital and operates primarily in Rural Bujumbura.

Speculation about the perpetrators is likely to fuel, and indeed to be used to fuel, existing political and ethnic tensions in both Burundi and DRC leading to further human rights abuses.

"Political and military leaders within the region should use their influence to call for calm and to pre-empt any incitement to violence or reprisal which the killings may provoke," urged Amnesty International.

The killings come at a critical time for both the Congolese and Burundian peace processes. In addition to any government investigations, in such a politically complex and volatile situation, the UN has a clear role

to play in undertaking authoritative and objective investigations. It is essential that UN missions, mandated by the Security Council to investigate human rights abuses in the Great Lakes Region, cooperate effectively and share information both to ascertain the truth behind Friday's massacre, as well as to prevent future violence and human rights abuses.

On 17 August, the Government of Burundi finally announced that land would be allocated to provide a secure camp for recently arrived Banyamulenge refugees in Rutana Province, eastern Burundi. Any investigation should also examine the causes of the failure to protect refugees in the Gatumba area.

Host governments in the region and the UNHCR need to take immediate steps to protect refugees in their countries of refuge. This includes ensuring that all refugee camps and transit centres are of a purely civilian and humanitarian character, and are located at a secure distance away from the country from which they have fled. The UNHCR must fulfil, and be allowed to fulfil, its mandate to protect refugees in Burundi and in the wider region.

While welcoming the rare international attention on human rights abuses in Burundi, and the worldwide condemnation that this massacre has provoked, Amnesty International also expressed concern that the majority of human rights abuses in Burundi, as well as the wider Great Lakes region, by government and opposition forces, go unnoticed by the international community and are not condemned by the parties to the conflict.

"It is simply not enough to periodically condemn the most blatant violations of human rights. Sustained pressure on the belligerents to respect human rights and to bring to justice those responsible for human rights abuses is essential if these recurrent political and human rights crises are ever to be addressed," the organization said.

The international community should do its utmost to ensure that past and present human rights abuses are investigated and that the perpetrators, whoever they are, are brought to justice. Sacrificing justice for short term political expediency will only prolong the region's terrible human rights crisis and plays into the hands of the many protagonists who have no wish to see the truth, and justice, emerge.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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