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BURUNDI: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON THE OAU TO OFFER LEADERSHIP TO PREVENT FURTHER MASSACRES

In the immediate aftermath of the coup d'état in Burundi, Amnesty International issued an urgent appeal to the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to take the lead in mobilizing the international community to prevent further massacres of defenceless civilians.

“Foreign governments - especially those in neighbouring countries - cannot just wait for others to take the lead while hundreds of people are being slaughtered in Burundi every week,” said Amnesty International.

At this critical moment, the OAU should make a concerted effort to implement practical steps which would bring justice and respect for human rights as an essential precondition for peace to Burundi.

Amnesty International condemned the reported closure of Burundi's borders and appealed to authorities in Burundi and in neighbouring countries to guarantee immediate protection to those fleeing from the violence.

Among those most at risk are the Hutu élite, who have been targeted since 1993. Many are now seeking shelter in foreign embassies. Other vulnerable groups include people living in enclosed spaces, such as prisoners. Rwandese Hutu refugees are also likely to be an easy target for Tutsi militia and members of the security forces. The forcible expulsions of these refugees to Rwanda could resume at any time. Tutsi internally displaced may also be attacked again by Hutu armed groups.

“More defenceless civilians are likely to be killed as a result of the coup d'état which took place in the night of 23-24 July,” Amnesty International warned today.

The organization reminded the international community that in October 1993, the assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye by the army had sparked off large-scale massacres among Hutu and Tutsi civilians and by government troops and armed groups.

“Similar widespread killings are almost inevitable in the present circumstances,” Amnesty International said.

This latest coup will be perceived as the negation of the democratic elections of 1993 which, for the first time, had given Hutu a greater say in government. Hutu groups are likely to resort to violence again in reaction to this development - which will in turn lead to retaliation by Tutsi militia and the security forces.

Following first reports of the coup, many Hutu have gone into hiding. There are few Hutu left in the capital. Much of the Hutu population has escaped into the countryside, where they continue to be vulnerable to ongoing attacks. On 23 July, a further 50 civilians were reportedly massacred by the security forces in Rukaramu, a village near Bujumbura.

“The population of Burundi - both Hutu and Tutsi - have suffered enough at the hands of armed groups on all sides,” said Amnesty International. “All political and military leaders must appeal publicly for calm and prevent the new political scenario from turning into a spree of revenge killings. They should immediately refrain from any action which could be interpreted as an incitement to violence.”

BACKGROUND

On 25 July, the army announced that Major Pierre Buyoya, a member of the Tutsi ethnic group and formerly president of Burundi from 1987 to 1993, had ousted Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, a Hutu. President Ntibantunganya has been hiding in the US embassy in the capital Bujumbura for two days, after being attacked on 23 July at the funeral of over 300 Tutsi killed at Bugendana.

Major Pierre Buyoya had previously come to power by military coup in September 1987 and left the Presidency after he was defeated by President Melchior Ndadaye in multi-party elections in June 1993.

The Tutsi-dominated army and its political ally, the Union pour le progrès national (UPRONA), Union for National Progress party, have been wielding power in Burundi since the 1993 coup attempt.

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