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Major step back for human rights as Rwanda stages 22 public executions

The public execution of 22 people in Rwanda this morning must be condemned universally and any further executions prevented, Amnesty International declared today.

“This macabre spectacle has further reduced chances of peace and reconciliation in Rwanda. Instead of eradicating the culture of violence, the government is perpetuating it,” the organization said.

“However grave the crimes some of these individuals may have committed, there can be no justification for the state ordering and carrying out further acts of brutality,” Amnesty International said. “However, further executions can still be prevented if the world keeps raising its voice in protest.”

Among those executed today in front of large crowds were several people whose trials were grossly unfair, such as Déogratias Bizimana and Egide Gatanazi, the two first people to be tried for participation in the genocide in Rwanda and who did not even have access to a defence lawyer. They were executed in Kibungo this morning.

Virginie Mukankusi, the first woman to be tried for participation in the genocide, was executed in Kigali. Amnesty International delegates who had observed her trial in Gitarama in January 1997 stated that none of the defence witnesses she had named were called to testify. Virginie Mukankusi did not appear to understand the procedures during the trial and contradicted herself during her defence on several occasions. Her defence lawyer did not have sufficient time to study her case file, yet the trial was not adjourned. The lawyer pleaded that Virginie Mukankusi should benefit from mitigating circumstances on the grounds that she was an ignorant peasant. However, the prosecution called for the death penalty and she was sentenced to death.

Silas Munyagishali, former assistant prosecutor of Kigali, was also among those executed in Kigali this morning. During his trial in Gitarama, several of his defence witnesses were threatened and intimidated, and prevented from testifying. There are indications that his arrest on charges of complicity in the genocide may have been politically motivated.

Amnesty International appealed again to leaders around the world to intervene to save the lives of more than 100 other people already sentenced to death -- and possibly thousands of others across Rwanda who could face the same fate.

The individuals responsible for the deaths of as many as one million people during the genocide in 1994 must be brought to justice and the international community should assist Rwanda in providing trials which are prompt and fair and which exclude inhuman punishments.

“This is the only hope for Rwanda to look forward to a more peaceful and just future,” Amnesty International said. “The Government of Rwanda has the power to break this cycle of killings and take a stand against violence once and for all.”

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