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ZAIRE: SOURCE OF REFUGEE CRISIS REMAINS HIDDEN FROM SCRUTINY

Amnesty International today released new evidence that “campaigns of terror” were being waged by Zaïrian military forces, militias and rebel forces against refugees and civilians in the South-Kivu region of Zaire at the very time that the international spotlight was focused on the massive stream of refugees further north heading back to Rwanda last month.

“This face of the Zaire tragedy has so far been hidden from international scrutiny -- and with this area still cut off from the outside world there are real fears that the attacks and killings are continuing today,” Amnesty International said.

In a new report, the organization says that some 40,000 people fled for their lives to Tanzania and many others fled further southwards into Zaire in the space of a few weeks in October and November to escape horrific abuses at the hands of rebel forces in eastern Zaire.

The report is based on findings from an Amnesty International investigation team visit to Tanzania earlier this month which talked to refugees from South Kivu. The evidence shows that there has been a systematic and deliberate policy of armed attacks and indiscriminate killings to flush out civilians in refugee camps there, as well as deliberate and arbitrary killings of civilians in Zaïrian towns and villages.

Amnesty International is extremely concerned that the Zaïrian regions, including South Kivu, now held by the armed group, the *L’alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaire* (AFDL), the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire, have remained hidden to international scrutiny for almost two months now.

The organization is appealing to the Zaïrian government and the AFDL to stop human rights abuses and to allow full access for human rights activists and others investigating allegations of human rights abuses in eastern Zaire. Amongst the abuses reported to the organization’s delegation were:

- In mid-September 1996, about 100 Tutsi were massacred in the villages of Lueba and Mboko by the Babembe volunteer force (an armed Zaïrian militia). The victims were members of a Methodist Church.
- On 6 October, armed Tutsi rebels attacked Lemera Hospital, where staff were caring for about 300 patients. At least 38 patients and three nurses were killed. One eye-witness said “*We fled, but the patients who had just been operated on could not move from their beds. When we went back the next day, we found them, killed in their beds by a bullet through the mouth*”.
- Members of the Tutsi armed group attacked the town of Kiliba on 18 October killing about 60 civilians, including young babies. Among those killed were nine members of the Kassandra family who had reportedly been slaughtered in their home with knives.
- Armed Tutsis attacked Luberezi camp on 20 or 21 October. One of those in the camp told Amnesty International “*Members of my family were killed. My father, Bizimana Samuel,*

and my sisters Nuwimana Maria and Soia Wimbabazi. I saw their dead bodies but I did not have time to bury them”.

- The small village of Mboko was the scene of mass killings between 28 and 30 October. There were around 300 victims. One boat was sunk with about 150 people on board. Some refugees said they had seen boats crammed with people trying to escape being shot at by Tutsi fighters from the shore. When the boats sunk, some were drowned, but people who could swim were allegedly shot in the water.

The latest cycle of violence began in mid 1996 following the Kinshasa government’s proposal to remove Zaïrian citizenship from the Tutsi population in Eastern Zaire. Following this announcement, local government officials instigated a campaign of intimidation against the Banyamulenge population with mass killings, armed attacks and forcible expulsions.

In early October, armed AFDEL forces were systematically attacking Zaïrian villages, towns and refugee camps, forcing their inhabitants to flee further South.

“What is clear is that both sides deliberately and indiscriminately targeted civilians in South Kivu,” Amnesty International said. “Now the AFDL control South Kivu there are only allowing restricted access to investigate what happened or to monitor what is going on at the moment.”

Amnesty International is calling on all parties to the conflict to commit themselves publicly to abiding by the principles of international humanitarian law, and on states who have influence with the AFDL to make every effort to ensure that the AFDL abides by these principles.

It is also urging the Zairian authorities and the AFDL to stop the forcible return of refugees to Burundi or Rwanda. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) should mount an independent investigation into attacks on the refugee camps under its protection and to denounce publicly any human rights violations.

“At the moment we are witnessing a continuous series of refugee crises in the Great Lakes region, with the international organizations at best struggling to cope with the results and at worst being prepared to overlook the fundamental human rights safeguards behind the refugee flows. Unless there is a serious attempt to solve the real issues behind this situation, the prospect for stability in Central Africa looks bleak,” Amnesty International said.
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