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NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: EXTERNAL - MALAWI, BURUNDI

PLEASE NOTE: The item on Burundi is the invitation to the press conference launch of the Burundi Week Campaign sent out by the Belgian section. Feel free to use this to contact your national media if they have correspondents in Belgium. Members of the Africa research department will also be available at the IS to answer media queries on Rwanda and Burundi.

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13 MAY 1994

MALAWI: Human rights abuses must not go unchecked in election run-up

Amnesty International is concerned at recent reports of human rights violations in the registration and run-up to the first multi-party election in Malawi for more than 30 years.

Despite some arrests, no one has yet been charged or tried in connection with human rights violations committed in connection with the 17 May balloting to elect a new parliament and new president of Malawi.

"We seriously warn all those concerned with monitoring these elections that concrete measures must be taken to ensure vulnerable members of the population are adequately protected from human rights abuses", Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization is calling on the Malawian Government, the National Consultative Council (NCC), the Electoral Commission, the United Nations and other intergovernmental observer missions in the country to take steps to ensure that all Malawians, especially vulnerable parts of the population, are able to use their vote -- or not use it -- without fear of human rights violations, intimidation or harassment. Any reports of human rights violations should be investigated thoroughly and the perpetrators brought to justice.

Malawi is in a crucial transition period that began with the June 1993 referendum which ended one-party rule. Since the referendum, there have been important human rights reforms, including the drafting of a new constitution with an entrenched bill of rights that is due to be passed by parliament before the elections.

Despite these positive changes, Amnesty International pointed out several warning signals that violence and intimidation may escalate as election day draws near. For example, in March the acting editor of the Malawi Independent newspaper received death threats for reporting allegations of corruption by supporters of the government. Cases of harassment and political intimidation during the registration period in February and March 1994, including beatings by Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and United Democratic Front (UDF) supporters which have not been dealt with by the authorities, have been reported by the Electoral Commission and the Joint International Observer Group. Voter registration certificates have been reportedly stolen or bought by party officials, village headmen and ethnic chiefs, mainly from the MCP.

Since the election registration, incidents of human rights abuses have been reported in the press, by human rights groups and by the Electoral Commission. Party supporters of the UDF and the MCP reportedly have disrupted campaign meetings, while members of the Nyau dance cult closely linked to the MCP reportedly have intimidated voters. An extensive increase in criminal violence is reported by some to be aimed at persuading people to vote for the government.

Of particular concern to Amnesty International are reports that members of the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP), a paramilitary organization which acted as the armed wing of the MCP, have been crossing into Malawi from Mozambique and intimidating opposition supporters in border areas. There are believed to be around 2,000 members in northwestern Mozambique, bordering Malawi. The MYP fled across the border last December during an operation by the army to forcibly disarm them.

The Electoral Commission has conducted investigations into incidents of intimidation and harassment, including human rights violations, but as yet no one has been charged and taken to court. Until this happens such incidents are unlikely to stop.

"If human rights violations go unpunished, the future of human rights protection in Malawi will be jeopardized". Amnesty International said.

ENDS/

INVITATION TO AN AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS CONFERENCE ON BURUNDI/RWANDA

Burundi /Rwanda

Amnesty International launches an international Burundi week of action from the International Press Conference Centre in Brussels on Tuesday May 17.

The press conference, which will introduce a week of world-wide action, will analyze the events of the last few months in Burundi, with additional information concerning the bloodshed in Rwanda.

Speakers will include Godfrey Byaruhanga, head of the Burundi research team at the International Secretariat of Amnesty International, and Roman Catholic Bishop Bernard Bududira of Bururi Province of Burundi.

The press conference will be held at 11 a.m. on May 17 in the press room of the International Press Centre, Karel De Grotelaan 1, 1041 Brussels. (Television crews are asked to arrive 15 minutes in advance to set up.)

Individual interviews with the speakers after the press conference can be arranged in advance by calling Koen Van dou Broeck, the Amnesty International Press Officer in Brussels. Also after the press conference, there will be a demonstration/march starting from the IPC to ask the international community not to forget the ongoing crisis in Africa.

For further information, contact Koen Van dou Broeck at Amnesty International - Belgian Section at 010 32 3 271 1616.