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South Africa ignores grave human rights violations in Rwanda by resuming sales of military equipment

The South African Government should not supply lethal military equipment to Rwanda until the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA) has demonstrated to independent observers that it has stopped committing atrocities and breaching humanitarian law, Amnesty International said today.

The human rights organization also warned that the South African agreement to provide armoured vehicles and military radios to Rwanda -- announced on 23 July -- could result in such equipment being used to facilitate human rights abuses.

“The South African Government appears to believe it can obtain assurances from the Rwandese Government that military equipment and arms of a lethal nature will not be used for human rights violations,” Amnesty International said.

“However, it is clear that atrocities against civilians have been committed by the RPA in former Zaire and in Rwanda itself -- atrocities which the Rwandese Government denies. There is no reason why the South Africa Government should believe these latest assurances.”

Earlier this month, Amnesty International submitted to the South African Government, on request, reports illustrating that since the beginning of 1997 the RPA has killed thousands of unarmed civilians. Details of grave abuses by armed opposition groups were also provided.

During a visit to South Africa last week, Amnesty International’s Secretary General, Pierre Sané, appealed to the chair of South Africa’s National Conventional Arms Control Committee (NCACC) not to supply arms to Rwanda and neighbouring countries in the Great Lakes region, in the light of daily reports of arbitrary killings in these countries.

The Government of Rwanda previously denied the large presence of RPA soldiers in former Zaire, but the Vice-President and Minister of Defence Paul Kagame has since admitted publicly that RPA soldiers were and still are present in that area.

“South Africa’s decision to resume military supplies to Rwanda was reportedly taken on the understanding that the equipment would not be used by Rwanda outside its national borders, but this blatantly ignores the plight of Rwandese civilians who are living in a state of fear -- caught between deliberate and arbitrary violence on both sides,” Amnesty International said.

In response to increased attacks by armed opposition groups, believed to be allied to the former Rwandese army and the *interahamwe* militia, the RPA has mounted large-scale military operations, especially in the north west of the country. It is during such operations that many unarmed civilians have lost their lives, simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time or for belonging to the same ethnic group as members of the armed opposition. Many of the victims are refugees who returned to Rwanda at the end of 1996 after fleeing attacks on refugee camps in eastern Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo).

In several different villages in Nkuli *commune* in Ruhengeri, for example, more than 500 civilians were reportedly killed by RPA soldiers between 9 and 11 May 1997. On 2 March 1997, at

least 150 civilians, and possibly as many as 280, were reportedly killed by RPA soldiers in Kigombe, also in Ruhengeri.

On 24 June 1997 local residents counted at least 68 bodies of unarmed civilians shot dead by RPA soldiers in Kivumu *commune* in Kibuye. These killings followed an ambush by unknown assailants on a vehicle, in which four people were killed. RPA soldiers called to the scene rounded up a group of young men to guard the vehicle. They then returned and shot at them; at least 29 men reportedly died on the spot. Soldiers then went on to attack nearby villages and wiped out several families in their homes including elderly people and young children.

Many other examples of similar massacres were provided to the South African authorities in July 1997 and on previous occasions. None of these massacres are known to have been investigated by the Rwandese authorities.

“The South African Government has stated on numerous occasions that it will take human rights protection seriously when making decisions about exports of military equipment,” Amnesty International said. “It should now put these promises into action by not supplying lethal military equipment to Rwanda until the authorities can provide independently verifiable guarantees that such equipment will not be used against unarmed civilians -- whether inside or outside Rwanda.”

“Any government which supplies lethal weapons to armed forces that use them to kill unarmed civilians should accept part of the responsibility for the killings which ensue.”

Amnesty International is also concerned that the new supplies of military vehicles and communications equipment will be used by the RPA to facilitate human rights violations in outlying areas, and is urging the South African Government to immediately stop such supplies if any instances of misuse of such types of equipment are verified.

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