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Burundi: Massacre of civilians

At least 43 people were massacred in Burundi by members of the government armed forces on 31 December 1999 in Kabezi commune, Rural Bujumbura, Amnesty International said today.

News of the killings is only just emerging from Kabezi commune, south of the capital, Bujumbura, which has been the scene of sustained conflict over the past few months. Several of those killed are reported to have been women and children, including a four year old boy.

Some of the bodies were hidden in the house of one of the victims, Kiremo, who was killed with his grandson. Some were reportedly killed with knives or bayonets. Forty-three bodies have so far been found in three locations in the vicinity. Other bodies are reported to have been seen in the area. Amnesty International believes they may be the bodies of those who were shot as they attempted to flee the killing.

The killings appear to have been in reprisal for an ambush in the vicinity at Gakungwe-Ramba on 28 December in which two soldiers were killed. A senior military officer was able to escape.

Following the ambush, a local military commander is reported to have ordered the local population not to use the road towards Gakungwe. However, not everyone received the information and in the early morning of 31 December, people began as usual to head towards Gakungwe when the massacre occurred. Amnesty International has received reports that the soldiers who carried out the killings came from military posts in Kabezi, Mubone and Ruziba communes.

"The government of Burundi must publicly acknowledge the killings and ensure that an immediate independent and impartial investigation is carried out," the human rights organization urged. "Those responsible must be brought to justice."

Fighting between the armed forces and armed opposition groups is reported to have continued following the massacre and there have been a series of attacks in the area attributed to an armed opposition group, the *Forces nationales pour la libération* (FNL), National Liberation Forces.

On 4 January a minibus is reported to have been ambushed near Nyamugari. All the passengers are reported to have been killed in the attack, although the number of victims is not known to Amnesty International. The perpetrators have not yet been identified but the incident appears consistent with numerous attacks on vehicles in the vicinity attributed to armed opposition groups.

Amnesty International reiterates its appeal to all armed opposition groups fighting in Burundi to refrain from attacking civilians taking no active part in the conflict and those who are *hors de combat*.

Background

The human rights situation continues to deteriorate in Burundi. Many of the human rights abuses are directly associated with the armed conflict in which all parties have carried out serious human rights abuses against the civilian population. During 1999, hundreds of unarmed civilians were killed by members of the government armed forces and armed opposition groups. Many of the extrajudicial executions carried out by government armed forces were in reprisal for military activities by armed opposition groups. Reprisals by the armed forces have been brutal and indiscriminate. Virtually none of the killings have been independently investigated.

Scores of arrests, many of which appear to have been arbitrary, have taken place since late 1999. Amnesty International has also concurrently noted a significant increase in reports of torture and "disappearance". These reports are continuing into 2000.

Extrajudicial executions continue to be reported. On 20 December, Gabriel Gisabwamana, a member of parliament and a member of the wing of the political party, *Front pour la Démocratie au Burundi* (FRODEBU), Front for Democracy in Burundi, which is critical of the government, was shot dead by members of the armed forces in Bujumbura. A spokesperson for the armed forces claimed that he was shot when he fled after being stopped by members of the armed forces. However, numerous reports state that the injuries on the body show clearly that he was shot from above at close range. An investigation has been opened.

Since September 1999 over 320,000 mainly Hutu civilians have been displaced in Rural Bujumbura province. Over 280,000 people were forcibly moved by government forces to regroupment camps. Conditions in the camps are appalling and human rights violations in the camps continue to be reported.

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