

AI INDEX: AFR 47/04/98
26 JANUARY 1998

Rwanda: Ugandan President incites killings

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's recent calls for executions of perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda is deplorable and will only serve to perpetuate the cycle of bitterness and revenge in the Great Lakes region, Amnesty International said today.

"The current level of killings, including of people suspected of involvement in, and survivors of the genocide, is already intolerable," the organization said. "Such an incitement, especially by a prominent political leader, could easily be interpreted by some as a call on ordinary Rwandese citizens to kill those they believe to have been involved in the genocide."

During a visit to Rwanda on 11 January President Museveni reportedly told students at the National University of Rwanda at Butare that the organizers of the genocide "*must be hanged and the sooner the better.... If you kill six of my children, you should be sure that I will kill you. If the government does not do it, I will do it myself*".

These statements were followed by similar comments made by President Museveni on 21 January at a conference on Burundi held in Arusha, Tanzania. He was reported to have said that the United Nations (UN) should execute those convicted [by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR)] of genocide in Rwanda to avert a cycle of violence. Media reports quoted him as saying, "*The international community must hang them -- and the sooner the better. The crime was capital and the punishment must be capital. Either the UN does it, or the Rwanda Government does it, or the families do it*".

There have already been many cases of killings by Tutsi of Hutu they accuse of killing members of their families. President Museveni's call could also be interpreted by members of the Rwandese security forces to mean that they have the support of the international community if they summarily execute people they accuse of participation in the genocide. Hutu armed groups too have killed hundreds of unarmed Tutsi civilians in recent months. Every effort should be made to ensure that there is no pretext for continuing such killings.

"We understand the anger and desires for retribution among the Rwandese population, given the scale of atrocities committed during the genocide. However, killing killers should not be mistaken for justice. Under no circumstances should victims' relatives or any other people be allowed or incited to take the law into their own hands," Amnesty International said.

President Museveni has been acknowledged for rebuilding the Ugandan state mostly through dialogue with opponents after hundreds of thousands were murdered by previous regimes.

“President Museveni’s statements on Rwanda appear at odds with his experience in Uganda,” Amnesty International said. “He seems to be suggesting there should be reconciliation in Uganda but retribution in Rwanda.”

Amnesty International has repeatedly called for the perpetrators of the genocide and other grave human rights abuses in Rwanda to be brought to justice in accordance with international standards for fairness, excluding the use of the death penalty. It believes that the Rwandese Government should refrain from using the death penalty and instead, apply prison sentences commensurate to the gravity of the crimes for those found guilty of genocide and other crimes against humanity.

“We are pleased that several senior government and judicial officials in Rwanda have voiced their opposition to the death penalty, as well as their belief that executions are likely to go against the spirit of reconciliation,” Amnesty International said. “World leaders and friends of Rwanda should now use this opportunity to support these individuals in the difficult task of protecting human rights in the country and encouraging an open discussion about the death penalty as a human rights issue.”

Background

Amnesty International believes that the death penalty violates fundamental human rights -- the right to life and the right not to be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The UN favours abolishing the death penalty and indeed the statute of the ICTR forbids it from imposing the death penalty.

More than 100 people were sentenced to death by Rwandese courts during 1997. Many of the first trials of people accused of genocide and other crimes against humanity have been unfair. Many defendants had no legal counsel and were not given an opportunity to call defence witnesses or challenge prosecution witness testimonies. In these circumstances, calls for executions increase the already inherent risk of executing the innocent. The irrevocability of the death penalty is of particular concern, given the pattern of arbitrary arrests. Furthermore, the judicial system is just being rebuilt and normal legal safeguards are not yet in place.

More than 1,100 prisoners are under sentence of death in Uganda and at least 12 were sentenced to death in 1997.

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