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Burundi: Gatumba massacre -- an urgent need for justice

On the anniversary of the Gatumba massacre, which took place in August 2004, Amnesty International calls on the forthcoming government of Burundi and the international community to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice.

"The new government should undertake to set up an independent and impartial body to investigate this and other massacres and those found to be responsible should be held to account," Amnesty International said today.

During the night of 13 August 2004, the refugee camp of Gatumba, located near the Congolese border, was attacked by an armed group. More than 160 Congolese refugees, predominantly children and women members of the Banyamulenge ethnic group from South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, (DRC), were deliberately and systematically killed. On 14 August, the Palipehutu-FNL (*Parti pour la libération du peuple hutu – Forces nationales de libération*) claimed responsibility for the killings. The same day, the governments of Burundi and Rwanda and delegates of the Banyamulenge communities accused Congolese and Rwandese armed political groups based in the DRC of involvement in the massacre. According to UN investigators, evidence of the presence of 'other groups' was credible, but they were not able to categorically identify them.

Human rights organizations and the United Nations have strongly condemned this massacre and called for an independent, impartial and comprehensive investigation. Given the alleged involvement of armed political groups based in the DRC, there was concern that the killing could lead to a military intervention in the DRC by Burundi and Rwanda. Such an intervention could have led to further human rights abuses in the DRC.

Since then, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Burundian authorities have moved a few refugees to the Mwaro province, farther away from the border, others have returned to the DRC, while many others have moved to Bujumbura. So far, despite the indication from the Burundian Minister of Justice that the national investigation into the Gatumba massacre was completed, the United Nations Operations in Burundi stressed in a recent statement that, 'no investigation report has been issued by the government [of Burundi] and the authors of the attack remain free'.

"Justice still needs to be done, for the survivors of Gatumba, but also for all the victims of human rights abuses and violations in Burundi, as well as in the wider Great Lakes region", Amnesty International emphasized.

Background

During the past year, members of armed political groups and governmental forces in Burundi have carried

out human rights violations against the population in the provinces of Bujumbura-rural and Bubanza. Recent electoral campaigning has seen an increase in killings of individuals and local government officials for their reported political affiliations.

Burundian rural populations also continue to be victims of human rights violations. More recently, on 16 June 2005, in the commune of Muhuta, Rural Bujumbura province, eight people (four men, three women and one child) were killed and more than 30 (predominantly women) injured during prayers at the Muyaga Pentecostal parish church. It is unclear whether the perpetrators have been identified.