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BURUNDI: KILLINGS OF CHILDREN BY GOVERNMENT TROOPS

INTRODUCTION

In mid-August 1988 thousands of people were killed in the Republic of Burundi in central Africa. At first it seemed that the massive loss of life had occurred during clashes between the country's two main communities or ethnic groups <1>, the Hutu and the Tutsi. However, it soon became clear that much of the killing, indeed probably most of it, had occurred after government troops intervened in the area affected by intercommunal disturbances. Since news of the killings first reached the outside world in mid-August, more and more evidence has become available that members of Burundi's armed forces were responsible for massive numbers of executions of unarmed civilians, and that many of the victims were young children, some of them were babies, who had played no part in any of the preceding violence. They were selected for execution simply because they and their parents were Hutu and they lived in an area in which members of the Hutu community had attacked and killed Tutsi, in the communes of Marangara and Ntega in Burundi's northern provinces of Ngozi and Kirundo.

Thousands of unarmed civilians appear to have been deliberately killed by members of Burundi's armed forces when they moved into the provinces to suppress the disturbances. Official sources have justified the death toll with claims that civilians offered armed resistance to soldiers. Amnesty International is investigating these claims in order to assess whether, as many civilians who fled from the areas affected by the army's operations claim, soldiers in fact conducted systematic extrajudicial executions of unarmed civilians. On the basis of evidence available to it already, Amnesty International has concluded that large numbers of children, many of them under 10 years of age, were among the victims of the deliberate executions and other brutality committed on a large scale for which soldiers were responsible. For it does not seem likely that children aged less than 10 years of age were offering any sort of armed resistance to soldiers which could justify the use of lethal force. Nevertheless, many who have survived the killings suffered injuries caused by soldiers' bullets and bayonets. Despite their young age, therefore, they appear to have been deliberately selected as targets by Burundi's army. Lethal weapons including guns and bayonets were used by soldiers to kill and maim children and other members of the community to

<1> The Hutu and Tutsi living in Burundi are in reality neither distinct communities nor distinct ethnic groups, for they live in the same hamlets and villages and share the same language and customs. The two groups are distinct, however, and each is keenly aware of its own separate social identity.

which they belonged, the Hutu. The total number of children killed or injured by soldiers is unlikely ever to be known. But what is clear is that the disturbances will leave permanent physical and psychological scars on the children from Marangara and Ntega communes who have survived.

The disturbances that resulted into a massacre mainly affected the communes of Marangara in Ngozi province and Ntega in Kirundo province. These communes are reported to have had a total population exceeding 100,000 before the disturbances. The disturbances broke out as a result of long standing tensions between the majority Hutu community and the Tutsi minority, who constitute respectively over 80 per cent and up to 20 per cent of the country's five or six million inhabitants. Burundi was traditionally a Tutsi-ruled kingdom, and, despite a series of protests by Hutu since independence in 1962 and the overthrow of the monarchy in 1966, the Tutsi have continued to dominate all branches of government and the state.

The immediate causes of the disturbances in August are not known, but appear to be linked to suspicions by many Hutu that government soldiers were planning to kill them. The disturbances are reported to have begun in the small town or commercial centre of Ntega (the administrative centre of Ntega commune). A well-known Tutsi trader was one of the first to be killed by what has been described by eye-witnesses as "a Hutu mob". For several days the Hutu inhabitants of first Ntega commune and later Marangara commune, further south, were responsible for the murder of large numbers of men, women and children belonging to the Tutsi community. It was then that the army, which is predominantly Tutsi, began anti-Hutu reprisals. The government has said that about 5,000 people died during the disturbances. However, independent sources put the figure at least four times higher. Large numbers of Hutu and some Tutsi refugees also fled to neighbouring countries, in particular to Rwanda, which has a border with Kirundo and Ngozi provinces. The number of refugees who fled in August 1988 is estimated at about 60,000.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Mass killings occurred previously in Burundi in May 1972. That year's massacre left an estimated 100,000 dead and about 300,000 in exile in Rwanda, Zaire, Tanzania and other countries. In 1972, as in 1988, the government reported that the killings were sparked off by a Hutu rebellion. However, the vast majority of the victims were Hutu who were systematically put to death all over the country. The killings were carried out both by soldiers and by members of the youth wing of the ruling party and other government officials - all of them Tutsi. The children who experienced the massacres in 1972 are the mothers and fathers of 1988 that experienced yet more slaughter. Hutu children attending school and other similar institutions seemed to be targeted in particular for killing in 1972 in an apparent attempt to prevent the development of an educated Hutu class.

Between 1972 and 1988 there were several changes in government, but no real change in the balance of power between the Hutu and the Tutsi. Furthermore, not only was no thorough inquiry into the circumstances of all the 1972 killings carried out, but even public references to the 1972 massacre or the differences between Hutu and Tutsi were discouraged.

Indeed, the government maintained in public statements that it kept no records about whether people were of Hutu or Tutsi origin, claiming that this was not a significant factor and that all the inhabitants of the country were to be regarded simply as 'Barundi' (inhabitants of Burundi). Under the government of Colonel Jean-Baptiste Bagaza (from 1976 until 1987), Amnesty International learned of the imprisonment of considerable numbers of the Hutu community who were suspected of being in contact with Hutu political groups outside Burundi or of promoting dissatisfaction among other Hutu about the government's failure to resolve the tensions between the communities. In early 1988, some months after Major Pierre Buyoya came to power in a military coup, further arrests of this sort were reported. However, there were no apparent signs that relations between the Hutu and Tutsi communities had deteriorated, either in the north of the country where Kirundo and Ngozi provinces are situated or elsewhere, to such an extent that mass killings were about to occur.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE 1988 KILLINGS

When the disturbances first broke out about 14 August 1988, killings of hundreds of Tutsi - possibly more - by Hutu mobs were indiscriminate. For example, more than 10 Tutsi villagers who had sought refuge in a Roman Catholic mission in Ntega were killed with machetes and spears. In these and other incidents of intercommunal violence neither community appears to have had access to firearms apart from a few members of the Tutsi community, and no Tutsi are reported to have suffered gun shot injuries. It became clear subsequently that those who did suffer gun shot wounds - or injuries inflicted by grenades or bayonets - were almost certainly the victims of soldiers, rather than of intercommunal violence, as only the armed forces use such weapons.

The army intervened in Marangara and Ntega some two days after the disturbances had began. It is not clear why this delay occurred, but when soldiers did intervene, their behaviour suggests that they were following orders not just to put an end to the intercommunal disturbances, but to carry out mass executions of members of the Hutu community left in the area. Virtually every village or hamlet in Marangara and Ntega commune appears to have been visited by soldiers and to have been the site of killings. The scale of resistance offered to the soldiers is not known, but the inclusion of large numbers of women and children among their victims suggests that troops were engaged not just in quelling armed resistance or indeed in searching for those who had participated in killings of Tutsi, but rather in reprisals aimed at the Hutu civilian population as a whole and carried out in order to punish and eliminate them rather than just to restore public order. Soldiers carried out virtually indiscriminate killings in some areas, dropping grenades by helicopters or occupying homesteads on the ground and either shooting or bayoneting the occupants. Most disturbing is that small children or their mothers were shot or bayoneted either in the back, as they fled from soldiers, or after being forced to lie on the ground. Eye-witnesses have also reported seeing children from two years of age upwards being deliberately killed by soldiers.

ATROCITIES AGAINST CHILDREN

Details of killings of children or injuries inflicted on them by soldiers come from a range of sources. Survivors from Marangara and Ntega communes have described, to journalists and others, witnessing such killings. In other cases, survivors were treated for wounds which it was possible to

identify as having been caused by rifle bullets or bayonets. Survivors have often been able to provide more details about their own cases, when they were injured by soldiers but not killed, than about others. However, from a wide range of eye-witnesses it has been clear that the number of civilian Hutu, including women and children, who were deliberately killed by soldiers was very high.

In Marangara commune, an agriculturalist's seven children and their pregnant mother were reported all to have been bayoneted to death by soldiers. This was one of numerous attacks on families of educated members of the Hutu community by the army. It is alleged that the pregnant woman's belly was cut open with a bayonet. In a similar story, a survivor has reported that his wife and their two-year-old twins were all killed by soldiers in Runda hill, <1> situated on the southwest border of Marangara commune.

Agnes Muhimpundu's two children and her husband of Ntega commune were reportedly bayoneted to death. Agnes Muhimpundu herself escaped and fled to neighbouring Rwanda, where she received medical treatment for seven bayonet wounds in her back. Angele Baribarambura's nine children were reportedly all killed with bayonets when soldiers attacked the family at Mugendo hill, in the north of Ntega commune. She arrived in Rwanda with neck wounds after having been left for dead at the place where her children were killed.

Another survivor has described the killing of his wife and two daughters by soldiers in Ntega. His daughter, Minani, sustained a five inch bayonet wound in her stomach before she was later found and carried by her father to Rwanda.

At Kiremba hospital in Ngozi province, situated close to Marangara commune, more than 80 survivors of the massacres who required medical treatment were women and children. The doctor working at the hospital reported that most of the patients arrived at the hospital too late to be treated, leading to frequent deaths and amputations of their limbs. A seven months pregnant woman reportedly arrived at the hospital with 18 bayonet wounds and was described as having developed gangrene, like many others. She died while on the operating table. A 17-month-old baby was reported to be receiving treatment at Kiremba hospital in late August after sustaining a gun-shot wound in the jaw. Her father was apparently killed.

On 21 August, 11 year-old Marie-Rose Nsabimana of Marangara commune had her right leg and left breast slashed with a bayonet. Her left arm was subsequently amputated at the elbow at Kiremba hospital after the bone had been crushed by a bullet. Her mother was apparently killed in the same incident. Jeannette Hashimimana, also of the same age, from Kigoma in Marangara commune, just south of the town of Marangara, was treated for gun shot wounds in the back. At the same hospital, Pascale Bankuri, aged two and a half years, had to have her left arm amputated at the shoulder. Her mother and two other children had been reportedly shot dead by soldiers.

Other evidence of gunshot and bayonet wounds has been reported from

<1> Each commune is divided for administrative purposes into a number of "collines" or hills, on which the rural population lives in scattered compounds, rather than in compact villages or hamlets.

Rwanda. One of the children treated there who was suffering from a bayonet wound was only one and a half months' old. The child's mother had apparently been killed by soldiers at the time the child was wounded. The child's eight-year-old brother and sister were also wounded. A baby aged about six months reportedly received treatment for a wound inflicted on its abdomen with a bayonet.

A Hutu woman, aged 40, hospitalized after having her left arm amputated, was able to give details about the circumstances in which more than 20 children that had been left in her care were killed by soldiers. She was looking after them while their mothers were working in the fields. She thought that only one of the 20 had survived. Valerie Mukamusoni, aged 12, from Ntega commune, was wounded in the chest with a bayonet on 20 August. Her four brothers were shot dead at the same time.

Some children who received gun-shot wounds survived their injuries: for example, a five year old, Humvamatwi, received treatment for gun-shot wounds at a hospital in Rwanda.

CONCLUSION

Each of the examples mentioned above refers to children whose injuries indicate strongly that those who inflicted them were members of the armed forces. In addition, many other children were killed or injured in the course of intercommunal disturbances, with machetes, lances and other weapons. It is of course impossible to establish the precise circumstances in which each child was injured or killed. However, it seems clear that in many, if not most cases, the use of force against children by soldiers was not necessary for the purposes of law-enforcement. Although some gun-shot wounds could be explained if children were caught in cross-fire, injuries caused by bayonets appear in all cases to have been inflicted by soldiers on children deliberately.

The cases documented above are those of children who were either taken to hospital for treatment or revealed by relatives and other witnesses. Many Hutu children are believed to have died, however, before they could reach hospital. It may take a long time before the numbers of the dead are actually known.

Since the mass killings occurred during the second half of August 1988, the Burundi authorities are not known to have taken any steps to investigate the conduct of the armed forces or specific allegations that Hutu civilians, particularly children, were deliberately and illegally put to death by soldiers. Further arrests have occurred, of well-educated Hutu in particular, and Hutu school children have fled the country alleging discrimination in their schools. However, there do not appear to have been any further killings of children. The government has, on the other hand, taken several significant steps towards reconciling the Hutu and Tutsi communities, for example by appointing a 24-person commission in September to study the question of national unity (composed of 12 Hutu and 12 Tutsi) and by promoting a Hutu provincial governor, Adrien Sibomana, to the post of Prime Minister in October.

The communes of Marangara and Ntega remained largely uninhabited in October, two months after the killings. Soldiers were still stationed in the area, inspiring fear among the few remaining Hutu. A considerable number of orphaned children were being cared for near Kirundo town by a

religious community organized by Mother Theresa of Calcutta and numerous other orphans were reported to be living in refugee camps in neighbouring Rwanda and elsewhere. In the absence of any official inquiry to establish the identities of all those killed, it will be a long time before these surviving children know for certain if they are orphans or whether some of their relatives have survived.