

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	250
Land:	Burundi
Kilde:	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Titel:	Grotesque rape chants lay bare campaign of terror by Burundi militia
Udgivet:	18. april 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	11. september 2017

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- **Source:**
OHCHR - UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
- **Title:**
Grotesque rape chants lay bare campaign of terror by Burundi militia – High Commissioner Zeid
- **Publication date:**
18 April 2017
- **ecoi.net summary:** Video shows members of Imbonerakure, youth wing of ruling CNDD-FDD political party, chanting slogans calling for the raping and killing of political opponents [ID 339210]
- **Countries:**
Burundi
- **Original link** http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/%28httpNewsByYear_en%29/ABD9DED4BE03DCB9C125810600446D89?OpenDocument

Recommended citation:

OHCHR - UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: Grotesque rape chants lay bare campaign of terror by Burundi militia – High Commissioner Zeid, 18 April 2017 (available at [ecoi.net](http://www.ecoi.net))
http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/339210/469347_en.html (accessed 11 September 2017)



Grotesque rape chants lay bare campaign of terror by Burundi militia – High Commissioner Zeid

18 April 2017

GENEVA (18 April 2017) – United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein on Tuesday expressed deep alarm at an apparent widespread pattern of rallies in several provinces across Burundi where young men from the Imbonerakure militia repeatedly chant a call to impregnate or kill opponents. High Commissioner Zeid said the organized nature of the marches, coupled with reports of ongoing serious human rights violations, lay bare the “campaign of terror” being waged in Burundi.

A chilling video circulating on social media shows more than 100 members of the Imbonerakure, the youth wing of the ruling CNDD-FDD party, repeating dozens of times their call to “make opponents pregnant so that they can give birth to Imbonerakure”. Another group then repeats a chant in which the phrase “he or she should die” is audible some 19 times. The rally took place in Ntega commune, Kirundo province, in the northeast of the country. Following the release of the video, on 5 April 2017 the CNDD-FDD issued a statement condemning the chanting and stating that a preliminary enquiry has found that there were “influences outside the party.” However, recent reports indicate that similar, larger rallies have been organized across the country by officials from the Government and the President’s party.

· On 1 April this year in the northern province of Kayanza, around 2,500 Imbonerakure reportedly marched from Kayanza football stadium along the main road chanting similar slogans, inciting rape and violence against opponents. Reports suggest that senior officials were present at this rally.

· Reports also suggest that similar chanting occurs regularly at weekly Imbonerakure meetings in the southern province of Makamba.

· On 3 April, during a meeting on security, the Governor of Makamba reportedly urged the local population to maintain security, to arrest any suspicious person, to check every bag and suitcase and to “eliminate immediately” every person presumed to be a rebel.

· On 7 April, the President of the Senate is alleged to have incited people to violence in Makamba, reportedly calling for all suspected rebels to be “silently collected”. This is the latest of many such speeches where the President of the Senate has reportedly used coded language, with its roots in the mass violence from Burundi’s past, to incite followers to violence.

· On 8 April, following the inauguration of a CNDD-FDD party office in the eastern province of Ruyigi, about 200 people, including Imbonerakure, also began chanting for the rape of opponents so that more Imbonerakure

would be born. They were reportedly instructed by party officials to stop.

Also on 8 April, in Gaharo commune in the southern province of Rutana, dozens of Imbonerakure reportedly marched in the city centre chanting hostile slogans.

“The grotesque rape chants by the young men of the Imbonerakure across several provinces in various parts of Burundi are deeply alarming – particularly because they confirm what we have been hearing from those who have fled Burundi about a campaign of fear and terror by this organized militia,” High Commissioner Zeid said.

“While I welcome the statement by the CNDD-FDD condemning the chants in Ntega, reports that senior officials were present at other rallies are very disturbing. There also needs to be an acknowledgement that the Ntega rally was not an isolated incident, but rather the tip of the iceberg, brought to light only because it was captured on camera. This condemnation is meaningless if, instead of a putting a stop to such events, senior government officials continue to take part in such rallies,” he said.

“The Government needs to stop pretending that the Imbonerakure are nothing but a community development group. Such blatant and brazen hate speech and incitement to violence must not be tolerated, nor encouraged. In a region which has suffered so many massive outbreaks of violence and atrocities, this type of organized incitement rings very loud alarm bells.”

The High Commissioner said the incitement to kill and rape is particularly troubling as reports of serious human rights violations have continued to surface.

“We have received credible reports of grave human rights violations, including the systematic use of torture by security forces and nightly raids by the Imbonerakure into the homes of people who refuse to join the ruling party,” the High Commissioner said.

“Reports indicate a major increase in cases of enforced disappearance between November 2016 and March 2017, as well as the discovery of dozens of unidentified bodies in various parts of the country during that time. We have also received numerous reports alleging that people are being targeted due to their ethnicity.”

Between April 2015 and 10 April 2017, United Nations figures indicate that 401,573 people have fled Burundi. Some of those who have recently fled to neighbouring countries described how the Imbonerakure would make regular visits to rural homes, forcing residents, irrespective of ethnicity, to pay regular financial contributions, as well as imposing “taxes” on goods sold in markets or on traders passing through roadblocks, thus suffocating the local economy. One refugee interviewed by the United Nations Human Rights Office said he had to flee his province of Karuzi because the extortion by the Imbonerakure was so unbearable.

The High Commissioner called on the authorities in Burundi to ensure that incitement to hatred and violence are swiftly condemned, and that police, security, intelligence and military officers receive clear, unequivocal instructions to operate in line with international human rights law.

“Those responsible for human rights violations, regardless of their position or rank, must be held accountable,” he said. “Impunity for human rights violations by security forces and the Imbonerakure must be brought to an end.”

The High Commissioner also asked the Government of Burundi to grant the UN Human Rights Office unfettered access, to be able to monitor the human rights situation throughout the country, to be able to independently verify allegations of grave violations and to support the authorities in bringing the perpetrators to justice.

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HC17.020E