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Increased militia violence “could tip Burundi over the edge” – High Commissioner Zeid

9 June 2015

GENEVA (9 June 2015) – The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein on Tuesday expressed alarm at the increasingly violent and threatening actions by a pro-government militia in Burundi, saying “they could tip an already extremely tense situation over the edge.” He urged the authorities to take immediate and concrete measures to rein them in.

“Every day, we receive 40 to 50 calls from frightened people all across the country pleading for protection or reporting abuses,” the United Nations Human Rights Chief said. “We have also received deeply worrying accounts from Burundian refugees who have fled to neighbouring countries about serious human rights violations reportedly committed by the militia attached to the pro-government movement known as the Imbonerakure. The alleged violations, reported to have taken place in Bujumbura, as well as in various provinces, include summary executions, abductions, torture, beatings, death threats and other forms of intimidation.”

High Commissioner Zeid based his comments partly on the detailed testimonies of 47 refugees interviewed by human rights officers in refugee camps in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) over the past few weeks.

A 19-year-old refugee from Makamba province said that his house was attacked and looted at night by Imbonerakure members and his father stabbed to death because he had refused to join the ruling party, the CNDD-FDD.

Another refugee from Rugongo town, in Citiboke province, told United Nations human rights staff that he was abducted on April 15 by four members of the Imbonerakure who accused him of supporting an opposition party, the FNL. He said he was taken to a building and tortured by the four men, who beat him with an iron rod. Wounds were still visible on his body at the time of the interview.

A female refugee from the same town said that she and her husband were also beaten up at night in their house by Imbonerakure, who asked why her husband was not taking part in the meetings organised by the ruling party, the CNDD-FDD. Her husband was subsequently abducted and has not been seen or heard from since.

A 32-year-old refugee from Mubine district, in Bujumbura rural province, described how he was arrested by two Imbonerakure and a policeman, and detained for two weeks in a prison, after he stopped attending ideological

training sessions organized by the ruling party.

Numerous refugees claimed that threats had been scrawled across the doors and walls of their own or other people's houses. Four refugees in Rwanda, for example, mentioned having seen houses marked with a cross, apparently in order to identify people to be targeted or attacked, or as a means of sowing terror. One refugee interviewed in the DRC stated that he found the following message written on his door: “You can escape wherever you want, but you will be found.” Another refugee from Citiboke province said he saw the houses of five different families marked in red with a message saying “Do you accept to be part of CNDD-FDD?”

“These reports are truly chilling, particularly in a country with a history like Burundi's,” High Commissioner Zeid said, adding that United Nations human rights staff in the region have received persistent allegations of collusion between members of the Imbonerakure militia, and the official police force and intelligence services.

“We have been receiving consistent testimonies indicating that Imbonerakure members operate under instructions from the ruling party and with the support of the national police and intelligence services, who provide them with weapons, vehicles and sometimes uniforms,” he said. “If these claims are even partly true, they indicate an extremely dangerous effort to escalate fear and tension. If State authorities are indeed colluding with a violent lawless militia in this manner, they are gambling with the country's future in the most reckless manner imaginable.”

“I am truly alarmed by these very serious allegations. Back in April, during my visit to Burundi, I warned against the extreme activities carried out by this militia and reminded the government of its obligation to protect all citizens and residents from intimidation and violence committed by any individual or group. Now, more than ever, it is essential the Burundian authorities show their commitment to peace by clearly disassociating themselves from their violent supporters and ensuring accountability for any crime or human rights violations they may have committed,” the High Commissioner said.

He also called on opposition leaders to rein in any violent elements that may be forming on their side.

“While so far there have been very few acts of violence committed by opposition elements, there are signs of increasingly coercive efforts to push people into actively supporting the opposition,” High Commissioner Zeid said. “I urge opposition leaders to make a huge effort to ensure their supporters protest peacefully and do not resort to violence.”

“The last thing Burundi needs after a decade of gradual and largely successful peace-building, is to be catapulted back into civil war because of a small number of people's ruthless determination to retain, or gain, power at any cost,” the High Commissioner added.

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