

London's Great Lakes wars bring death to Burundians

by Linda de Hoyos

"Large-scale killings of unarmed civilians, primarily by government forces, have continued throughout 1998" in Burundi, Amnesty International alleges in a report released in November. The report confirms that the modus operandi of the regime of Pierre Buyoya, who came to power in a military coup in July 1996, continues unabated: mass killings of civilians, detentions, and disappearances of any suspected political opponents, and forced relocation of civilians to camps, where they are left without means of subsistence and subject to death by disease, starvation, or killings by the military.

These charges have long been aired by the major opponent to the Buyoya regime, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD), led by Leonard Nyangoma, who was Interior Minister under the murdered elected President in Burundi, Melchior Ndayaye. In March 1998, Human Rights Watch published a report, "Proxy Targets: Civilians in the War in Burundi," which documented the forced relocation policy of the government, which stands in violation of Article 4 of the Geneva Convention.

No fanfare in English-language press

Although most reports of such prestigious human rights organizations as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International receive major international press attention, in the case of Burundi, there is no fanfare, particularly in the English-speaking press.

The reason? Buyoya, who has somehow earned the characterization of "moderate Tutsi," is an ally of London's "new breed" of leaders in Africa, specifically of Paul Kagame in Rwanda, and of Yoweri Museveni in Uganda. According to multiple reports, Burundian soldiers are now operating inside the Democratic Republic of Congo, which Rwanda and Uganda invaded on Aug. 2. *Agence Missionnaire Misna* (Misna Missionary Agency) reported that 89 Burundian soldiers were killed fighting with Ugandan and Rwandan troops in defense of the town of Moba in the Congo.

Although Museveni is known to be a sponsoring friend of Buyoya's Tutsi rival, predecessor in the Presidency, and cousin, Jean-Baptiste Bagaza, such intramural competition appears to have been put aside, as Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi "get down to business" to hive off the mineral-rich regions of eastern Congo for themselves and their backers in

the British Commonwealth extraction companies that have brought them to power.

In Burundi, the military, which is 100% controlled by the Tutsi group, has dominated Burundi nearly continuously since independence through a series of militarist governments, the last of which was led by Buyoya. In 1993, Buyoya agreed to the holding of elections. In June of that year, Ndayaye became the first elected and first Hutu President in Burundi. In October 1993, in an attempted coup directed by Buyoya, Ndayaye was murdered. Despite the fact that the winning Frodebu party nominally continued to hold the government, the Tutsi military embarked on a campaign of assassination against Hutu elected officials, and the slaughter of Hutu civilians, which massacres were decried during 1995-96 by U.S. Ambassador to Burundi Robert Kreuger.

The military's relentless campaigns forced the creation of the National Council for the Defense of Democracy by Leonard Nyangoma, which organized for the armed defense of the population. Now, although the CNDD has split into two groups, the armed resistance is knocking at the doors of the capital, Bujumbura, with the fiercest fighting now taking place in the province of Rural Bujumbura.

As a consequence, it is likely that the embargo placed on Burundi by neighboring regimes, including Uganda, after Buyoya's 1996 coup, is likely to be lifted, as has been demanded by the European Union and the United States. The lifting will presumably permit Buyoya to act more effectively against the Congo and against the CNDD and other armed groups at home.

Civilians chased like rabbits

The Human Rights Watch report on Buyoya's reign of terror and murder against the civilian population went unnoticed in March of this year. In the intervening time, Amnesty International documents, the killings have continued under the shroud of silence.

As the Amnesty report states in the outset: "Amnesty International has received numerous reports of killings from the southern provinces of Makamba and Bururi, and from the province of Rural Bujumbura. The majority of killings have taken place in areas of armed conflict, making access to and verification of information particularly difficult. However,

several clear patterns emerge.

“Most killings by government soldiers of Hutu civilians appear to take place in reprisal for insurgent activity or killings of soldiers or Tutsi civilians by Hutu-dominated armed opposition groups. . . . In some instances, it appears that soldiers were alerted by the local population to the presence of armed opposition groups, but were unable or unwilling to engage in direct combat and resorted instead to reprisal attacks on civilians after the combatants had left.”

Amnesty notes that while the military has killed “hundreds of civilians,” the armed insurgent groups have killed “scores” of civilians—some in attacks on camps of displaced Tutsis.

Most recently, on Nov. 11, the military murdered up to 178 civilians in a village in the hills south of Bujumbura, according to press accounts, in one of the largest massacres ever reported. The killings followed an attack in the area, which is only 22 miles south of the capital, by the insurgent groups.

The *modus operandi* is not only to kill civilians, but also to burn houses and seize whatever valuables the military can find—making it impossible for survivors to resume normal life. The killings were escalated in January of this year, after a successful raid by the Forces for the Defense of Democracy on the Bujumbura airport.

On Jan. 7, the military killed 22 civilians, including at least three young children, in the area of Kirekura and Maramvya in Rural Bujumbura. Another 72 people were killed, including at least 10 children under the age of 10, in Isale commune between Feb. 22 and March 30, “when they failed, or refused to be moved to a site at Rushubi, as soldiers cleared the civilian population from the area.”

In the same time frame, on Jan. 6-7 in Bururi, in southern Burundi, up to 100 people were killed. Then, on Feb. 20, “at least 100 people who had been regrouped at a military post in the area because of fighting between government soldiers and insurgents in the locality were allowed by the soldiers at the post to return to their fields to harvest crops. However, when they went to the fields, they were shot by soldiers who had accompanied them.”

Concentration camps

Since February 1996, even before Buyoya took power, the Burundian military has carried out a policy of the removal of the civilian population from areas of fighting. The idea is to dry up the “sea of support” in which the armed groups subsist. By early 1997, upwards of 500,000 people—nearly 10% of the population—were incarcerated in such camps. According to Amnesty International, the number remains approximately the same, although the areas of incarceration have shifted.

As one non-governmental organization worker in Burundi described the camps in the Human Rights Watch report of March: “Hutus are officially protected from rebels by the

army in those camps; in reality, they are prisoners. They are very like concentration camps. [People] cannot leave them, because, if so, they are shot; they have no land to work in, no clean clothing, they have nothing. Scabies and hunger are present in every regroupment camp. Furthermore, there is a dysentery epidemic all over the country.”

Another aid worker likened the camps to the concentration camps of the Holocaust. “All that is lacking is the gas chamber. You watch as members of the family slowly die off, one by one, from tuberculosis, malaria, dysentery, starvation.”

Amnesty International confirms that the conditions of the camps have not improved. “Conditions in the camps continue to be appalling with high levels of disease and malnutrition. Thousands of people are reported to be severely malnourished, in some cases literally starving mainly as a result of their confinement in the camps. In May 1998, the government spokesperson and Minister of Communication denied on Rwandese radio reports by humanitarian organizations that 10 people were dying each day in regroupment camps in Bumbana and Musigati communes. . . . A number of refugees recently interviewed by local organizations in Bubanza province said that they could not tend their crops because they feared that if they were found in the evacuated area they would be shot by soldiers as suspected combatants. While some are able to get small jobs which enable them to buy some food, the majority are believed to be suffering from serious malnutrition, and other life-threatening diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria, which are prevalent in the camps. Many recent refugees arriving in Tanzania from southern Burundi are severely malnourished. Some have claimed that this is because they have been confined to camps near military posts for weeks and months in poor conditions and without access to adequate food.”

Amnesty also reports that, as in the war in Bosnia, “many cases of rape by government soldiers are reported to have taken place in or near regroupment camps, or during counter-insurgency operations. According to some sources, in the month of March 1998 alone, hundreds of women and young girls, including children under the age of 10, were raped in regroupment camps in Bubanza.”

But in Burundi, such atrocities have been carried out unnoticed by the international community, with nary a word of protest to the Buyoya regime from anyone. Without action from the United States in particular—without a change in policy from the United States, away from its current war posture to that of actual peace—the nightmare in Burundi can be expected to continue. Its prolongation is testimony to the criminal insanity of the policy being imposed on the entire Great Lakes region from London, Paris, and their subordinates in Washington: the imposition of a minority militarist force as a marcher-lord against populations who must be cleared out of the way to make way for the new colonialism of raw materials looting of Africa.