

SA arms 'stoke' the Burundi fire

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A United States-based human rights organisation claims that South Africans have been deeply involved in the underground supply of arms and military assistance to warring parties in Burundi. It says senior government and African National Congress officials may have given the "green light" to such transactions, without actively participating.

The allegations are contained in a report on Burundi to be released by Human Rights Watch next week. Joost Hiltermann, director of the organisation's arms project, said it would give details of senior ANC and government members allegedly encouraging Burundi rebels to seek a "military" solution; how South Africans and South African companies - often with apartheid era links - have been among the main suppliers of weapons and mercenary services in the troubled Great Lakes region; and how Spoornet allegedly smuggled weapons to the region.

Specific allegations which Hilter-

mann said would be in the report included:

* Top leaders of the Burundi rebel movements, the National Council for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD) and the Front for Democracy in Burundi, met with senior ANC and government officials where they were allegedly encouraged to fight. Details of one meeting, in February 1995, were given to Human Rights Watch by a CNDD official among others.

Hiltermann said Human Rights Watch had no evidence of government or ANC officials directly involved in weapons transfers, but that "we are very concerned that even if the government is not providing direct military assistance, they have given the green light to the rebels to procure arms from nominally private sources in South Africa".

* A South African employee of the GMR group of companies, registered in South Africa, offered a consignment of assault rifles, anti-tank mines and grenades of Somali origin

first to the Burundi government, but later to the rebels, around September last year. On about September 11 the weapons were delivered to CNDD representatives at the southern Tanzanian port of Mtwara.

GMR has counted among its employees the likes of former apartheid “superspy” Craig Williamson and Willem “Ters” Ehlers, former president PW Botha’s last private secretary. The M and G reported last year how in 1994 Ehlers shipped 80 tons of arms to Rwandan rebels. Ehlers maintained he had been under the impression the arms were destined for the government of the then Zaire.

* Spoornet employees who regularly travelled through Zambia and Tanzania on behalf of the parastatal told Human Rights Watch that South Africans often transported weapons in Spoornet trains to Burundi rebels in Tanzania, and that Spoornet was aware of the practice.

In July 1996 arms were hidden in a Spoornet convoy which had been hired by the United Nations World Food Programme. The UN agency confirmed to Human Rights Watch that there had been such a convoy at the time and denied sanctioning its use to transport weapons.

* Senior Burundi rebel officials in Dar es Salaam told Human Rights Watch they often travelled to South Africa to buy weapons from private sources. Hiltermann said it appeared that South Africa, alongside former Warsaw Pact countries, was the biggest supplier of arms to conflict zones in Africa.

* Executive Outcomes provided military services to CNDD forces in the then Zaire last year. During the course of its investigation, Human Rights Watch saw South African government communications which showed the government was aware of this.

The European Union’s special representative to the Great Lakes, Aldo Ajello, confirmed that Executive Outcomes was involved and discussed it with the South African government.

A representative of Kader Asmal, chair of the National Conventional Arms Control Committee, said the allegations were “thick with surmise, innuendo and reliance on unnamed sources about unidentified senior ANC and government members”, but that the government would try to address the claims when the full report is released.