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Madagascar: Human rights violations must be addressed in any political settlement

Talks on the political crisis in Madagascar being held today in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, must address the deteriorating human rights situation, Amnesty International said today. "The leaders of Madagascar and the international community must condemn the ongoing human rights abuses and take a firm stance on holding those responsible to account," the organization said.

The leaders, Marc Ravalomanana and Didier Ratsiraka, are meeting under the aegis of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in an attempt to resolve their political standoff following disputed Presidential elections in December 2001.

"Murder, torture, detention of suspected political opponents, harassment and intimidation are some of the worst abuses committed since December's election. Both leaders must give clear instructions to their forces and supporters not to commit human rights abuses in the context of current military clashes," Amnesty International said.

On 15 June, the city of Mahajunga fell under the control of the pro-Ravalomanana army, and local residents looted and set fire to shops owned by suspected supporters of the pro-Ratsiraka local authorities. The pro-Ravalomanana army intervened to stop the violence, injuring several people.

"Unless human rights violations are addressed, people will want to take revenge and more abuses will follow. The people of Madagascar should be given assurances that the gravest abuses will be independently investigated, that those responsible will be brought to justice and that impunity will not be part of a future political settlement," Amnesty International said.

There have been recent reports of killings and torture on the island of Nosy-Be. Eight mutilated bodies, including six pro-Ravalomanana soldiers and two civilians, were found on the island of Nosy-Be in the province of Antsiranana, where fighting between both sides is raging. More civilians are reported to have "disappeared" in Nosy-Be and it is feared that they may have been killed.

Threats and intimidation have fuelled further human rights abuses. In Toamasina, the

zatovo, a militia loyal to the local governor, has been searching houses for suspected Ravalomanana supporters. Leaflets have been distributed which threaten Ravalomanana supporters and persons of *Merina* ethnicity with arrest unless they leave town. A list of persons to be arrested was also circulated in town. Many people are now reportedly in hiding.

Amnesty International is also concerned about arbitrary arrests and detentions. In the Ratsiraka stronghold of Toamasina, three suspected Ravalomanana supporters are detained in prison, including Member of Parliament Zakahely Boniface who was arrested on 25 March 2002 and charged with undermining the security of the State . On 1 June, at least six suspected Ravalomanana supporters were arrested by militia in Brickaville and reportedly transferred to Toamasina. Their whereabouts are unknown.

"Persons currently detained must not be tortured or ill-treated and should be released or charged with a recognizable criminal offence. If they were arrested solely for the peaceful expression of their political beliefs, they should be released unconditionally," Amnesty International said.

Background

After December's disputed election between Marc Ravalomanana and incumbent president Didier Ratsiraka, Marc Ravalomanana's supporters demonstrated for two months in the capital Antananarivo. Marc Ravalomanana then proclaimed himself President on 22 February and installed his ministers in government office.

Didier Ratsiraka left Antananarivo to set up a rival government in Toamasina, a provincial capital, from where he organized economic blockades against the capital. There were then negotiations organized by the OAU and a recount of the December poll. Marc Ravalomanana was sworn in as President of Madagascar on 6 April.

Four out of six provincial governors backed Ratsiraka and declared their independence from the capital. The army, under the control of Marc Ravalomanana, launched a military offensive against the four provinces at the end of May, regained control of Mahajunga and Toliara and are currently clashing with military and militia loyal to Ratsiraka in the province of Antsiranana.

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