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Public Statement

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Nigeria: Violence in Port Harcourt escalates

Amnesty International is extremely concerned about the number of people who have been killed and injured in the recent violent clashes in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Immediate action is needed to prevent a further deterioration of this situation, especially as the local government elections -- expected in November -- are likely to trigger even more violence.

Amnesty International urges the Nigerian authorities to ensure that all citizens are adequately protected from further attacks. The organization calls on the Federal Government to carry out thorough, independent and impartial investigations into the killings, including establishing the exact number of deaths and injuries, and bring suspected perpetrators to justice in trials that meet international standards of fairness and without recourse to the death penalty.

The latest outbreak of violence in Port Harcourt started on 6 August when two rival armed gangs clashed in the streets. In the following ten days, the armed gangs attacked not only each other, but they also randomly shot ordinary civilians. At least 30 persons were killed. According to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), over 70 people with gunshot wounds were treated in the first two weeks of August in Teme hospital, Port Harcourt. Seven of these patients died from their injuries. A third of these people were bystanders, including women and children, who reportedly witnessed armed gangs deliberately and indiscriminately shooting into crowds of people at a bus stop and in a market.

On 16 August, the Joint Task Force (combined troops of the army, navy, air force and the mobile police) intervened, using helicopters and machineguns. At least 32 people -- gang members, members of the security forces and bystanders -- were killed. Amnesty International has received several reports claiming that bystanders, including women and children, were killed and many more wounded as a result of the intervention of the Joint Task Force. Reports suggest that several innocent people, who had nothing to do with the gangs, were arrested.

In response to the violent clashes, the Rivers State Governor has imposed a curfew from 7 pm till 6 am. The Governor stated that the Joint Task Force will stay in Port Harcourt for six months, and described this deployment as a "temporary inconvenience aimed at restoring law and order."

Amnesty International is very concerned about the conduct of the security forces, given for example the human rights abuses committed by the Joint Task Force in Odioma, Bayelsa State, in February 2005, resulting in at least 17 people being killed.

Amnesty International urges the Joint Task Force and other security forces, in their attempts to restore law and order in Port Harcourt, to respect fundamental human rights and act in accordance with international human rights law and standards, including those on the use of force and fire arms.

The clashes of the last weeks have had a considerable impact on the local population. Hundreds of people have fled the city out of fear of more attacks. Amnesty International fears that more people will be displaced, as the Rivers State government decided to demolish houses in the Port Harcourt waterfront area and replace them with 6,000 new housing units. The Rivers State government assumed that this area served as a haven for the gangs.

Amnesty International has also received reports that as a result of mistrust and fear for their safety, some people in Port Harcourt have already formed new armed gangs to defend themselves, thus increasing the risk of violence. Moreover, the fact that the government over the past years has failed to initiate investigations into the killings by both armed gangs and security forces, thus allowing them to commit human right abuses with impunity, is destabilising the state.

Background

The current outbreak of violence in Port Harcourt is not an isolated event. Over the past years armed gangs have clashed on many occasions, resulting in numerous deaths and injuries.

In the run-up to and during the April 2007 elections, many politicians in the Delta sought the support of armed gangs and encouraged political violence. Already in August 2006, at least 12 people -- both bystanders and gang members -- were killed in a clash between armed gangs linked to politicians in Rivers State. As the police failed to take effective steps to investigate and prosecute gang members, the violence continued in 2007.

The violence between gangs supporting opposing politicians did not cease after the inauguration of the new governor and state assembly. Politicians reportedly continue to sponsor these gangs and encourage violence in order to gain political power.

Poverty, corruption and the presence of oil, arms and gangs, have made the Niger Delta a very volatile region. When President Yar'Adua was inaugurated on 29 May 2007, he declared the crisis in the Niger Delta a priority for his government. In his inauguration address he said: "I will use every resource available to me, with your help, to address this crisis in a spirit of fairness, justice, and cooperation." In the two and a half months since his inauguration, the situation in the Niger Delta has worsened.