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Nigeria: Security forces constantly fail to protect and respect human rights

In the three years following the return to civilian rule in Nigeria, attempts by security forces to stem the rise in criminality and inter-communal conflicts, have resulted in the deaths of thousands of people. On many occasions, this violence appears to have been unleashed with government complacency, and even outright complicity.

"The federal police and the armed forces are responsible for numerous human rights violations on a regular basis in their policing activities, ranging from extrajudicial executions to death in custody, torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of suspects," Amnesty International said in a new report on Nigeria entitled "*Security forces in Nigeria: Serving to protect and respect human rights?*"

In many instances, torture in police cells results in death. The police usually attribute such deaths in custody to alleged attempts to escape. Victims are labelled as armed robbers to deny them any form of popular sympathy and to justify inaction by superiors within the police who only rarely attempt to investigate these cases.

Extra-judicial executions of criminal suspects not in custody are often linked to operations by special task forces assigned to patrol streets and highways to control armed robbery. They also occur during violence or illegal activities by some members of the police force, including illegal checkpoints set up to extort bribes from citizens. Amid general concern over crime, serious flaws in the legal system have permitted the police to routinely label citizens as "suspects of armed robbery or murder" without any substantial evidence, resulting in extremely lengthy periods-in most cases years- of detention without charge or trial.

Statements made by some senior officials seem to condone these blatant human rights violations. On 11 March 2002, while visiting the Lagos Command Headquarters, the new Inspector General of the Police, Tafa Balogun, directed police throughout Nigeria to return fire without seeking approval from superior officers when in "very difficult situations".

"The poor performance of the Nigerian police in effectively tackling crime, constant allegations of human rights violation during law enforcement activities and the sense of mistrust which they inspire among Nigerians, have also facilitated the creation of armed vigilante groups at local and state level,

which routinely carry out summary executions, unlawful detention and inflict torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment on suspected criminals," Amnesty International added.

The organization believes that the end of criminal violence does not depend exclusively on the will of federal authorities to launch anti-crime operations or tackle vigilante violence. It depends to a large extent on the security forces undertaking profound reform to improve their performance against crime, minimize corruption within its ranks and demonstrate a clear commitment to human rights when carrying out law enforcement duties.

Inter-communal strife, arguably the most serious source of human rights violations in Nigeria, has caused more than 5,000 deaths in the past three years and remains difficult to tackle. In several instances, the government has deployed soldiers to complement police pacification in most of these conflicts. However, on two occasions, intervention by soldiers has resulted in excessive use of force and extra-judicial killings.

In November 1999, in Odi, Bayelsa State, over 250 people were killed by soldiers in retaliation for the killing of 12 policemen. The army again killed 200 people in villages in Benue State between 22 and 24 October 2001, in retaliation for the killing of 19 soldiers.

"The murder of policemen and soldiers is a serious crime and those alleged to be responsible should be brought to justice. However, nothing can justify the contempt towards human life shown by the armed forces on those two occasions," the organization said.

To date, the military authorities have not prosecuted any military personnel in connection with these killings. Worse, in March 2001, President Obasanjo declared to a local television station that he had "no apology to make" over the destruction of the town of Odi by soldiers. "This statement by the President is a clear signal that there is no political will to prosecute those in the armed forces responsible for human rights violations in Odi. It is a dangerous declaration that could pave the way for new incidents of similar nature," Amnesty International said.

The organization calls on the Federal government to ensure that law enforcement officers do not resort to torture or inflict cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment on detainees under any circumstance; that they do not carry out extra-judicial executions; or exert excessive use of lethal force. Alongside, all military officers responsible for the massacres in Odi and Benue State must be brought to justice according to international standards of fair trial.

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