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Chad

Security forces shot dead 68 people in an attempt to arrest a Muslim spiritual leader

Amnesty International is concerned at the killing of at least 68 people by the Chadian security forces on Sunday 29 June 2008 at Kouno, 300 km southeast of the capital, N'Djamena.

The organization condemns the excessive use of lethal force by the Chadian security forces in their attempt to arrest a Muslim spiritual leader who has threatened to launch a "jihad" (holy war) "from Chad to Denmark". At least 68 followers of Sheikh Ahmet Ismael Bichara and four members of the Chadian security forces were killed and more than 51 other people seriously injured in the fighting. The sheik and seven of his assistants were arrested and transferred to N'Djamena where they were paraded during a press conference organized by Chadian authorities on 2 July.

Amnesty International acknowledges that the Chadian authorities have responsibility to maintain law and order in the country and to ensure the protection of all its population. At the same time the organization recalls that the force used by security forces must be proportionate to the situation and strictly necessary.

Chadian Minister of Internal Affairs Ahmat Mahamat Bachir has announced that some 700 followers of the Muslim leader attacked Koumo on 1 July, setting fire to 158 huts, two churches, a local clinic and the gendarmerie post before replacing the Chadian national flag with a flag on which it was written "*Au nom d'Allah, Dieu est Grand*" (in the name of Allah, God is great). The minister said that Sheikh Ahmet Ismael Bichara and his followers were armed with poisoned spears, swords and arrows. He added that the sheik was dangerous, an extremist and a terrorist. He also said that government forces were able to free 90 women and 121 children.

According to human rights defenders and independent media in Chad, the Chadian security forces response to Sheikh Ahmet Ismael Bichara and his followers attack on Koumo was clearly disproportionate and unnecessary. The security forces are reported to have opened fire indiscriminately and unlawfully killed some people when they could have arrested them. The sources in Chad said that the big number of people who were killed

illustrates how the force used was disproportionate. Furthermore, local human rights activists added that the scene of desolation of the site at Kouno shown at the local television also suggested that excessive lethal force was used by Chadian security forces. When Sheikh Ahmet Ismael Bichara started his "holy war" against corruption of the Islamic faith and to restore Justice in Chad before 2006 from the southeastern city of Sarh before moving to Kouno, both local and national authorities were aware of the danger of his activities and speeches on other religious communities. Tensions were created by his movement between Muslims, Christians and animists in those areas but nothing was done to stop him.

Amnesty International calls on the Government of Chad to immediately order an independent, impartial and competent inquiry to clearly determine the circumstances of the killings that occurred. The report of the inquiry should be made public. Members of the Chadian security forces and other officials involved should be investigated and those identified by the investigation to have ordered, condoned or perpetrated any unlawful killings and/or wounding should be brought to Justice. The investigation should also recommend to the government measures to prevent similar incidents in the future. The government should also ensure that those wounded are provided with adequate medical care and psychological support and all victims are afforded just and fair compensation.

Background

Chad has suffered waves of violence over the last five years, especially along its eastern border with Sudan's Darfur region and in N'Djamena. In the east, regular inter-ethnic clashes, attacks on civilians by armed opposition groups including janjawid militias from Sudan and frequent fights between armed groups and the Chadian army have caused the displacement of more than 170,000 Chadian civilians. Successive attacks of opposition armed groups on N'Djamena and other towns, especially in April 2006, February 2008 and June 2008, worsened the situation which was already bad.

Southeastern Chad is predominantly Christian and animist, while the northern and eastern parts of Chad are predominantly Muslim. Both Muslims and Christians inhabit Kouno.