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Central African Republic: Law and order collapsing as civilians flee violence and killings

Amnesty International today warned that hundreds of thousands of civilians are at risk in the Central African Republic (CAR), as violence in neighbouring Sudan and Chad continues unabated.

"As attention remains focused on Darfur and eastern Chad, armed conflict and lawlessness in northern Central African Republic are spiralling, virtually unnoticed by the international community," said Godfrey Byaruhanga, an Amnesty International researcher who recently returned from southern Chad and the CAR.

"The northern areas in particular have become a free-for-all -- a hunting ground for the region's various armed opposition forces, government troops, and even armed bandits -- some of whom come from as far away as West Africa to kidnap and loot in local villages."

CAR armed opposition forces kill civilians who do not support or refuse to join them. Government troops kill civilians they accuse of colluding with the armed groups and burn down entire villages during reprisal attacks. The civilians who survive attacks by government forces and members of armed opposition forces are attacked by bandits who kidnap for ransom and loot property. The CAR government is clearly failing in its duty to protect civilians in the area.

Interviewing dozens of refugees who recently fled to southern Chad from the northern areas of the CAR, Amnesty International's preliminary findings indicate a near complete vacuum of authority to protect civilians -- allowing free rein to a host of armed actors. As well as CAR opposition forces and government troops, Chadian government troops and opposition forces also carry out incursions into the region. Armed bandits are roaming northern CAR, searching for cattle and children, whom they kidnap and release in exchange for hefty ransoms.

"The entire area has become a cauldron of violence and fear -- threatening to destabilize even further what is already one of the most unstable and dangerous areas in the world," said Byaruhanga. "Civilians are trapped in a lose-lose situation, with many so afraid that they are actually fleeing into Sudan, Cameroon and southern Chad -- effectively moving from the frying pan into the fire out of sheer desperation."

While in refugee camps in southern Chad, Amnesty International's researchers met with families whose children -- some as young as three years old -- had been kidnapped and held for ransom by armed bandits commonly known as *Zaraguinas* or *coupeurs de routes*.

Some parents have had to pay a ransom of up to two million CFA Francs (the equivalent of US\$ 4,000) for a child. Some families have had their children kidnapped for ransom as many as seven times. Parents who previously had more than 100 heads of cattle, from which they derived their livelihood, are now destitute and dependant on meagre rations of humanitarian aid in refugee camps in southern Chad.

"The parents who got their children back after paying ransoms are the lucky ones. Some children have been killed because their parents were unable to pay the ransoms, while others are still being held with no authority to rescue them," Byaruhanga said.

"News is clearly spreading to criminal elements throughout the region that they can have free-rein in northern CAR, as there is an almost total absence of any authority," said Byaruhanga.

"Law and order in the Central African Republic is heading rapidly towards the brink of collapse -- the government's authority is already effectively confined to the capital, Bangui, where also insecurity, corruption and impunity reign. The repercussions of such a collapse would be catastrophic for the entire central African region."

Amnesty International calls for the immediate deployment of a multi-dimensional UN force to protect civilians in CAR, warning that the international community -- including the UN and the African Union -- are not taking the deteriorating situation there seriously enough.

The organization said that the force should be capable of protecting civilians and that deployment of such a force should not wait for the deployment of forces to Darfur or eastern Chad.

"This situation is too dangerous and simply cannot wait," said Byaruhanga. "The people of the Central African Republic should not be left to live or die at the whim of the Sudanese or Chadian governments, especially when the CAR government has agreed to the deployment of an international force."

The organization added that the deployment of a UN force should be part of a more comprehensive approach to protecting civilians in CAR, including the government fulfilling its duty to protect its population throughout its territory. While the UN are considering setting up and deploying a multidimensional force, the CAR government should make an immediate start by ordering its forces not to attack civilians. In addition, the CAR government must immediately investigate and bring to justice -- in trials which meet international standards of fairness -- its soldiers and other law enforcement agents accused of committing violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

Amnesty International said that armed groups have an obligation to respect international humanitarian law and must stop committing human rights abuses immediately and that all parties to the conflict have an obligation to ensure that humanitarian organizations have unfettered access to the affected population.

Amnesty International is preparing a more detailed report with further recommendations to the international community and the CAR government on the protection of civilians.

Public Document

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