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Ivory Coast: without immediate international help, the country will descend into chaos

From Bamako in Mali, Amnesty International today launches an urgent appeal to the international community to immediately mobilize and take active steps to end the constant massacres, displacement of populations and denial of the fundamental rights of tens of thousands of people in the Ivory Coast.

"The international community, starting with the United Nations and the African Union, are duty-bound to protect the civilian population of the Ivory Coast and those who have fled to neighbouring countries to escape incessant violence and increasingly insupportable living conditions," added the organization today.

An Amnesty International delegation, which has just returned from a research mission to the north of the Ivory Coast, gathered disquieting information about atrocities committed by armed opposition groups, included the *Mouvement patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire* (MPCI) *Ivory Coast Patriotic Movement*, which controls the north of the country. These atrocities include the arbitrary arrest and "disappearance" of government representatives and members of the forces of order, the summary execution of civilians and presumed delinquents and the denial of certain essential rights such as the freedom of movement.

In addition, the delegation visiting the north of the Ivory Coast and the refugee camps in Mali gathered personal testimony from civilians, men, women and children, who have fled the areas held or retaken by government forces, who are responsible for the extra-judicial execution of dozens of people, mostly natives of the north of the Ivory Coast or of foreign nationality.

"The risks of a generalized conflagration throughout the country have never been so great and this could result in massive atrocities against the civilian population and implode the country. This situation could also seriously destabilize other countries in the sub-region," said the organization.

To prevent the deterioration in the human rights situation since 19 September resulting in a major catastrophe, Amnesty International:

Launches this urgent appeal to all parties to the conflict to respect article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and the provisions of the 2nd Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, ratified by the Ivory Coast in 1989. These stipulate the obligation to treat humanely civilians and soldiers who are wounded or unable to fight, whether the conflict is international or not;

Insists on the protection of minors against any involvement in armed conflicts including their enlistment and deployment during the hostilities. It reminds the parties that this protection, established notably by the optional protocol of the Convention on The Rights of the Child, on the involvement of children in armed conflicts, also applies to armed groups other than the state's armed forces;

Requests the United Nations and the African Union to play an active role in taking the immediate measures necessary to protect the civilian population of the Ivory Coast. This appeal is also and especially addressed to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, which should act quickly to support displaced people in the north of the Ivory Coast, and provide aid to refugees who are moving towards or who have already reached Mali and Burkina Faso;

Requests the United Nations to open an inquiry into all the atrocities that have taken place in the Ivory Coast since the beginning of this conflict. It requests the respective United Nations agencies to pay greater attention to the growing refugee problem in neighbouring countries and to displaced people within the Ivory Coast.

In view of the disturbing apathy and indifference of the International community to the terrible suffering endured by the civilian population in the Ivory Coast and other countries in the sub-region who have had to take in waves of impoverished and traumatized refugees, Amnesty International warns the international community to act before it is too late.

"If the international community does not mobilize immediately, hundreds of thousands of people living in the sub-region will suffer", the organization concluded.

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