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Mali: All parties must do utmost to avoid civilian casualties

All parties to the armed conflict in Mali must ensure civilians are protected, Amnesty International urged today as military attacks by French forces continued.

With French support, the Malian army launched a counter-offensive against armed Islamist groups on 11 January to prevent the capture of cities in the south of the country.

“There are real concerns that the fighting might lead to indiscriminate or other unlawful attacks in areas where members of armed Islamist groups and civilians are inter-mingled,” said Paule Rigaud, Amnesty International’s Africa deputy director.

“Forces involved in armed attacks should avoid indiscriminate shelling at all costs, and do their utmost to prevent civilian casualties.”

Today the town of Diabaly, 400km north of the capital Bamako, was captured from the Malian army by Islamist armed groups.

In a marked intensification of the intervention, the French army bombed positions in the north, in Gao and Kidal, on 13 January. At least six civilians were reportedly killed during the fighting for control of the town of Konna on 11 and 12 January.

“The international community has a responsibility to prevent a fresh surge in abuses during this new phase of the conflict,” said Rigaud.

Amnesty International is calling for the international community to support the immediate deployment of human rights monitors, with particular attention given to the use of child soldiers, children’s rights, gender, and protection of civilians.

Reports have indicated that the Islamist groups have been using child soldiers, and that some of them have been wounded and possibly killed in the conflict.

Amnesty International is urging French forces in Mali to give as much advance warning as possible to civilians, and calls on the armed groups to not put military targets near civilian objects. Armed forces are bound by international humanitarian law to take all necessary precautions to minimise harm to civilians.

The organisation is also calling on the Islamist armed groups not to harm any of the 13 hostages they are holding, among whom are six French and four Algerian nationals.

Since Islamist groups gained control of Mali’s north in April 2012, they have committed widespread and grave human rights abuses, introducing amputations, flogging, and stoning to death for those who oppose their interpretation of Islam.

At the request of Mali's government, France has deployed since 11 January some 550 soldiers to Mali under "Operation Serval".

On 20 December 2012, The UN Security Council authorized an African-led force to "use all necessary measures" to take back northern Mali from "terrorist, extremist and armed groups." Troops from several West African countries including Nigeria and Niger are about to be sent in.