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Nigeria: Amnesty International witnesses attempted summary execution by Anambra Government Security Force

An Amnesty International delegation just returned from Nigeria described today how they witnessed members of the Anambra State Vigilante Service (AVS), commonly known as "Bakassi Boys", trying to set alight a man inside the compound of the Government House of Anambra State, south-eastern Nigeria, some 100 metres away from the State Governor's own office.

In view of such a grave incident, Amnesty International strongly reiterates its call on the Governor of Anambra State, that he take immediate action to end impunity for the abuse of human rights committed by the Anambra State Vigilante Service, which is officially organized and funded by his State government.

The delegation of Amnesty International was inside the compound of the Government House, en route to an appointment at the office of the Chairman of the Anambra State Vigilante Service, when they encountered at a distance of less than 5 metres a group of around 12 men armed with automatic weapons and machetes, dressed in black and orange and wearing dark glasses and ammunition-belts around their chests.

"The armed men were surrounding a man, apparently some 50 years of age. The man was on his knees, his arms tied behind his back and his face disfigured by recent beatings. He was bleeding profusely," Amnesty International delegates reported, adding that members of the Vigilante Service were shouting at the man, apparently insulting him.

"AVS members were pouring petrol over the man's body with the clear intention of setting him on fire. When they realised that there were strangers watching the scene, they bundled their victim into a van, loaded the vehicle with machetes and guns, and drove away," delegates added. Amnesty International has been unable to discover the name of the victim or his eventual fate.

"This episode is illustrative of the exceptionally serious abuses, committed by the Anambra State Vigilante Service, there are reports of over 1000 summary executions being committed by AVS in Anambra State in the past two years, and several dozens have been reported tortured or "disappeared". Similar violations are carried out by armed groups -- many of them having formal or informal links with state government authorities -- throughout Nigeria," Amnesty International said.

The organization is deeply concerned that the alternative armed security forces established in several states of Nigeria appear to fall outside the law and that they engage in widespread abuses of human rights with impunity. In the run-up to presidential elections in 2003, there is a clear risk that these groups will become politically manipulated. Amnesty International fears that they may be used to commit human rights abuses in order to intimidate political opponents, social leaders or voters.

"The Federal Government of Nigeria should take all necessary measures to immediately bring to justice all those members of armed groups suspected to be responsible for killings, torture, unlawful detention or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment," Amnesty International said, stressing that these practices constitute serious breaches of human rights and of Nigeria's obligations under international law.

Accordingly, Amnesty International calls on the Governments of all the States in the Republic of Nigeria who have officially or unofficially endorsed or supported vigilante armed groups to halt the abuses of human rights by them.

"Such groups should be dismantled in any case where they are found to be unlawful, and even when they are established in conformity with the law, mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that policing is carried out in conformity with international standards, in a transparent and accountable manner, and independent of political motivations," the organization said.

This includes clearly defining the division of duties between the federal police and such groups and ensuring that they operate according to strict codes of conduct, and that their members receive adequate training in both police and international human rights standards.

Background

The Anambra State Vigilante Service (AVS) is a vigilante armed group which was officially sanctioned by the House of Assembly of Anambra State in August 2000. This group has repeatedly been accused of carrying out summary executions of presumed criminals. The Governor of the State and officials responsible for the AVS have consistently denied the accusations. According to the Chairman of AVS, their members are on the payroll of the Government of Anambra State and act "under the strict supervision from the authorities of Anambra". The Chairman told the members of the Amnesty International delegation on the very day of the incident in question, that the commonly known Bakassi Boys "...never carry guns and always hand over the suspects to the police". However, there are no known records of the Anambra Vigilante Service delivering those they apprehend into police custody nor are there known official

detention centres run by the Vigilante Service. Many sources both official and unofficial have confirmed to Amnesty International that the AVS routinely executes its victims without reference to any officially constituted police or judicial authority.

Although armed vigilante groups have been banned by the Federal Government throughout Nigeria, the Anambra State Vigilance Service carries out its activities with full knowledge and endorsement from the Government of Anambra State. Hundreds of people of Anambra State are reported to have been summarily executed by the AVS over the past two years.

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