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Nigeria: Fears of human rights violations as troops pour into Niger Delta

There are fears that a military operation in the Niger Delta to seek out and arrest armed youths who have killed 12 police officers in recent weeks has resulted in the killing of innocent civilians and the burning of villages, Amnesty International warned today.

"Instead of quelling the escalating unrest in the region, the Nigerian government may have opened the door to further human rights violations," the human rights organization said.

Residents fleeing the area around the town of Odi in Bayelsa State have reported that soldiers have killed dozens of people, including women and children. These reports cannot be confirmed because journalists and others have not been allowed into the area, and have been prevented from talking to wounded people, including soldiers, receiving treatment in hospital in Port Harcourt.

Officials reportedly said 43 people had been killed. The military have said that the figure is exaggerated but have provided no information on the number of casualties. Soldiers are also reported to have been killed.

Before the military went in, local people fled the area in fear of military reprisals against their community. The authorities warned community leaders and medical personnel that they might be arrested for harbouring criminals.

However, Amnesty International is concerned that the military may be repeating a pattern of retribution against civilians in the Niger Delta who have not contributed to the violence.

"If the military operate beyond the law, then far from combating the growing lawlessness in the Niger Delta, they will inflame the situation," Amnesty International said.

Soldiers deployed in the Niger Delta have on previous occasions attacked defenceless civilians and ransacked their homes, in reprisal for the actions of armed groups and the killing of police and soldiers.

While recognizing the government's responsibilities to stop the killing of police and military personnel and to bring the perpetrators to justice, the organization urges the government to ensure that the military does not use excessive force and that all those arrested are accorded their fundamental rights.

In January and September this year, the armed forces are reported to have used excessive and lethal force against youths in the same part of Bayelsa State. The youths were protesting against the presence of security forces in the region and agitating for a halt to oil production. The armed forces were also reported to have carried out punishment raids and reprisal killings in their communities.

Wariebi Ajoko, a 14-year-old boy, was among the more than 20 youths who were reportedly shot dead in January. The soldiers took the boy's body away and it was not returned to the family. His father was among the community elders detained and tortured by the security forces, and forced to drink their own urine after being held for days in the open without food and water.

Killings by the security forces under the military governments in power until May 1999 were not investigated. Although the new civilian government ordered an internal army inquiry into the September killings in Bayelsa State, no information had been made available about the nature of the investigation, its initial findings -- not even about the number or identity of those killed -- nor when the government would make public its findings and recommendations.

"Failure to make public the results of internal investigations and to bring to justice those responsible for previous unlawful killings and excessive use of force, will only continue to encourage a climate of impunity within the security forces," the organization added.

Background

On 20 November, the government sent truckloads of troops into the Niger Delta in response to the kidnapping and killing of 12 police officers by armed youths belonging to the Ijaw ethnic group in Bayelsa state. Prior to these killings, a three-day clash from 30 October between armed groups from the Yoruba and Ijaw ethnic groups in Lagos left at least 12 dead, including four police officers.

Nigeria returned to civilian government in May, after 15 years of military rule in which the poverty of the inhabitants of the oil-rich Niger Delta increasingly became a cause of popular protest. Ethnic groups in the Niger Delta, of which the Ijaw are the largest, maintain that they have not been adequately compensated for environmental damage to their fishing and farming livelihoods or granted a fair share of oil revenues.

Since 1997, scores have died in clashes between ethnic groups over land and oil rights. Since 1998 the seizure of oil installations and the abduction of oil workers -- at least six of whom are believed to have been killed -- has seriously disrupted oil production, the mainstay of Nigeria's economy.

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