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Algeria: Amnesty International condemns massacres and calls for urgent measures

Amnesty International today condemned the massacres of more than 500 civilians in Algeria over the past few weeks, and urged Western governments to ensure that Algerian asylum-seekers who would be at risk of death or other human rights violations in Algeria are not sent back to their country.

More than 40 people, many of them women and children were reportedly killed two days ago in the latest of a series of massacres which have been committed in regions around the capital. The victims were killed at night by large groups of unknown individuals armed with firearms, knives, axes and other objects. Men, women and children were slaughtered, decapitated, mutilated, shot and burned as their homes were set in fire.

“These murders and atrocities must stop. The targeting of civilians cannot be justified or tolerated under any circumstance whatsoever, and those responsible for these atrocities must be brought to justice without delay,” Amnesty International said. “Unless concrete measures are urgently taken, Algeria’s cycle of violence and despair will continue to spiral out of control.”

Survivors complain that the security forces, often stationed nearby, have not intervened to stop the massacres and did not come to the scene of the crime until the following morning. The authorities blame all the killings on armed opposition groups, while the armed groups accuse security forces and militias armed by the state. To date no investigation has been carried out and no one has been brought to justice for the killings.

Amnesty International condemns unreservedly all killings of civilians and other abuses committed by armed opposition groups. The organisation called on all those involved in the conflict to put an immediate end to the targeting of civilians and on the Algerian authorities to take concrete measures to ensure the protection of the civilian population, to ensure that prompt, independent and impartial investigations are carried out into the massacres and that those responsible are brought to justice.

While the pattern of massacres of civilians has become increasingly widespread, with thousands of victims in the past year, the Algerian government authorities have continued to reiterate that the security situation is under control and that there only remains “residual terrorism”. Yet, at the same time they have encouraged the civilian population to take up arms and set up militia groups to protect themselves from armed attacks.

“The task of protecting the civilian population is the responsibility and the duty of the state. The protection of civilians cannot be guaranteed by arming them and encouraging them to take the law into their own hands,” Amnesty International said.

Thousands of people have fled their homes in the wake of the massacres, for fear of attacks by armed groups, and as a result of death threats from armed opposition groups. Thousands more, who have managed to leave the country, have seen their asylum claims rejected. Western countries, who advise their own nationals not to travel to Algeria because of

the high level of violence there, often refuse to grant political asylum to Algerians on the pretext that “there is no evidence that they would be at risk in their country”.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recently expressed concern at the forced return of Algerian asylum seekers, many of whom were in need of protection as refugees. The organisation stated that there has been a "very low level of acknowledgement" in some countries of these protection needs. The UNHCR called on governments not to deport Algerian asylum-seekers without due consideration of the security risks they may face if they are returned to Algeria.

“Amnesty International shares the concerns expressed by the UNHCR and wholly supports its call on governments not to return to Algeria asylum-seekers who would be in danger in their country,” the organization said, adding that it was surprised by a statement made by the Algerian authorities condemning the UNHCR’s position, and claiming that it is not true that a large number of Algerians who fled their country are in real need of international protection.

“It is unacceptable that the Algerian authorities, who have demonstrably failed to ensure the protection of the civilian population should condemn and object to initiatives aimed at protecting asylum-seekers,” Amnesty International said.

The Algerian authorities routinely accuse those who express concern at the human rights situation in Algeria of “interference in internal affairs”. Recently the Algerian government condemned a statement by the UN Secretary General, who had expressed concern at the situation in Algeria, saying that the statement was unacceptable and went against the principle of the respect for sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs.

“With tens of thousands killed, it is high time for the Algerian authorities to acknowledge that human rights protection is not an internal affair and to take concrete measures to protect the civilian population,” Amnesty International said.

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