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## **Violence in northern Mali causing a human rights crisis**

Fighting between Mali's military and a Tuareg armed group in the north has escalated and is causing a human rights crisis, Amnesty International said today.

Dozens have been killed since the violence erupted last month, and thousands of people have fled across the border into neighbouring Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania.

"This is the worst human rights crisis in northern Mali for 20 years," said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty International's researcher on West Africa.

"The rule of law has been markedly absent in this part of the country for years, and the region could be plunged into chaos if the fighting continues."

The most serious fighting to date took place in Alguelhoc, some 750 km north-east of the capital Bamako, starting on 18 January.

In the following days, dozens of soldiers and fighters were killed in clashes between the Malian armed forces and the Azawad National Liberation Movement (Mouvement national de liberation de l'Azawad, (MNLA), a Tuareg armed opposition group.

A few days later, photographs were circulated which showed the corpses of Malian soldiers' with their hands tied behind their backs, prompting the authorities to accuse the MNLA of carrying out extrajudicial executions. The armed opposition group denied this, saying that the Malian troops died during the fighting and that these photographs were fabricated.

The Malian authorities have said a commission of inquiry had been sent to investigate the incident.

"In view of the contradicting stories about how the soldiers depicted in these images were killed, there is an urgent need for an independent and impartial inquiry into what happened," said Gaëtan Mootoo.

"The MNLA should reveal the names of any captives they are currently holding and allow the Red Cross unrestricted access to them."

Amnesty International also calls on the Malian authorities to charge or release four people including two women who were arrested in the northern town of Kidal, for their alleged support of the MNLA. These four people were transferred to the town of Gao early on Thursday, and were reportedly blindfolded and handcuffed during this transfer.

Releasing the images of the dead soldiers angered their families, who protested in Bamako on 1 and 2 February.

During the demonstrations, the Malian security forces failed to prevent an angry mob from attacking

homes and properties owned by Tuaregs and other ethnic groups – including Arabs and Mauritians – living in the capital.

The security forces' failure to act resulted in thousands of Tuaregs and others, targeted because of their lighter skin color (“teint clair”) to flee Bamako, with many seeking refuge in neighbouring Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania.

“All reports indicate that the Malian security forces were unwilling or unable to protect the Tuareg population and others targeted when the Bamako protests turned violent. The authorities must take immediate measures to ensure that anyone at risk is granted protection,” said Gaëtan Mootoo.