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Mali: Aid agencies must be allowed safe access to north

Northern Mali is on the brink of a major humanitarian disaster and aid agencies must be allowed immediate access to avoid further civilian deaths, Amnesty International said today.

The three northern towns of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu have experienced days of looting, abductions and chaos since they were occupied by armed groups late last week.

“All the food and medicine stored by major aid agencies has been looted and most of the aid workers have fled,” said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty International’s researcher on West Africa.

“The population is at imminent risk of severe food and medical shortages that could lead to many casualties especially among women and children who are less able to fend for themselves.”

In the towns of Gao and Menaka Amnesty International has learned that women and girls have been abducted from their homes and reportedly raped.

A witness in Gao told Amnesty International: “On 2 April, three young girls were abducted by armed men in the 8th neighbourhood called Boulgoundié and taken away in vehicles. They were returned the following morning. They were too traumatised to speak about what they had experienced.”

Amnesty International has also learnt of an attempted abduction of a 13 year old girl at her home on 3 April by a man in Gao but neighbours raised the alarm causing the man to flee.

“Women and girls particularly are too terrified to leave their homes. People are describing an atmosphere of near total lawlessness,” said Mootoo.

Across the north of the country, the situation continues to deteriorate.

In Gao the electricity and water supplies have been cut and the hospital looted.

A resident of Gao told Amnesty International this morning: “All the shops and the market are closed. People are living on meagre food supplies.”

A doctor in Gao told Amnesty International: “Medicine has been stolen and the records of the patients destroyed. In a few days, years of medical efforts and success have disappeared in the flames.”

In Kidal, one of the armed groups, Ansar Dine which wants to impose Sharia law, has asked women to wear veils and destroyed a nightclub, the manager of which is now in hiding.

In Gao, all the bars have been destroyed. In Timbuktu, armed groups from Ansar Dine have arrested and detained people accused of robbery and looting. There are concerns that some of them may receive Sharia-based punishments.

People from Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu are trying to leave by any means possible.

A resident in Timbuktu told Amnesty International this morning: “The town is emptying out. People are going to the south or to Mauritania. They are using all means: by car, by motorbike or on the donkeys.”

Since the beginning of the uprising, more than 200,000 people have fled the north of Mali with an estimated 100,000 crossing to the neighbouring countries of Mauritania, Niger, Algeria and Burkina Faso.