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## **Mali's worst human rights situation in 50 years**

Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced by fighting in northern Mali and dozens have been subjected to arbitrary detention, extra-judicial executions or sexual violence including rape, Amnesty International said today.

In a report 'Mali: Five months of crisis, armed rebellion and military coup' Amnesty International catalogues a litany of human rights violations committed against the backdrop of a food shortage affecting 15 million people in the Sahel region.

"After two decades of relative stability and peace, Mali is now facing its worst crisis since independence in 1960," said Gaetan Mootoo, Amnesty International's West Africa researcher who has just returned from a three week research mission to the country.

"The entire north of the country has been taken over by armed groups who are running riot. Ten of thousands of people have fled the region, creating a humanitarian crisis in Mali and in neighbouring countries."

During the research mission Amnesty International delegates visited the Malian capital Bamako and four refugee sites in Niger, about 200 kilometres north of the capital Niamey.

According to testimonies taken by Amnesty International women and girls were raped, sometimes collectively, by armed men including by members of the MNLA, particularly in Menaka and Gao.

A 19 year old female student who had fled to Bamako told Amnesty International:

"I was on the way to a friend's house around 8pm with one of my classmates. On the way, a motorcycle carrying two Tamasheq [Tuareg] and a car full of armed men and captured women, stopped beside us. One of the two Tamasheqs on the motorbike was wearing a military uniform. They began to tell us that we should go with them to the camp because they needed women. We refused. My friend lied and said she was pregnant. One of the Tamasheks then made me go into an empty house. I told him I was menstruating. He ordered me to show him. I showed him the blood. He said 'What's that?' and raped me."

All parties to the conflict are believed to be committing human rights violations and abuses.

Malian soldiers beat and then extra-judicially executed three unarmed people accused of spying for the MNLA in Sevare (630 kilometres north of Bamako) on 18 April 2012. Other suspects are being held in locations not registered as places of detention such as the General Directorate of Public Security (Direction générale de la sécurité d'État or DGSE).

Similarly, Malian soldiers taken prisoner by armed groups have been summarily executed and some were ill-treated. Two Malian soldiers who had been taken prisoner in January 2012 before being released

as part of an exchange described how some soldiers had been tortured and abused. Some had their throats slit.

Delegates found evidence of the presence of child soldiers within the ranks of the armed Tuareg and Islamists groups who took control of the north of the country.

Amnesty International has collected several testimonies indicating pressure from members of the Ansar Eddin armed group on people to change their behaviour, in accordance with their fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.

Witnesses said that the imposition of these new behaviours has been accompanied by intimidation and physical violence, including deliberate and arbitrary killings.

A resident of Gao said:

“Five days after the rebels took control of the city, a car was stopped at the edge of town by armed men. One of the car’s occupants then phoned the number given out by Ansar Eddin. They arrived immediately on the scene, they shot at the thieves, one was injured, the other ran off, a third was stopped and his throat slit.”

“Without coordinated action to protect human rights, uphold international humanitarian law and the assistance of displaced and refugee populations, the entire sub-region risks destabilisation through the effects of political instability, armed conflict in the north and the food crisis which affects the whole of the Sahel,” said Gaëtan Mootoo.

Amnesty International is calling all parties to the conflict to respect international humanitarian law and to take the necessary measures to protect civilians and combatants captured during the conflict. The organization calls upon Malian authorities to put an end to the harassment of those who campaign peacefully for the return of the rule of law.

Amnesty International also calls on the armed groups who have taken control of the north to stop immediately sexual violence against women and young girls and the recruitment and use of child soldiers

The organisation also urges the Malian authorities and armed groups to allow United Nations and other humanitarian agencies unrestricted access to refugees and internally displaced people, particularly in northern Mali.