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Guinea: Security forces still a threat

Amnesty International today called on the Guinean authorities to take immediate measures to stop security forces from using excessive force against unarmed civilians in policing operations. The organization also called on the government to provide judicial and material reparations to the families of over 130 killed and to the more than 1,500 injured during weeks of violent repression of mainly peaceful protests in January and February 2007.

"The Guinean security forces are a permanent threat to the people of Guinea," said Véronique Aubert, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme. "They have repeatedly used force against the population when the government feels threatened. The fact that no one has been held to account clearly shows how state authorities -- up to the highest level -- have covered up these acts and even encouraged them."

Following an investigation by Amnesty International into the conduct of Guinean security forces during general strikes and demonstrations in the country earlier this year, the organisation today released a report *Guinea: 'Soldiers were shooting everywhere'*, accusing the security forces -- including the army, gendarmerie and police -- of deliberately using firearms against civilians, including three year old children.

"The new government, installed in March 2007 in the wake of the largest peaceful protests ever seen in Guinea, must set in place systems to ensure that the state violence seen earlier this year never happens again," said Veronique Aubert.

Information gathered by Amnesty International researchers in Guinea indicates that many members of the security forces who were involved in the shootings came from the Presidential Guard (known as the "red berets") -- an army unit answerable to the Chief of Defence Staff and based at the President's residence.

Corroborative information demonstrates that the security forces carried out extrajudicial executions and used excessive force by in many cases aiming at the vital organs of demonstrators, or by shooting in the back anyone attempting to flee. On 17 January 2007, a young high school student was killed by red berets. A witness told Amnesty International:

"When the red berets arrived, shots were fired into the air and people started running. That's when a young high school student called Diallo was killed. The soldiers shot him in the back as he tried to slip into a compound. The bullet entered the back of the neck and came out through the nose."

Another military unit called the "Rangers" also took part in the killings. This elite corps of paratroopers, set up in 2001, is expert in "bush combat" and received training from the US and China.

In addition to killings, a number of women were raped by soldiers or masked men in military uniform.

In Conakry, on 13 February 2007, a 32-year-old woman was raped at her home, the day after the state of siege:

"Soldiers (...) , came towards my house. One of them took a rifle and hit me with it. I was afraid and went back into the house. They followed me and demanded money. I offered them rice, but they said they didn't need any. Then they closed the door. They fired shots through the window, then they raped me. When they had finished, they opened the door, fired four shots, then ran off."

Dozens of people were also arrested, with many tortured while in custody. This included being subjected to a form of torture known as "Chinese torture," which involves the arms being crossed behind the back in handcuffs. One young man accused of participating in demonstrations who was subjected to this form of torture told Amnesty International researchers, "They walked on me, kicked me in the chest and beat me with batons, saying 'You want change? You'll get change.'"

In May 2007, the new government established an "Independent National Commission of Inquiry" to look into the actions of the security forces. Amnesty International welcomes this initiative, but believes that given the climate of total impunity that has reigned in the country for decades, establishing the truth and bringing justice will not be easy.

"In Guinea, maintaining public order has always taken precedence over respecting the lives of the civilian population," said Véronique Aubert. "The formation of a new government has created new hope in the country -- but it is a fragile hope that must not be dashed."

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