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Madagascar: Human rights must be respected

Amnesty International today took note of the new political agreement between rival Presidential contenders in Madagascar and expressed its grave concern at recent human rights violations in the country, including the killing of two women by soldiers in the town of Fianarantsoa on 16 April.

"The turbulence which has characterized the political situation in Madagascar in the past months has unleashed a wave of human rights violations which the outside world has largely ignored," the organization said.

Since the beginning of unrest, sparked by disputed presidential election results in December 2001, Amnesty International has received reports of unlawful killings by security forces, arbitrary detention, death threats and intimidation. These reports of human rights violations have increased dramatically over the past few weeks.

On 16 April two women, apparently transporting food from their village to sell at a local market, were shot dead in Fianarantsoa by soldiers loyal to Didier Ratsiraka, the incumbent Head of State at the time of the December elections. The town had seen an increase in violence between supporters of Didier Ratsiraka and those supporting Marc Ravalomanana, the President's challenger during this election. An army general, wounded in an exchange of fire in the town, was later reported to have been assassinated in hospital.

"These deaths are some of the latest in a series of shocking incidents in which respect for human rights has been totally disregarded

by both sides in the political struggle in Madagascar. No side has been prepared to speak out for human rights," the organization added.

Amnesty International is also seriously concerned at reports that Roland Ravalomaso, an activist supporter of Didier Ratsiraka, died in custody shortly after being arrested by supporters of Marc Ravalomanana. Ravalomaso had been arrested in the capital Antananarivo on 9 April. Hospital and police sources are later reported to have confirmed that he died of head injuries the same day.

At least 35 people, including more than 20 civilians, are reported to have been killed since the violence erupted. In addition to the two women, other civilians have died at the hands of security forces, in circumstances suggesting excessive use of lethal force.

In one such incident, police sources in Toamasina reportedly confirmed that officers of the *Organe Mixte de Conception* (OMC), comprising army and police forces, opened fire on suspected looters in Morano district of Toamasina on the morning of 14 March killing at least seven people. Tension had been mounting in the town amid growing unrest between rival supporters of Didier Ratsiraka and Marc Ravalomanana.

"Reports suggest that these deaths were avoidable. Intentional lethal use of firearms is sanctioned only when law enforcement officials or others are faced with the imminent threat of death or serious injury – this does not appear to have been the case in Toamasina," the organization added.

The two sides in the political struggle signed an accord on 18 April following talks in Senegal in which it was agreed to order a recount of

the votes and to hold a referendum if neither side were found to have won an absolute majority.

"Both sides in the conflict and the international community should take this opportunity to ensure the future respect and protection of human rights in Madagascar. Respect for human rights by the security forces in maintaining law and order must also be a top priority to ensure future stability", the organization added.

Background

On 22 February 2002, opposition Presidential candidate Marc Ravalomanana declared himself President of Madagascar, disputing the official results of the December 2001 elections which declared that neither he nor incumbent President Didier Ratsiraka had won an absolute majority of votes. The High Constitutional Court of Madagascar had ordered a re-run of the elections.

The declaration followed weeks of generally peaceful protests and general strikes in the capital Antananarivo in support of Marc Ravalomanana, the capital's Mayor. Marc Ravalomanana subsequently appointed a rival government, installing his ministers in government offices. President Ratsiraka and his remaining cabinet left Antananarivo to set up a temporary capital in Toamasina with the backing of five regional governors. Tension, violence and human rights violations have steadily increased throughout the country in the stand off between both sides.

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