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Nigeria: Government responsibility in vigilante violence

"Any armed vigilante group endorsed by the authorities to conduct law enforcement functions in Nigeria which does not meet relevant human rights standards should be permanently dismantled, and those individuals responsible for violations, brought to justice," Amnesty International said today in a new report, *Nigeria: Vigilante violence in South and South - East*.

The rise in crime and insecurity three years after the return of civilian rule in Nigeria and the sense of low performance by the security forces has led to the expansion of vigilante groups at local and state level.

"Armed vigilante groups carry out law enforcement activities in an ever-growing number of states with the tacit, and sometimes explicit, endorsement from the state governments, especially in the South-East of Nigeria. State-endorsed armed vigilante groups routinely carry out extrajudicial executions and unlawful detentions and inflict torture and other forms cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment to suspected criminals," Amnesty International said.

According to the organization, the Nigerian federal government is not only responsible for the numerous human rights violations committed by its security forces, it is also fully accountable for those groups officially endorsed by authorities at state or local levels to carry out law enforcement duties. The Government must also acknowledge its failure to effectively take on those armed groups who commit human rights abuses and for failing to arrest the perpetrators and bring them to justice.

Armed vigilante groups, commonly known as the "Bakassi Boys" of Abia, Anambra and Imo states have carried out extra-judicial executions, torture, cruel and inhuman treatment of alleged criminals and illegal detentions, with the backing of state governments. Over the past two years, hundreds of people have been reportedly extrajudicially executed by the Anambra State Vigilante Service, of Anambra, which was officially recognised by the Government of Anambra State.

In its report, Amnesty International welcomes recent actions by the Nigeria Police Force to dismantle armed vigilante groups in the South-East, mainly in Abia and Anambra States. The human rights organization warns, however, that this latest initiative might prove insufficient if it is not sustained in time and applied consistently for the whole of Nigeria, and unless those responsible for human rights violations committed by state-endorsed armed vigilante groups are brought to justice.

As social pressure grows over increasing crime and poor performance by the Nigerian security

forces coupled with activities in the run-up to presidential elections, due in April 2003, there is a clear risk that tacitly or expressly state-endorsed vigilante groups will carry out further human rights violations in the context of struggle for power," Amnesty International warned.

"The police must, in their fight against crime, observe all relevant international human rights standards concerning the use of force by law enforcement officers," Amnesty International urged.

The organization calls on the Federal and State governments to put the respect and protection of human rights at the top of their political agenda, and ensure that no human rights violations or abuses by armed groups are carried out with impunity.

NB: *Armed vigilante groups in Nigeria in the report* refers to two different categories of groups:

1. Armed vigilante groups officially endorsed by the authorities of certain States:

This is the case of the "Bakassi Boys" in Abia, Imo and Anambra States. These groups have received official public endorsement by the State Governor, the State House of Assembly or both to carry out law enforcement duties. In this case, Amnesty International considers that, even if the Federal Government is opposed to this endorsement, it is fully accountable for their activities. The breach of human rights standards by these groups amounts to human rights violations.

2. Armed vigilante groups tacitly endorsed by some State governors:

This is the case of the OPC in Lagos State and other vigilante groups already operating in some States whose authorities are considering official endorsement. Amnesty International considers that the breach of human rights standards amounts to human rights abuses. Obviously, the Federal Government has the responsibility of immediately dismantling these groups and bring the responsible for human rights abuses to justice.

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