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Algeria: Civilians caught in a spiral of violence amidst the indifference of the international community

NEW YORK – The civilian population in Algeria is increasingly caught up in a growing spiral of violence, which in the past year has reached unprecedented levels. Up to 80,000 people have been brutally killed since the beginning of the conflict in 1992. In the past year violence has taken a new and terrifying turn with the massacre of thousands of civilians.

Human rights abuses by security forces, state-armed militias, and armed groups calling themselves “Islamic groups” are increasingly widespread. Killings, torture, “disappearances”, abductions and death threats have been part of daily life in Algeria in the past few years.

“The international community has turned its back on the Algerian human rights tragedy. Such indifference in the face of so much horror is an abdication of their responsibility towards the Algerian people,” Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International, said.

In a report released today: *Algeria : Civilian population caught in spiral of violence*, the organization called for an international investigation into recent massacres and other abuses to reveal the truth about who is responsible for these atrocities and to point the way forward. Following this a long-term human rights plan should be developed to bring about change.

In its report Amnesty International documents a complex reality of violence and counter-violence in a conflict which has claimed tens of thousands of lives and which has often been unreported due to censorship and manipulation of “security-related” information, denial of access to the country and strict surveillance and restrictions imposed on media and human rights groups.

In 1997, the civilian population has been targeted in an unprecedented manner. Thousands of men, women, children and elderly people have been slaughtered, decapitated, mutilated or burned alive in their homes. Babies and elderly people have been hacked to death. Pregnant women have been disembowelled. Most of these massacres were committed around the capital in the Algiers, Blida and Medea regions - in the most heavily militarized part of the country - and often near army and security forces barracks. Many massacres, often lasting hours, took place only a few hundred metres’ away from army and security forces’ barracks.

Hundreds of men, women, children and even babies, were massacred in Rais and Bentalha, a few kilometres south of the capital, Algiers, on 28 August and 22 September, respectively. Both Rais and Bentalha are virtually surrounded by army barracks and security forces outposts, and survivors of the Bentalha massacre have reported that military troops with armoured vehicles were stationed a few hundred metres away as the massacre was taking place.

The massacres lasted for hours; Yet despite the screams of the victims, sound of gunshots, flames and smoke from the burning houses, the security forces stationed nearby never intervened to come to the rescue of the victims, nor to arrest those responsible for the massacres, who got away on each occasion. In Beni Messous, near the most important barracks and security forces

centre of the capital, more than 60 civilians were massacred. Neighbours telephoned the security forces who refused to intervene saying the matter was within the mandate of the *gendarmérie*.

Such testimonies add further weight to reports that armed groups who carried out massacres of civilians in some cases operated in conjunction with, or with the consent of, certain army or security forces units.

The Algerian authorities blame the massacres on the GIA (*Groupe islamique armé - Armed Islamic Group*) and other such groups, in the same way as they also blame other killings and abuses committed in the past five years on these groups. However, they have consistently failed to investigate, or to allow others to investigate, killings and other abuses blamed on both armed groups and security forces.

Armed groups, calling themselves “Islamic groups” have also continued to deliberately and arbitrarily kill civilians, often targeting the most vulnerable, including women and children, or carrying out indiscriminate bomb attacks in public places. Among those targeted by such groups are people from all walks of life, including relatives of members of the security forces, civil servants, journalists, artists, youths who had completed the compulsory military service, and people whom they accuse of being supporters of the government. In addition to killing civilians armed groups have also been responsible for abductions and torture, including rape, and for issuing death threats to individuals and groups of people.

The Algerian authorities have continue to claim that the security situation is “under control” and that “terrorism is residual”, but at the same time they have been distributing weapons to the civilian population and have encouraged them to set up militia groups. Such abdication of their responsibility to ensure the protection of the civilian population has had a seriously negative impact on the human rights situation.

“By arming civilians and encouraging them to take the law into their own hands the Algerian authorities have created a situation where the civilian population has been further drawn into the conflict and the rule of law has been further eroded,” Pierre Sané said.

To date no independent and impartial investigation has ever been carried out into killings, “disappearances”, torture and other abuses committed by security forces, state-armed militias and armed groups. Such impunity for the perpetrators has encouraged further violations.

Whilst recognizing the gravity of the human rights situation in Algeria, the international community has failed to address the issue in concrete terms, often hiding behind the pretext that the Algerian authorities accuse those who raise questions and concerns about the human rights situation of “interference in Algeria’s internal affairs”.

“Word of condemnations and expressions of concern are no longer enough. It is high time for concrete action to be taken,” Pierre Sané said. “ For years the cries for help of victims in Algeria have fallen on deaf ears. This indifference must not continue.”

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