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Nigeria warned over rise in pre-election violence

Amnesty International has urged the Nigerian authorities to act to stem a rising tide of political, ethnic and religious violence that risks threatening the stability of April elections.

The short report entitled *Loss of life, insecurity and impunity in the run up to Nigeria's elections* highlights how hundreds of people have been killed in politically-motivated, communal and sectarian violence across Nigeria ahead of presidential and parliamentary polls.

Authorities have failed to bring suspected perpetrators to justice, or to prevent further human rights abuses. Investigations are infrequent and often inadequate. Hardly anyone has been convicted for the killings.

"The Nigerian authorities must act to protect people's lives and all political candidates should denounce violence and tell their supporters to campaign peacefully" said Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Africa, Tawanda Hondora.

"Candidates should tell voters what they will do to stop the senseless killings and improve security and justice in Nigeria. The Presidential Debate on Friday 18 March is an excellent opportunity to make such a commitment."

In one of the worst episodes of violence, a bomb attack in Jos on 24 December 2010, killed about 80 people. The attack, which was later claimed by the Boko Haram armed religious sect, also sparked months of reprisals between different ethnic and religious groups in Plateau state that left at least another 120 people dead.

One resident told Amnesty International that authorities had not done enough to prevent the attacks in Jos, saying "there were clear signals that something was going to happen but [the security forces] were not on ground."

Another said during the violence "it's chaos, there are people going round on motorbikes, they ride into a community and throw [bombs]."

More than 50 people have also been killed since July 2010 in violence directly related to elections. Human rights defenders, who will play a key role in monitoring the April election, are facing increased threats and violence with no adequate protection from the security forces.

Despite these deaths, there have been no national campaigns against election violence, and very few arrests.

The authorities have also failed to competently prosecute those responsible for the Jos and Plateau State violence, and the results of previous government investigations into reasons behind the violence have never been made public.

In Borno state, in the northeast of the country, Boko Haram has been blamed for attacks on security forces, government officials and religious leaders. More than 50 people, including bystanders, have been killed since July 2010.

The security forces have reacted with wide ranging abuses such as enforced disappearance, extrajudicial execution, and sweeping arbitrary detention.

A local resident told Amnesty International “After the killings [by Boko Haram]... they come and arrest all those people around [the area]... Now, if an incident happened in an area you will see most of the neighbours packing out of the area.”

Another resident described his detention as a Boko Haram suspect: “We were taken to SARS [Special Anti-Robbery Squad], Abuja. It’s known as the abattoir... we were not alive. We had no food, no water... One cell held about 45 of us... There were five small children there too.”

Poor police investigation is undermining efforts to bring suspected perpetrators to justice.

Amnesty International is urging political parties and candidates to put justice, security and human rights at the heart of the election campaign, in order to break Nigeria’s nationwide cycle of violence.

“When no-one is brought to justice for violence, this sends the message that you can get away with murder,” said Tawanda Hondora.