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Mali: Urgent action needed to protect civilians

The Tuareg and Islamist armed groups who have taken the northern cities of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu must protect the civilian population in areas under their control, Amnesty International said today.

In Gao, the organisation received reports of armed men firing into the air and looting public and private buildings, including the hospital.

One witness living there told Amnesty International today: “Armed people are entering the houses and looting. They are firing in the air and we are all terrified. We are left with no defence.”

A woman was forced to give birth in the street in Gao as the hospital was being looted by armed men. One patient died as medical care was withdrawn.

“The armed groups who seized these towns in the last three days must ensure human rights abuses do not occur and where they do, they must take action and remove anyone implicated from their ranks,” said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty International’s researcher on West Africa.

“The looting must be halted to ensure that the civilian population can safely go about their lives.”

“In Gao especially, there is an atmosphere of terror and confusion. People must be reassured that if they stay they will not be harmed.”

In Timbuktu a young man was reportedly killed on Sunday by a stray bullet while walking in the street.

As chaos spirals more and more people are fleeing their homes.

A resident of Kidal told Amnesty International this morning: “I’m trying to leave the city with my family but there is a waiting list at the bus station. I hope I can have a ticket for Wednesday.”

The Azawad National Liberation Movement (Mouvement national de liberation de l’Azawad, (MNLA), a Tuareg armed opposition group, launched a military uprising in the north of the country late January 2012.

Meanwhile Islamic group, Ansar Dine, which says it aims to implement the Sharia law in Mali, has also been fighting against the national army.

Since the beginning of the uprising, more than 200,000 people have fled the north of Mali with an estimated 100,000 crossing to the neighbouring countries of Mauritania, Niger, Algeria and Burkina Faso.

“There is a real risk of a humanitarian crisis as aid agencies are encountering many problems gaining access to those in need,” said Gaëtan Mootoo. “This situation is aggravated by the fact that the whole Sahel region is facing a widespread food and nutrition crisis.”

The situation in Bamako continues to be volatile ten days on from the military coup that toppled Mali's President Amadou Toumani Touré.

The leader of Mali's new ruling junta promised on Sunday to reinstate the constitution, hours ahead of a deadline set by the Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS) either to start handing back power or face sanctions.