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UN protection needed for tens of thousands of displaced civilians in Côte d'Ivoire

The UN mission in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) must protect the tens of thousands of civilians displaced by the conflict who wish to return to their home villages but are afraid to do so, Amnesty International said today.

"Thousands of people are hiding in the bush in life threatening conditions and without any proper food or sanitation. They need to be reassured and to be allowed to return to their homes," said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty's Côte d'Ivoire researcher who is currently in the west of the country.

Scores of villages between the towns of Guiglo and Bolequin, 600 km west of Abidjan, have been burnt or looted and almost all local inhabitants have fled following the fighting that took place in the area at the end of March, an Amnesty International delegation on the ground reports.

"We have seen ghost villages with nearly no civilians. Nearly all the 30,000 civilians have fled from Bolequin after intense fighting and massacres took place there" said Gaëtan Mootoo.

"The UNOCI contingent based in Guiglo is conducting two patrols a day in the area, but this is clearly insufficient to effectively protect civilians at risk. Amnesty International calls on UNOCI to significantly increase its presence in the area, in particular in Bolequin, in order to provide protection and to create conditions that will enable people to return safely to their communities."

"The Ivorian authorities also have a duty to ensure that displaced civilians are able to voluntarily return to their homes and retrieve their land, if they wish to do so. It is their responsibility under international law," said Gaëtan Mootoo.

In Bolequin, the delegation witnessed distressing scenes with most of the town destroyed and nearly no civilians present in the town. Scores of Republican Forces loyal to President Alassane Ouattara were seen in and around the town. Amnesty International is particularly concerned by the fact that the whereabouts of the priest of Bolequin, Damien Gecbeu, remain unknown since the attack against the town by Republican Forces.

At least 47 people were killed in Bolequin on 31 March, Amnesty International has learned.

"Officials of the Republican Forces told us that these people were killed by Liberian mercenaries loyal to Laurent Gbagbo, but only an independent investigation can really establish the truth into these killings and the many others that took place in this area," Gaëtan Mootoo said.

Around 30 people from the Guere ethnic group, perceived to be supporters of former President Laurent Gbagbo, have returned to Bolequin after spending several weeks in the bush, the Amnesty International delegation reports. Some are ill and in urgent need of medical attention.

“There is an urgent need for international humanitarian assistance to help the tens of thousands of people who are wandering in the bush in the region of Bolequin without any food or shelter. If nothing is done very urgently, the most vulnerable people risk dying from hunger, disease or exhaustion,” Gaëtan Mootoo added.