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Côte D'Ivoire: Time to put an end to the cycle of reprisals and revenge

More than 200 people including members of former President Laurent Gbagbo's Front Populaire Ivoirien (Ivorian Popular Front, FPI) have faced illegal detention and torture with many still languishing behind bars, Amnesty International can reveal after members of the organisation returned from a month-long mission to Côte D'Ivoire.

"We were able to meet dozens of detainees who told us how they have been tortured by electricity or had molten plastic poured on their bodies, two of them have been sexually abused," said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty International researcher on West Africa.

"Some have been held for many months denied contact with their families and access to lawyers."

Laurent Gbagbo was president of Côte d'Ivoire from 2000 to 2010 when he was forced from power after a disputed election escalated into a violent standoff.

After a four month battle that resulted in more than 3,000 deaths, Gbagbo was arrested in April 2011 and was subsequently turned over to the International Criminal Court in The Hague on charges relating to post-election violence.

During its mission Amnesty International met four detainees at an unrecognized place of detention, the Génie militaire, a military barracks in Abidjan. These people had been held incommunicado for more than a month.

In many cases families have, despite tireless requests and efforts to trace relatives in different places of detention, been left with no information about their fate and only learnt of their whereabouts through Amnesty International.

Among those held in illegal places of detention in Abidjan, some have been charged with endangering the security of the State, others were released without charge or trial. In some cases release followed ransoms being paid to military officers.

This happened in the case of a member of Gbagbo's FPI, who was arrested in Abidjan on 27 August 2012 because he was accused of being a militiaman.

He was released two days later against a ransom. This person told Amnesty International : "My parents first paid 50 000 CFA (around 75 euros) and then after my release, my jailers went at my house and demanded a higher sum. I told them that I couldn't pay such an amount and they agreed to receive 20 000 CFA more (30 euros)."

In another case, a police officer died as a result of torture.

Serge Hervé Kribié was arrested in San Pedro on 21 August 2012 by the Forces Républicaines de Côte d'Ivoire (Republican Forces of Côte d'Ivoire, FRCI, the national army) and interrogated about recent attacks. He was stripped naked, tied to a pole, had water poured on his body and then was subjected to electric shocks. He died a few hours later.

During the mission Amnesty International met high ranking officials close to Gbagbo detained in four towns in the centre and the north of the country including his wife Simone who is held in the town of Odienné, his son Michel, held in Bouna plus key figures from the former administration held in Boundiali and Korhogo.

All are facing a number of charges including crimes against State security and murder.

“Some of them told us that despite the fact that they have been held since April 2011, they only saw an investigating judge twice for less than a few hours,” said Mootoo.

The delegation met one of the judges involved in these cases who said that due to the confidentiality of investigations he couldn't give any information on the files but that he would end his enquiry before the end of the year.

The Amnesty International delegation went also to Duekoué and the neighbouring villages in the west of the country where recently mass graves were discovered.

Amnesty International spoke with a number of displaced people who lived in a camp in Nahibly who had been attacked by Dozos (traditional hunters who are a state-sponsored militia) and FRCI members in July 2012 as a reprisal for the death of four people.

Amnesty International collected credible accounts of numerous people being arbitrarily detained, “disappeared” and extrajudicially executed in the aftermath of the attack. The attack and violations occurred despite the fact that peacekeeping soldiers of the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) were stationed outside the camp and UN police were posted inside the camp.

“While acknowledging that the Côte d'Ivoire government is facing a wave of attacks, we are very worried that the current arrests and repression stem from a willingness of reprisals and revenge”, said Mootoo.

“More than 18 months after the arrest of Laurent Gbagbo in April 2011, it's high time for President Alassane Dramane Ouattara to go beyond promises and put the respect of human rights at the top of his government's agenda.”