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Madagascar must end mass killings and investigate security forces

Madagascar's rampaging security forces must be brought under control in the south of the country, Amnesty International said after widespread state killings of civilians over cattle theft, and a failure to protect hundreds from mass communal murder.

Official sources have claimed that ongoing 'Operation Tandroka', which started in September, has seen 40 cattle thieves (dahalos) killed and 76 arrested in the southern region of Anosy. Cattle-rustling gangs reportedly killed 14 state security officers earlier in the year.

However, witnesses have told Amnesty International that elderly people, the physically disabled, children, and others unable to flee their homes were burned alive when security forces indiscriminately set fire to villages as part of the military operation.

"We are hearing of punishment and persecution of individuals and communities in the south which could amount to human rights abuses on an appalling scale," said Christian Mukosa, Amnesty International's Africa Programme Researcher, who has just returned from Madagascar.

"The government has to rein in its security forces and launch an independent investigation into these allegations."

In one of the many raids on villages in September, security forces burned 95 homes in Elonty district, and killed at least 11 people including a six year old girl, witnesses say.

During the attacks, crops have been destroyed and at least one school has been razed. Officials claimed that only cannabis farms were destroyed by their forces.

Security forces have also extrajudicially executed suspects during the raids, Amnesty International has been told, including one physically disabled person in Numbi village in September, and the parents and wife of a high-profile suspect in Mahaly district in October.

Forces involved in the alleged extrajudicial killings include the Special Intervention Forces.

At least 250 people have also been killed throughout the year around the southern town of Fort-Dauphin, in what the authorities describe as communal clashes sparked by cattle-thefts. Amnesty International fears the number could be far higher.

At least two witnesses told Amnesty International that authorities were informed about the imminence of an attack on one village by its neighbours in which at least 86 people were hacked to death by machetes, but did nothing to prevent it.

"Those responsible for these massive violations, including senior members of the security forces, must be brought to justice," said Mukosa. "The government should call on the international community including

the UN to help establish a truly independent investigation.”

The months of violence present serious concerns for the security of civilians in the region ahead of presidential elections planned for May 2013.