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Central African Republic: War crimes and crimes against humanity in Bangui

War crimes and crimes against humanity are being committed in the Central African Republic, Amnesty International said at the close of a two-week mission to the country.

The organization is calling for the rapid deployment of a robust UN peacekeeping force with a clear mandate to protect civilians – and sufficient resources to do so effectively.

“Our in-depth research on the ground in the Central African Republic over the past two weeks has left no room for doubt that war crimes and crimes against humanity are being committed by all parties to the conflict,” said Christian Mukosa, Amnesty International’s Central Africa expert.

“Crimes that have been committed include extrajudicial executions, mutilation of bodies, intentional destruction of religious buildings such as mosques, and the forced displacement of massive numbers of people.”

The three-person Amnesty International delegation has documented the violations and abuses that have taken place since violence erupted on 5 December in the capital, Bangui, with an early morning attack by anti-balaka militia.

In some neighbourhoods, the anti-balaka forces went door to door and killed approximately 60 Muslim men. The de facto government forces, known as ex-Seleka, retaliated on a larger scale against Christians in the wake of the attack, killing nearly 1,000 men over a two-day period and systematically looting civilian homes. A small number of women and children were also killed.

During the days that followed the initial burst of violence in Bangui, human rights violations and abuses continued at a staggering pace.

Despite the presence of French and African military forces meant to protect the civilian population, civilians are being wilfully killed on a daily basis, with at least 90 additional people killed since 8 December. Some victims have been shot; others have been killed by angry mobs with machetes; others have even been stoned.

The complete absence of justice and accountability for these crimes has led to a downward spiral of revenge killings and to deepening inter-communal hatred and mistrust. In total 614,000 people have been displaced across the country – 189,000 in Bangui alone, a quarter of the city’s population.

“The continuing violence, the extensive destruction of property, and the forced displacement of the population in Bangui are feeding enormous anger, hostility and mistrust,” said Christian Mukosa.

“There can be no prospect of ending the cycle of violence until the militias are disarmed and there is

proper and effective protection for the thousands of civilians at risk in the country. Residential neighbourhoods must be made safe as an urgent priority in order to allow people to go back to their homes and resume their normal lives.”

Any disarmament process must be accompanied by effective physical protection measures, particularly in crisis hotspots such as the PK5, Miskine and Combattant neighbourhoods. Amnesty International has learned of revenge attacks on those who have been disarmed to date.

One of the most worrying aspects of the current situation is the blurring of lines between organized armed groups and civilian mobs. In many cases it has been difficult to identify those responsible for the killings, but it is clear that many local civilians advocate violent acts of revenge, and some are participating in them.

Both the Christian and Muslim communities have a deep sense of anger and grievance – many people have shown Amnesty International researchers photos and videos of slaughter that they keep on their mobile phones.

Amnesty International believes that more international troops are urgently needed to ensure security in Bangui and elsewhere in the Central African Republic.

The African Union has promised to deploy up to 6,000 troops in a new peacekeeping force which is due to take authority in the Central African Republic on 19 December. This deployment is urgently needed but the makeup and deployment plans for the troops have not yet been spelled out.

Amnesty International is also calling on the UN to expedite its plans to set up a commission of inquiry to investigate war crimes, crimes against humanity and gross violations of human rights.

“It is important to establish responsibility for the crimes that have been committed by all sides in this conflict and ensure an end to decades of impunity that have prevailed in this country,” said Christian Mukosa. The organization has received credible information about militia leaders who are directly implicated in the attacks and should be brought to justice.

“The international community has an important role to play in the Central African Republic, ensuring peacekeeping forces are deployed with all haste and are given the resources they need to prevent even greater bloodshed.”

Amnesty International will present its preliminary findings in a briefing at a press conference today in London. It will publish a more in-depth report in early 2014.

Human Rights Watch is publishing a separate report focusing on an escalation of sectarian violence and atrocities in Ouham province in northern Central African Republic.