

Amnesty International Web Feature

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Masked bandits run riot in Central African Republic

Gangs of armed bandits are terrorizing the population of the Central African Republic (CAR) as the region is swamped by violence and lawlessness.

The masked outlaws - known locally as "Zaraguinas" (*coupeurs de route*) - have become stronger and better organized than government forces, leaving local people increasingly vulnerable to grave human rights abuses.

"Zaraguinas are often better equipped with automatic weapons and have better knowledge of the terrain than government forces," said Erwin van der Borgh, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme. "This is coupled with an already dire situation of fighting between government forces and armed political groups."

If the turmoil in northern CAR continues unchecked, it will have severe consequences for neighbouring countries in the region, such as Sudan, Chad and Cameroon. The UN Security Council must immediately authorize the deployment of international troops to the CAR with a mandate to protect civilians, who are at serious risk of attacks and abductions.

Most victims of abduction have been young Mbororo children, who live mainly in north-western CAR but also in Chad, Cameroon and some West African countries. They are targeted because their families - nomadic cattle keepers - can sell cattle to raise hefty ransoms. Zaraguinas target these children for as long as their parents and relatives have cows to sell. Some child abductees are reported to have been killed by the bandits after their families failed to pay ransoms.

Victims believe many Zaraguinas are local people. They speak local languages and appear to know how many cattle and other possessions their targets own. Zaraguinas usually cover their faces with turbans so as not to be recognized. Other bandits - attracted by the vacuum of authority in the area - are reported to be coming into northern CAR from as far away as West Africa to join the Zaraguinas.

Many abductees told Amnesty International that security forces and government officials make no attempt to prevent abductions or arrest Zaraguinas. In the rare cases that they do, the bandits have more firepower and easily beat off any pursuit.

"By its inaction, the government is failing the people legally under its care," said van der Borgh. "It is time for the government and the international community to take strong, concerted action. Any further delays are likely to have catastrophic consequences for the entire area."

Case study

Adamou Bi Babayo, 56, a member of the Mbororo ethnic group, told Amnesty International that his children had been kidnapped more than six times. His 18-year-old daughter, Fadimatou Adamou, was kidnapped from a cattle keepers' camp in June 2006. The Zaraguinas held Fadimatou for one month before Babayo was able to borrow FCFA 1.5 million (US\$3,000) to pay for his daughter's release.

Babayo's 9-year-old daughter, Loussoufa, was then kidnapped at night from her bed. The Zaraguinas held her for 35 days before Babayo was able to borrow and pay FCFA 1 million for her release.

Bakari Adamou, Babayo's 22-year-old son, was next to be abducted while he was looking after cattle. The abductors initially demanded a ransom of FCFA 1 million but they accepted FCFA 700,000, which Babayo paid after Bakari had been held for 13 days.

Babayo's three other children were abducted in 2003, 2004 and 2005 but managed to escape when the Zaraguinas fell asleep after taking drugs and alcohol.

Babayo said he informed a local military commander about the abductions on several occasions, but each time the commander had refused to pursue the Zaraguinas. Babayo added that government soldiers kept to the main roads and never attempted to pursue or arrest the Zaraguinas or free the victims of abduction.

Side-bar

On 26 May 2007, seven United Nations workers were attacked by Zaraguinas near Sibut town. Victims say they were ill-treated and had clothes and money stolen by the bandits.

On 19 May 2007, two workers from Italian humanitarian organization, COOPI (*Cooperazione Internazionale*), were abducted by Zaraguinas on the road between Bozoum and Bocaranga. They were released on 29 May.