

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Nigeria: Security forces use violence against demonstrators

Amnesty International condemns the excessive use of force by some members of the security forces in Bundu waterfront community, Port Harcourt, Rivers State on 12 October. At least three people were killed and eleven seriously injured when combined troops of the Joint Task Force (JTF) and police used firearms to disperse a crowd.

Government authorities accompanied by approximately 40 heavily armed soldiers and police officers went to Bundu community on 12 October to assess the value of structures earmarked for demolition. Groups of men, women and children confronted the soldiers and police, demonstrating against the intended demolitions and blocking their entry into the community.

According to eyewitness accounts, two armoured vehicles drove into the crowd. The soldiers and police officers then began firing. Most fired into the air; however, several security officers are reported to have fired directly into the surrounding crowd. Stray bullets are reported to have entered into houses, shops and cars; one man told Amnesty International that his sister was shot in her leg while she was inside the house. Some of the people who were shot reportedly fled into the water and escaped into the mangroves. Eleven people have been treated in hospital for gunshot wounds. Amnesty International also received reports that soldiers have beaten several people.

Some 23 men were arrested and brought to Magistrate Court 4 in Port Harcourt on 13 October where they were charged with conspiracy, breaching the peace of the community and destruction of public property. They were then remanded to Port Harcourt prison.

According to Rivers State authorities, the security forces were fired on by people who "benefitted from the reign of lawlessness in Bundu waterfront" when they entered the community and were forced to use their firearms in self-defence. The information received by Amnesty International indicates that firearms were not used by demonstrators. No soldiers or police officers were injured.

It was the second time within a week the government attempted to enter the community to assess the value of structures. On 6 October they were stopped by community members.

Amnesty International is calling on the federal and state governments to ensure that security forces only use force in a manner that complies with international human rights law and standards. The intentional use of lethal force is only permitted where strictly unavoidable in order to protect life. Amnesty International urges the government to promptly investigate any deaths or injuries resulting from the use of firearms by police and JTF. Those suspected of excessive use of force should be prosecuted in fair trials, in accordance with international standards, without recourse to the death penalty.

Background

This incident comes only a week after many militants in the Niger Delta accepted the amnesty offered by President Yar'Adua and handed over their guns. Many of them returned to their communities, including Bundu community.

Bundu community is one of the largest waterfronts in Port Harcourt. The state government is in the process of demolishing the houses in several waterfront communities and has been paying compensation to owners of property in waterfront communities. No alternative housing is offered. Those who do not own their house or shop or who are unable to prove it, do not receive any compensation or alternative housing.

Governor Ameachi has frequently announced he will demolish all waterfronts "to sanitize and check criminal activities." Most recently, in August 2009, Njemanze waterfront was demolished. Many people who lived there have received no adequate alternative housing. The next community threatened to be evicted is Abonnema Wharf.

Evictions should not be carried out until all other feasible alternatives have been explored, genuine consultation has taken place with the affected communities and appropriate procedural protections are in place. However, many of those facing forced eviction have claimed the state government's consultation on the planned evictions was not adequate. Governor Ameachi has announced he will compensate only the owners and not the tenants or owners of buildings constructed without permission. According to UN Habitat, at least 200,000 people will be affected if the Rivers State Government goes ahead with demolishing all waterfronts.

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