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Somalia: Allegations of AU force firing on civilians need investigating

Amnesty International today called for a prompt, independent and impartial investigation into allegations that AMISOM, the African Union peace support operation in Somalia, opened fire indiscriminately, resulting in the killing of civilians, in the capital Mogadishu on 2 February 2008.

“It is crucial that an effective public investigation is conducted into accusations that AMISOM troops unlawfully killed civilians. This would send a message to the Somali population that AMISOM is willing to uphold standards of international humanitarian law, in a situation where all parties to the conflict have unlawfully killed civilians with impunity,” said Michelle Kagari, Amnesty International’s Africa Programme Deputy Director.

The AMISOM spokesperson denied the force opened fire on civilians, saying that three civilians were killed and one of their soldiers injured by an explosion on the Maka Al-Mukarama road that was targeted at one of their vehicles. However, Amnesty International has received several reports that AMISOM soldiers fired indiscriminately in response to the explosion, killing at least 10 civilians on board or boarding buses on that road, and injuring at least a dozen others. Reports indicate that at least ten bodies with gunshot wounds were transported to the Medina hospital in the capital. AMISOM later stated that civilians killed in the incident were victims of both the explosion and gunfire fired by armed opposition groups.

An investigation is needed to establish the number and identity of the civilians killed and injured in the incident, the nature of their injuries and the sources of the gunfire. If it reveals that AMISOM soldiers did open fire, the investigation should also establish whether all feasible precautions were taken to spare civilian deaths and injuries. Soldiers alleged to have opened fire should be suspended from duty pending the results of the investigation and anyone found responsible for violations of international humanitarian law should be brought to justice.

Amnesty International has repeatedly condemned direct attacks on civilians and indiscriminate attacks which fail to distinguish between military objectives and civilians by all parties to the conflict in Somalia. Armed groups fighting the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) forces have used explosive devices in civilian-populated areas and launched attacks from civilian areas, while TFG forces, militias and their allies have carried out indiscriminate attacks as well as directly targeted civilians in response to attacks by armed groups.