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Mali: Civilians at risk from all sides of the conflict

The Malian army has committed serious human rights breaches plus violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) during the ongoing conflict against armed groups in the country, including extrajudicial executions of civilians, according to evidence gathered by Amnesty International during a 10-day mission to the West African state.

A new briefing based on the mission also outlines concerns that Islamist armed groups have committed of serious human rights abuses and violations of IHL, including unlawful killings and the recruitment of child soldiers.

Additionally, there is evidence that at least five civilians, including three children, were killed in an airstrike carried out as part of a joint operation by the French and the Malian armies in order to stop the offensive of the Islamist armed groups.

“As fighting is continuing in Mali, all parties to the conflict must ensure that they respect international humanitarian law – and in particular to ensure the humane treatment of captives while taking all necessary precautions to minimise harm to civilians,” said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty International’s Mali Researcher.

During its visit, the Amnesty International delegation conducted research in the towns of Ségou, Sévaré, Niono, Konna and Diabaly.

Amnesty International collected witness testimonies that on 10 January 2013, on the eve of the French intervention, the Malian army arrested and extrajudicially executed more than two dozen civilians, mainly in the northern city of Sévaré.

Eye witnesses in Sévaré described how they saw soldiers dump the bodies of several people into a well in the Waïludé neighbourhood.

“Once the bodies had been thrown and were in the well, [the soldiers] fired two or three bursts of machine gun fire into the well,” one witness said.

People spoke of how the Malian security forces apparently targeted people they suspected of ties to Islamist armed groups – often on very tenuous grounds, such as the clothes they were wearing or their ethnic origin.

“Many people are genuinely afraid of being arrested, or worse, by the military. The security forces must ensure that people are protected from any reprisals based on ethnicity or perceived political sympathy,” said Mootoo.

“The authorities should also immediately launch an independent and impartial investigation into any reports of extrajudicial executions by the armed forces, and suspend any security personnel suspected of

involvement in human rights violations.”

The Malian army has additionally carried out arbitrary arrests of people suspected of ties to the militants. Amnesty International spoke to several detainees who reported being beaten or otherwise ill-treated while in detention.

Amnesty International documented reports of Islamist armed groups carrying out extrajudicial executions.

Eye witnesses described how militants summarily killed five injured Malian soldiers as well as one civilian in the town of Diabaly on 14 and 15 January, following its capture by militant groups.

Additionally, there is mounting evidence that Islamist militants have been forcibly recruiting and using child soldiers in their ranks.

In Diabaly, several people described how they had seen children, some as young as ten years old, armed with rifles together with Islamist fighters.

In Ségou, Amnesty International was able to interview two captured child soldiers – one of whom showed signs of mental illness.

“The boy was silent and downcast, and wasn't able to talk to us – it was like his mind wasn't fully there,” said Mootoo.

“The recruitment of child soldiers has to stop immediately, and any still in the ranks of the Islamist armed groups should be released.”

There is also disturbing evidence to indicate that five civilians – including a mother and her three young children – were killed in an air strike launched in the context of a counter offensive carried out by the French and Malian armies.

The strike occurred on the morning of 11 January 2013, the first day of the French intervention, in the town of Konna.

French officials have told Amnesty International that they did not carry out any attacks at that time in Konna, while a senior member of the Malian government and a Malian high ranking military official confirmed to the organization that a joint operation had begun targeting the town in the morning of 11 January with the participation of the French military.

“It is absolutely imperative that France and Mali launch investigations into who carried out this attack. Any findings have to be fully disclosed so it can be determined if there has been any breach of international law,” said Mootoo.