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Children in Mali conflict forced to fight, detained with adults and tortured

Children in Mali, some as young as 13, who were recruited as child soldiers by armed groups or suspected of links with them, are now being detained by Malian forces alongside adults, where some say they've been tortured, Amnesty International revealed after returning from a four-week visit to the country.

The organization's delegates spoke to nine children between 13 and 17 years of age who were held with adults at the Maison centrale d'arrêt and at Camp I of the gendarmerie of Mali's capital, Bamako, on suspicion of association with armed groups.

One of them, a 15-year-old shepherd, was arrested by Chadian forces in Intouké – in the northern Kidal region – and handed over to French forces. He said they did not ask for his age and did not interview him in his mother tongue, Tamasheq (a Tuareg language) before handing him over to the Malian gendarmerie in Bamako. During the plane transfer he was blindfolded and had his hands and feet tied.

Some of the children said they had been victims of torture or other ill-treatment by the Malian forces.

"They hung me up to the ceiling for 15 minutes and they threatened to give me electric shocks. They threatened to kill me," one of them told Amnesty International.

"Under international law, children should be detained separately from adults, and Malian law also prohibits detaining them with adults. The Malian authorities should give notice to the UNICEF when arresting children suspected of association with armed groups so that their families can be identified and their cases handled by child protection professionals," said Gaëtan Mootoo, Mali Researcher at Amnesty International.

These children in detention have been charged with offences such as association with wrongdoers, rebellion, undermining internal and external state security and acts of terrorism.

Other children arrested for alleged links with armed groups were handed over to UNICEF via the Malian gendarmerie and the French forces.

Some of the children surrendered or were arrested by Malian, French or Chadian armed forces following the military operation launched in January this year to retake northern Mali from armed groups that took control of the region in April 2012.

Others have not yet been located, prompting concerns they might still be linked to armed groups or hiding in their communities for fear of reprisals or of being detained.

Since the beginning of the Malian conflict in January 2012, human rights organizations including

Amnesty International have denounced the recruitment and use of child soldiers by armed groups and self-defence militias supported by the Malian authorities.

Amnesty International urged the Malian authorities, the MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) and other UN agencies to reach out to local communities to ensure care for children now in hiding after allegedly joining armed groups. They must also develop programmes to reinsert and reintegrate former child soldiers.

The organization also called for the release of all children held by armed groups - including the Mouvement pour l'unicité du djihad en Afrique de l'ouest (MUJAO, Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa) and the Tuareg Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA, National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) and Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as well as self-defence militias.

The United Nations Secretary-General's 2012 Report on Children and Armed Conflict, released this week, has for the first time explicitly named parties to the conflict in Mali as being responsible for the recruitment and use of child soldiers and for sexual violence against children.

"It is critical that the leadership of the MINUSMA prioritize the issue of child soldiers and other children associated with armed forces," said Gaëtan Mootoo.

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