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Guinea Bissau: Beatings and intimidation create a climate of fear

A climate of fear has fallen over Guinea Bissau since Tuesday when two government critics were badly beaten and soldiers conducted searches for people they suspect were involved in an attack on a military barracks early Sunday.

The government claims the attack on the barracks of an elite army unit based on the outskirts of the capital, Bissau, was an attempted coup by supporters of the previous Prime Minister Carlos Gomez Júnior, who was himself ousted by a coup in April this year.

“It is wholly unacceptable that civilians are being terrorised because they happen to live in an area where the army suspects that supporters of the former government are hiding,” said Noel Kututwa, Amnesty International’s southern Africa director.

“It is imperative that the authorities uphold the rule of law and conduct investigations into this alleged attack rather than hunting opposition politicians down on the streets.”

On Tuesday 23 October two outspoken critics of the transitional government were badly beaten by soldiers, some of whom were dressed in civilian clothes.

Iancuba Indjai, leader of the Partido da Solidaridade e Trabalho (Party of solidarity and Labour Workers Solidarity – PST) was assaulted, bundled into a car and dumped some 40 kilometres outside the city. He was recognised by local residents and was later collected by his family. He is currently in an embassy receiving medical treatment.

Following the coup in April, Iancuba Indjai had to go into hiding as the military were seeking to arrest him.

Later on Tuesday, Silvestre Alves, a lawyer and president of a political party Movimento Democrático Guineense or MDG (Guinean Democratic Movement), was taken from his office and also severely beaten and dumped north of Bissau. He is currently hospitalised in an intensive care unit suffering from severe head injuries and two broken legs.

The authorities have also now accused the former secretary of state for fisheries, Tomas Barbosa, of collusion in Sunday’s attack and are hunting for him. According to information received by Amnesty International he has taken refuge in an embassy.

Other members of the government deposed in April have apparently also taken refuge in embassies. Some of them have already spent months in hiding following the April coup.

“These savage acts only add to rapid deterioration of the human rights situation in the country and the pervasive climate of fear,” said Noel Kututwa.

“These witch hunts must end and the perpetrators of these vicious attacks brought to justice or the cycle of violence that has plagued Guinea Bissau for decades will never end.”

The April coup exacerbated the political instability and fragility of Guinea-Bissau and accentuated the tension between the military and civilian authorities, and was a setback to the tenuous democratic and human rights gains made in recent years.

For years, security and stability in Guinea-Bissau have been threatened by rampant impunity for human rights violations by the armed forces, including stalled investigations into the killings of political and military figures since 2009, the urgent need to reform the security forces, including the military who have long interfered in politics, and suspicions that several military officers and other officials are involved in international drug trafficking.

Coups, attempted coups and military revolts that have plagued the country since its independence from Portugal in 1974 became more frequent after 2000.

Notes to Editors:

Iancuba Indjai is also a spokesperson of the Frente Nacional Anti-Golpe – FRENAGOLPE, (a platform of political parties and civil society groups set up to contest the April coup)