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Central African Republic: Government soldiers and armed groups attacking unarmed civilians and critics

Amnesty international is deeply concerned about the deteriorating security situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) and escalating attacks by members of the security forces and armed gangs outside the control of the government on unarmed civilians in recent months. Dozens of civilians in northern CAR are reported to have been killed and thousands more are reported to have fled their homes, including to neighbouring Chad.

Victims of human rights abuses by government soldiers include human rights defenders and journalists who have been targeted because they have denounced abuses against civilians.

Amnesty International has received reports that armed gangs have attacked unarmed civilians in northern CAR, killing dozens and wounding many others. The gangs are reported to have ransacked homes and stolen private property. In a number of cases, the gangs reportedly abducted some civilians and forced them to carry the looted property. More than 10,000 civilians are reported to have fled to southern Chad to escape the violence. The insecurity in northern CAR over several years has resulted in over 45,000 CAR civilians seeking refuge in Chad. The refugees have access to limited humanitarian assistance.

In the aftermath of the attacks by armed gangs, government soldiers deployed in northern CAR to fight the armed gangs are reported to have attacked civilians accusing them of collaborating with or being members of the armed gangs. The soldiers are reported to have killed and wounded an unspecified number of civilians.

In Bangui, the capital of the CAR, members of the security forces are reported to have carried out unlawful killings with impunity.

On 5 January 2006, two people were shot dead by members of the security forces who attacked a group of mourners. The mourners were returning from the funeral of an army sergeant who had been killed by members of the presidential guard after he killed a senior military officer. The sergeant had been removed from the custody of the gendarmerie and summarily executed by fellow soldiers. The government is not known to have taken any action against the soldiers who killed the civilians or the army sergeant.

A former member of the presidential guard who has reportedly killed several people and severely beaten others since 2004 has threatened human rights defenders and journalists with impunity. He was arrested and released without charge or trial during 2005. The government has taken no action against the soldier, despite protests by human rights activists and reports in the press about his violence. There are fears that he may continue terrorising people in the CAR with impunity.

Amnesty International has learned that the same soldier has threatened to kill at least one journalist and two human rights defenders. Those reportedly threatened in January 2006 include Maka Gbossokoto, the director of *Le Citoyen* independent newspaper and President of the Central African Journalist Union (UJCA), Nganatouwa Goungaye Wanfiyo, a lawyer and president of the LCDH, and Adolphe Ngouyombo, president of the Movement for Human Rights and Humanitarian Action, Mouvement pour les Droits de l'Homme et l'Action Humanitaire (MDDH).

Amnesty International calls on the Central African Government to enforce its national laws and abide by its international obligations, as stipulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights the Africa Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and other human rights treaties to which the Central African Republic is party.

The organization urges the government to protect the fundamental human rights of its citizens, particularly the right to life. Furthermore, the government should ensure that journalists and human rights defenders freely exercise their freedom of expression and association. Members of the security forces suspected of violating human rights must be brought to justice. In addition, the government must put in place and enforce mechanisms to deter impunity.

Amnesty International also calls on the international community to encourage the Central African Government to protect and promote human rights. CEMAC countries and France should ensure that their assistance to the Central African government and its security forces includes promotion and protection of human rights.

Background

President François Bozizé came to power in March 2003 after an armed group he led overthrew former President Ange-Félix Patassé. Hundreds of unarmed civilians were unlawfully killed and hundreds more women were raped by armed supporters of Bozizé and Patassé. Most of the rapes are reported to have been carried out by combatants from neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo supporting former President Patassé. Despite President Bozizé's public condemnation of the human rights abuses committed by his opponent's supporters, his government has failed to bring any of the alleged perpetrators to justice. However, the Central African Government has referred crimes committed during the armed conflict that culminated in the seizure of power by President Bozizé, to the Hague-based International Criminal Court (ICC). The CAR ratified the Rome Statute that established the ICC in 2002.

Further killings and other human rights violations have been carried out by members of the security forces since President Bozizé came to power. Pledges by his government -- both before and after general elections in early 2005 -- to end impunity have not been honoured. Soldiers have continued to torture and kill civilians, rape women and loot property with impunity. The main perpetrators are reported to be members of the presidential guard who are directly responsible to President Bozizé as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and Minister of Defence. Marauding armed gangs, commonly known as *zaraguinas*, continue to kill and rob travellers and residents in northern CAR. *Zaraguinas* are highway robbers who have taken advantage of the failure by successive governments to enforce law and order in northern CAR and terrorised the local population and robbed travellers for many years. In recent months, there have been reports that some of the armed groups active in northern CAR are politically motivated and are carrying out attacks to destabilise and ultimately overthrow President Bozizé's government. It is unclear whether this latter group actually exists or if it is loyal to any political leader or party. Security in northern CAR and discipline among Central African security forces remain elusive, despite a deployment of peacekeeping force comprising soldiers from the Monetary and Economic Community of Central Africa (Communauté économique et monétaire d'Afrique centrale, CEMAC), which is backed by a French military contingent.

