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Madagascar: Killings must be investigated and perpetrators brought to justice

The Madagascar authorities must urgently launch impartial investigations into dozens of killings carried out by security forces during more than a year of anti-government protests and bring those responsible to justice, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

The deadliest incident saw at least 31 people killed and several injured on 7 February 2009 when President Marc Ravalomanana's Presidential Guard opened fire, using live ammunition, on unarmed opposition demonstrators marching on the Presidential Palace in the capital Antananarivo.

"The Malagasy authorities must immediately investigate all cases of suspected unlawful killings by the security forces as well as any use of firearms resulting in deaths or serious injuries. Those responsible for violence against peaceful protesters must face justice," said Erwin van der Borgh, Africa Director at Amnesty International.

Human rights violations were reported throughout a year of political unrest in Madagascar sparked by President Marc Ravalomanana's closure in December 2008 of a television station owned by Andry Nirina Rajoelina, at that time the Mayor of Antananarivo.

They continued after the High Transitional Authority (Haute Autorité de la Transition, HAT), headed by Rajoelina, came to power on 17 March 2009. It has not been recognised by the African Union and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Since then, HAT security forces have frequently intervened to disperse opposition protests leading to deaths and injuries.

In some instances the demonstrations had become violent. However, the authorities did not begin investigations of the incidents, or of those that led to the serious injury of demonstrators or bystanders.

On 23 April 2009, a 24-year-old man was admitted to hospital after being shot in the shoulder and then beaten with guns by security officials, while on the way home from a mosque.

"There were no demonstrations going on at that point and I only saw the soldiers once I was wounded. I don't know why they fired," the injured man told Amnesty International. "No one from the courts or the police came to see me in hospital to conduct an investigation."

Members of the Malagasy parliament and senate, lawyers and political opposition leaders were subjected to arbitrary and unlawful arrest and detention, specifically after the HAT came to power in March 2009. Some

of those arrested were reportedly ill treated during their arrest.

Journalists and media outlets were targeted by the Malagasy authorities; both under President Ravalomanana as well as after the HAT came to power. The authorities have also taken steps to silence journalists deemed too critical of those in power at the time, including by closing down privately owned radio and television stations.

Background

A mediation team made up of representatives from the African Union (AU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the International Organization of la Francophonie (IOF) and the United Nations (UN), has been mediating between the main political parties in an attempt to resolve the crisis.

The political crisis that has affected Madagascar during 2009 was sparked off by the closure, during the night of 13-14 December 2008, of the Viva television station owned by Andry Nirina Rajoelina, at that time the Mayor of the capital, Antananarivo.

The decision to do so by the government of President Marc Ravalomanana exacerbated an already tense situation between the government on the one hand and the political opposition and the Mayor of the urban municipality of Antananarivo, on the other.

In early 2009 the opposition organized various mass demonstrations against President Marc Ravalomanana. On 17 March 2009, following popular pressure from Rajoelina and his movement President Ravalomanana signed an order dissolving the government and granting full powers to a military directorate.

That same day the members of the military directorate in turn passed on the powers that had been granted to them to Rajoelina.