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Côte d’Ivoire: Defenceless people need urgent protection from escalating violence

Eyewitnesses have told Amnesty International that abductions, disappearances and physical abuse are increasing as post-election violence escalates in Côte d’Ivoire.

Amnesty International has received a growing number of reports of people being arrested or abducted at home or on the streets, often by unidentified armed attackers accompanied by elements of the Defence and Security Forces and militia groups.

Gendarmes and police officials are accused of attacking a mosque in Grand-Bassam, using live ammunition on crowds and of beating and groping female protesters.

“It is clear that more and more people are being illegally detained by security forces or armed militiamen and we fear that many of them may have been killed or have disappeared,” said Salvatore Saguès, Amnesty International’s West Africa researcher.

Amnesty International has received reports of constant harassment from people in Abidjan identified as real or alleged supporters of the RHDP [Rally of Houphouëtists for Democracy and Peace], the coalition party that supported Alassane Ouattara in the presidential election: “We don’t sleep at nights. We are always watching and when we see armed people in uniform or in plainclothes, we make noise with saucepans in order to alert our neighbors and to deter them,” many residents living in the neighborhoods of Abobo, Adjame, Treichville and Yopougon told Amnesty International.

Amnesty International has learned of numerous cases of people arrested by security forces or militiamen loyal to Laurent Gbagbo. The bodies of some have been found either in morgues or on the streets. The whereabouts of many others remain unknown.

On the evening of 16 December, a few hours after a march organized by supporters of Alassane Ouattara was violently suppressed by security forces, eyewitnesses saw Drissa Yahou Ali and Konan Rochlin kidnapped from their homes in the area called Avocats, in Abobo, a neighbourhood of Abidjan. An eyewitness told Amnesty International: “Around 7 pm, a black Mercedes stopped in front of our compound. People wearing black T-shirts and military pants entered into the courtyard and asked for Drissa. They took him and Rochlin and went away.” Their bodies were found two days later in the Yopougon morgue.

On 18 December, Brahim Ouattara and Abdoulaye Coulibaly, members of an organization called Alliance pour le changement (APC) were arrested nearby a chemist shop in Angré, in the area of Cocody, a neighbourhood of Abidjan. An eyewitness told Amnesty International: “A car of the Republican Guard stopped by. They asked all the people around to lie on the ground and they picked up the two members of the APC. No one has seen them since then.”

The violence and ill-treatment has not been confined to Abidjan.

On the afternoon of 17 December, in Grand-Bassam, some 40 km east of Abidjan, approximately 100 gendarmes and police officials surrounded a mosque and threw tear gas grenades. An eyewitness told Amnesty International: "It was around 1 pm. We were listening to the preaching of the imam when we saw gendarmes and policemen around the mosque. Some of our young people went to protest and they threw tear gas grenades at us so we had to flee."

The following morning, 18 December, gendarmes went on to arrest people in a private house. An eyewitness told Amnesty International: "They took three young men and beat them with a pestle. They were also looking for other people and we all fled so they fired at us with live bullets."

A few hours later, more than 300 hundred women marched in front of the police station demanding the release of those being held. One of these women told Amnesty International: "They beat us. They tore our underwear. They put their hands in our vagina and touched our breast."

On 19 December, Laurent Gbagbo issued a demand for the United Nations mission in Côte d'Ivoire, ONUCI, and the French operation mission, Licorne, to withdraw their forces from the country.

The UN refused, saying that Laurent Gbagbo is not recognized by the international community and does not have the right to call for the departure of its peacekeeping forces and the UN Security Council extended the mandate of the UN peacekeeping force in Côte d'Ivoire for an additional six months on 20 December. The French government also said its 900-plus force would remain.

In a separate statement, the Security Council warned that anyone responsible for attacks on civilians or peacekeepers could be brought before an international tribunal.

A peacekeeping official in New York said that the UN troops were ready to open fire in self-defense and to defend their mandate, which includes the protection of civilians.

On 19 December, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, said that more than 50 people had been killed in the past three days with more than 200 wounded.

"In a situation where the security forces are collaborating in the commission of serious human rights violations, the international community must act to ensure that violations are halted immediately," said Salvatore Saguès.