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Côte d'Ivoire : Amnesty International fears settling of scores and xenophobia

Five days after an uprising led by certain elements of the Côte d'Ivoire army, which has already left approximately 300 dead, including the Minister of the Interior, Emile Boga Doudou, and at least as many wounded, the situation remains confused, both in relation to the rebels' motives and the identity of those who initiated this action.

"While recognizing the right of the Côte d'Ivoire authorities to restore order, Amnesty International fears that the opportunity will be taken to summarily execute or settle scores with people suspected of involvement in the uprising or other political opponents", the organization declared yesterday.

Amnesty International is especially worried about the circumstances in which General Gueï was killed on Thursday 19 September. The General is a former head of state, who came to power after the first coup d'état in Côte d'Ivoire's history in December 1999. His wife, aide-de-camp, captain Fabien Coulibaly and a dozen other people, including bodyguards and domestic servants, who were at his home at the time of the attack, were also killed. According to the information gathered by Amnesty International, General Gueï and his immediate family were killed in cold blood. Their bodies were found in different parts of the capital.

"We call on the Côte d'Ivoire authorities to quickly set up an independent inquiry into the circumstances in which these people, and the Minister, Emile Boga Doudou, were killed and whether some or all of them were the victims of extra-judicial executions. If this were found to be the case, those responsible should be brought to justice", said Amnesty International.

Furthermore, worrying signs indicate that a new wave of xenophobia against people of foreign origin and Côte d'Ivoire Muslims from the north of the country could menace the country if the authorities do not ensure the protection of these particularly vulnerable people.

On 21 September, several thousands of homes inhabited mostly by immigrants and located in deprived areas of Abidjan, especially near the Agban gendarme camp, were set on fire and thousands of people turned on to the street. These events closely followed official declarations affirming that foreign mercenaries and armed vehicles were advancing from neighbouring countries to support the rebels.

"Several witnesses declared that these shanty towns were set on fire by the gendarmes. The gendarmes are also reported to have looted these homes and given the inhabitants only a few minutes to leave", said Amnesty International today.

These events are reminiscent of other attacks led by the security forces against foreigners and Côte d'Ivoire Muslims from the north of the country following the presidential and legislative elections of October and December 2000. At that time, these people were also accused of supporting the candidacy of Alassane Ouattara, whose Côte d'Ivoire nationality was contested.

Although all political parties made an effort during 2002 to find an agreement and resolve the crisis that has been tearing the country apart for the last ten years, the official response to the armed uprising could lead to score settling and ethnic harassment, if the uprising is not brought under control by the authorities.

We call on the authorities to issue strict orders to the security forces not to violate the human rights of political opponents or people who are vulnerable because of their foreign or ethnic origin. Only then will Côte d'Ivoire be able to avoid a new and profound crisis like the one it experienced at the end of 2000", concluded Amnesty International.

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