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Senegal: Terror in Casamance

Paris -- "The gendarmes cut off his lips and told him to eat them...The blood began to flow and they ordered me to drink it... Then they stripped me and poured a mixture of molten plastic and petrol over me."

This is one of the many testimonies collected by Amnesty International which describes the horror of torture in Casamance, Senegal, where even elderly people and women have not been spared.

In its new report, "*Senegal: Climate of terror in Casamance*", the organization describes how, for the past 15 years, civilians in Casamance have been powerless victims in the conflict and negotiations between the Senegalese Government and the MFDC*. A conflict in which the two parties have consciously chosen to terrorize civilians.

"Massive violations of human rights cannot be explained away as 'regrettable errors', since the Senegalese army is universally seen as being well-structured and disciplined," Amnesty International said. "These violations clearly imply that responsibility lies with the highest authorities of the State."

Receiving an Amnesty International's delegation last year, the Senegalese President Abdou Diouf said he was committed to the rule of law. Yet 10 months after receiving a memorandum detailing cases of torture, unlawful executions and "disappearances", the government has not responded and human rights violations committed by the security forces in Casamance have escalated.

Since April 1995, 120 people arrested have been held without trial, with no serious charges against most of them. Many prisoners, most of whom are prisoners of conscience, have been tortured into signing judicial statements and many illiterate people have not had these statements read out to them. On this basis all of them have been "charged with threatening State security and the integrity of the nation."

"In Casamance, many arrests or releases are not a result of judicial decisions, but can be motivated purely by political strategy: to serve as bargaining chips in the Senegalese Government talks with the MFDC," Amnesty International said.

In Casamance, torture is used systematically when people are arrested, during the period of *garde à vue*, when the prisoners are held incommunicado, and when they are being moved by boat from Ziguinchor prison to Dakar prison. Many have been tortured in their own homes in front of their families, before being asked a single question.

Arbitrary arrests and torture have become a way of dealing with the crisis. To humiliate and forcibly extract confession from all suspects including women and old people, the army and the *Gendarmerie* have used a formidable range of techniques:

“The gendarmes hit us on every part of the body and the electric current jolted our hearts and ears”; “The gendarmes forced us to hit each other, and blood ran down from some prisoners’ ears”; “The electrical current reached my heart; my ears hurt and I couldn’t hear anymore. It hurt so much that I tore the wires off”;

Dozens of such testimonies and material evidence gathered by Amnesty International show a high level of cruelty and inhumanity. In the conflict, several witnesses have mentioned the role of the army doctors who have treated torture victims without objecting to the practice.

It would appear that elderly people have been particularly targeted, and women arrested have been savagely beaten. At Nema gendarmerie in Ziguinchor, one woman had her clothes ripped by blows with a mango tree branch and was left naked in front of other prisoners. Others have been taken hostage by gendarmes who failed to find the person they were looking for.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned about the “disappearance” of people arrested by the security forces, and whose fate is unknown and by the recurrent phenomenon of unlawful executions which have resumed since July 1997. The organisation fears that most of these people have been killed and buried in mass graves. If this is true, by refusing to acknowledge victims' deaths, the authorities are denying relatives the natural mourning process that follows the death of a loved one.

Since 1990, MFDC has also been responsible for killing villagers who have refused to give them food or money and other civilians suspected of collaborating with the Senegalese authorities. Some killings seem to have been committed on the basis of ethnic criteria. On the night of 7/8 September 1997, MFDC’ fighters burst into the youth centre in the village of Djibanar, in the *département* of Sédhiou, and killed some 10 children.

For many years, Amnesty International has been denouncing the abuses committed with full impunity by the MFDC against unarmed civilians. The MFDC's political leaders have regularly assured Amnesty International that their fighters are given written instructions to stop their abuses on civilians, with no effect.

Amnesty International welcomes the main MFDC leader, Father Diamacoune’s recent call for peace in January but stresses that as long as such human rights abuses remain unpunished and nothing is done to prevent further abuses taking place, there can be no serious hope of any improvement in the situation as regards the respect of human rights.

*MFDC: *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance*, Democratic Forces of Casamance Movement, an armed opposition group which is demanding the independence of this region in southern Senegal.

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