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Algeria: Children Caught in the Conflict

Children in Algeria are bearing the brunt of a conflict for which they bear no responsibility. Tens of thousands of children have been affected by six years of violence which continues unabated.

Since the beginning of the conflict hundreds of children and babies have been killed, victims of both targeted and random attacks. In the recent massacres children, as well as other vulnerable civilians, have been slaughtered, decapitated, mutilated, or burned alive in their homes. While these children were being massacred the army and security forces, often in very close proximity, stood by and did nothing to stop the massacres or to arrest the perpetrators..

Thousands of children have been traumatized by the conflict. Children who have witnessed the killing, often in the most brutal way, of their parents or neighbours. Children who have had their parents killed or abducted either by security forces or by armed groups. Children who have witnessed bomb explosions, military operations by the army and security forces and armed attacks by armed groups.

And in spite of all this the Algerian authorities have the audacity to keep saying that this is an "internal issue", and to condemn the "interference" of those who speak out against the massacres and who call on the international community to do something to protect the civilian population.

Children must be protected. If their government is unable or unwilling to protect them, someone else must. In order to protect these children we must know what is happening in Algeria; who is responsible for what, who is killing who, and why those in need of protection - and especially the children - are being abandoned to their fate. What is more important -- to protect the oil and gas installations and the army barracks or to protect the children?

On the night of 22/23 September 1997, more than 200 people, including many children, were massacred in Bentalha, on the outskirts of Baraki, a few kilometres south of Algiers. The village of Bentalha is near five different army and security forces outposts. Two main army barracks are just a few kilometres away and several security forces post are only a few hundreds metres away. Survivors have told Amnesty International that at the time of the massacre armed forces units with armoured vehicles were stationed outside the village - just a few hundreds metres from the place where the massacre was taking place. Yet they did not intervene, neither to stop the massacre nor to arrest the perpetrators, who were able to

leave undisturbed. The killers spent several hours in Bentalha; they slaughtered, decapitated and mutilated men, women and children. Some of the children were snatched from their parents' arms and slaughtered in front of them; others were murdered and thrown off balconies. Those who survived saw their parents, relatives and neighbours being slaughtered; how will they ever forget? How can they ever understand why the army and the security forces did not lift a finger to stop the massacre?

One night at the end of February 1995 Malika, Rachid and Omar (not their real names), aged between six and 12, woke up to find a group of men who had come to the house to kill their father. After they killed him they took their mother, tied her hands and killed her. Then they killed a neighbour (f) who had helped their mother a few weeks before during a previous attack. The children's father was a policeman, and their mother a housewife. Their father, like other policemen, had received death threats against him and against his family, and there had been previous attempts to kill him. Armed opposition groups who call themselves "Islamic groups" often kill civilian relatives of members of the security forces.

Samira (not her real name), aged six, was asleep when a security forces came to the family home and killed four of her uncles, and her grandfather, aged 84. It was in May 1996. They made her uncles lie on the floor and shot them in the back of the head. Her grandfather screamed and they shot him in the face, in front of Samira. Before leaving they also shot the dog, who survived. Now Samira listens to her grandmother, who has gone insane, and who talks incessantly about what happened. Samira's uncles and grandfather were ordinary people, but another uncle was a member of an armed Islamist groups (armed opposition group), and was on the run. The security forces often kill civilians relatives of members of armed opposition groups.
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