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Mali urged to release top officials arbitrarily detained

Soldiers in Mali have arbitrarily detained a group of at least eight key political figures and military officials, prompting Amnesty International to call for their release.

Among those arrested are former Prime Minister Modibo Sidibé and former Minister of Finance Soumaila Cissé, both leading candidates in a presidential election that was disrupted by the military coup which toppled Mali's President Amadou Toumani Touré last month.

The detainees have been taken to the Kati military camp some 15 km outside the capital Bamako, where they are being held incommunicado. An Amnesty International delegation visiting Mali was denied access to the detainees yesterday, despite repeated requests.

"The arrests clearly show that despite the re-establishment of a civilian authority, members of the military continue to disregard the rule of law", said Gaëtan Mootoo, West Africa researcher currently in Mali with an Amnesty International delegation.

"Some of these men have been arrested in the middle of the night in their homes and all are being held without charge. The Malian authorities must release them or charge them with a recognizable criminal offence."

A member of Modibo Sidibe's family has told Amnesty International that about thirty members of the security forces burst into his house without warning at 11 pm on 16 April and took him to the military camp, confiscating all mobile phones in the house.

Other people detained include Mahamadou Diagouraga, General Inspector of the National Police, General Hamidou Sissoko, Chief of Staff of former President Touré, General Sadio Gassama, former Minister of Defence, Tiéman Coulibaly, member of the Union for Democracy and Development (UDD) and Me Kassoum Tapo, former head of the Malian Bar Association and spokesman for the Front du Refus, a coalition of political parties that has been asking the departure of the military junta from power.

Following the coup, which was led by soldiers opposed to the way President Touré had been handling an armed insurgency in the north of the country, ECOWAS (The Economic Community of West Africa) brokered an agreement with the military junta, setting out the transition to civilian rule.

The agreement gives the coup leader Captain Amadou Sanogo a say in key parts of the process, notably the naming of an interim Prime Minister.

Interim President Dioncounda Traoré has called on Tuareg and Islamists armed groups to "return to the fold".

Since the coup, Tuareg and Islamist militants have taken control of large swathes of the northern desert region.

