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Serious human rights abuses pervade in Mali five months after French intervention

Civilians are among dozens of people who have been tortured, killed and disappeared, including while in detention, since the launch of the French army's intervention in the country five months ago, Amnesty International said in a new briefing published today.

The briefing Mali: Preliminary findings of a four-week mission. Serious human rights abuses, issued in the run-up to the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force in Mali next month, is the result of a research mission carried out in May and June in the country.

"The Malian security forces' human rights record since January is, simply, appalling. They continue to violate human rights with apparently no fear of being held accountable," said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty International researcher and member of this research mission.

During the visit, Amnesty International documented dozens of cases of detainees being tortured or ill-treated after being arrested for having alleged links with armed groups. The organization also documented more than 20 cases of extrajudicial-executions or enforced disappearances.

Mohamed Lemine and Mohamed Tidjani were arrested by the Malian security forces on 28 January this year, the day the French and Malian armies entered the city of Timbuktu.

Their bodies were found a few days later and a relative told Amnesty International: "Both wore the same clothes and shoes they had on the day of their arrest, Mohamed Lemine had a white boubou [robe] and black pants while his friend was wearing a boubou. We preferred not to displace the bodies and recovered the tomb with sand."

Amnesty International's delegates were able to speak to more than 80 of the 200 detainees held in the capital Bamako, most of them charged with acts of terrorism and other offences.

Many of them said they were tortured or ill-treated and some were reportedly denied medical treatment. A number of them had marks and scars of burnings and cuts – including on their backs, chests and ears.

At least five detainees died in the facility in April 2013, most of them apparently as a result of the appalling conditions of detention and lack of medical care.

Akassane Ag Hanina was arrested in the city of Timbuktu and arrived at Bamako's Maison centrale d'arrêt on 4 April 2013, where he died seven days later. Before his death, he told other detainees he had been beaten up by the military in Timbuktu.

One of Ag Hanina's co-detainees told Amnesty International: "He told the prison guards that he was ill but never got any medical treatment. The night before he died, we asked for help, but no one came until

the morning. When they arrived, he was dead.”

When Amnesty International visited the detention center, several child soldiers, some as young as 13 years old, were being held with adults.

The authorities in Mali recognized that some human rights violations had been committed and said a number of cases were being investigated, but so far no one has been brought to justice.

“Ensuring that all those responsible for human rights abuses face justice will not be an easy task but it’s the key to a lasting stabilization and rebirth of a country torn apart for more than 18 months,” said Mootoo.

The organization is also concerned that French military, as well as West African (AFISMA) troops – including forces from Chad and Niger – handed over prisoners to the Malian authorities when they knew or should have known the detainees were at real risk of being tortured or ill-treated.

During the mission, Amnesty International’s delegates also collected testimonies of abductions and arbitrary killings committed by the armed opposition group Mouvement pour l’unicité du djihad en Afrique de l’ouest (MUJAO, Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa) against civilians accused of supporting the French and Malian armies.

Armed opposition groups, including MUJAO and the Tuareg Mouvement national de libération de l’Azawad (MNLA, National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) were also accused of sexually abusing women and girls and using children to carry weapons, control checkpoints and cook. Some children were also sent to the front line.

“In the run up to the deployment of the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali, it is essential to ensure that the Malian army and any other armed forces respect and protect human rights so people living in the north of the country can be reassured they will be safe,” said Mootoo.