

Mali seeks ICC probe into 'atrocities' in occupied north

By AFP

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BAMAKO — Mali plans to ask the International Criminal Court to probe atrocities committed by armed groups occupying the north who are accused by rights bodies of rapes, executions and using child soldiers.

International concern is growing as Mali spirals further into chaos, with hardline Islamists now firmly in control of an area larger than France, and populations reeling from the impact of the takeover.

The White House said it was "deeply concerned about the situation of the Malian people" as US President Barack Obama authorized \$10 million (eight million euro) in emergency funds for those displaced by the conflict.

As fresh reports emerged of rapes, murders, enlistment of child soldiers and further destruction of ancient religious World Heritage sites, Mali's justice ministry said it was taking the matter to the ICC.

"Next week, Mali will officially refer atrocities committed in the north by armed groups to the ICC. International organisations... have confirmed these atrocities," a justice ministry source said on condition of anonymity.

ICC chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda told AFP last week that the ongoing destruction of the shrines of ancient Muslim saints in Timbuktu was a war crime, and that the court was collecting information on the matter.

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) released a report Thursday stating Mali was "descending into hell" because of the executions, rape and torture taking place in its north. The FIDH also asked the ICC to open a preliminary inquiry into the abuses and called on the world community to "intensify actions to reestablish legitimate authority in Bamako and speed up political transition."

Long seen as one of West Africa's most stable democracies, Mali has unravelled into chaos in a matter of months.

The crisis began when Tuareg rebels of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) in January launched a rebellion for independence which swiftly overwhelmed the nation's army.

Angry and frustrated, a group of low-ranking soldiers carried out a coup on March 22. However this only worsened the situation as the unmanned north became easy prey and fell to rebel groups in a matter of days.

The Tuareg rebels have since been completely sidelined by armed jihadist groups linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) who initially appeared fighting on their flanks in an unclear alliance.

The Islamist group Ansar Dine (Defenders of Faith) have violently enforced sharia law, whipping unmarried couples and chopping off hands, the FIDH said, and have also smashed ancient shrines seen as idolatrous.

The FIDH report says both the MNLA and Ansar Dine are responsible for atrocities, such as rapes and recruiting child soldiers.

Both are also implicated in the January 24 attack on a Malian army camp where 153 soldiers were taken prisoner and then executed.

In another incident, after fighters took the town of Gao in March, the heads of certain troops were seen "hanging on the camp wall and over the Wabaria bridge", according to one eyewitness account.

One of the prime concerns over the takeover is that Mali's north will become a new breeding ground for terrorism, with AQIM wielding significant influence over the new rulers.

"Mali is a very serious case because it's the first time that terrorists have taken over major cities and are perhaps in a position to take control of a state," French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said Thursday.

The north African Al-Qaeda franchise has long been involved in attacks and kidnappings of Westerners for stiff ransoms.

On Thursday their offshoot Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, which holds the city of Gao, said it had released three of seven Algerian diplomats seized during the takeover. The grouping is still holding two Spanish and an Italian hostage.

Another six French hostages held by AQIM are alive but have been separated, Fabius said.

As Mali's interim authorities grapple with solutions to the crisis, Fabius said dislodging the Islamists would most likely necessitate force.

The transition government has been ordered by West African mediators to form a unity government by July 31, which could form a plan to exit the crisis.

"Once the rule of law is re-established in the south, one must look at the north, meaning that at some point it's probable there will be use of force," Fabius told journalists in Paris.

Mali's interim Prime Minister Cheik Modibo Diarra said in Niger that he wanted talks to begin "very fast" with those on the ground in the north in order to resolve the crisis.

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