

Wave of Violent Repression Plagues Capital of Mali
By Adam Nossiter, New York Times
25 July 2012

BAMAKO, Mali — Hooded gunmen have abducted and beaten journalists at night. Soldiers who oppose the military junta have been tortured or forcibly “disappeared.” Those who mobbed and beat the country’s elderly interim president escaped without charges.

While much alarm has been expressed about the extremist ministate in northern Mali, which has prompted hundreds of thousands of residents to flee the country, the situation here in the Malian capital is dire in its own way, with a worsening climate of repression and intimidation.

Outside hopes for confronting the Islamists in the north have been pinned on the renewal of civil government here, after a military coup d’état in March. Under international pressure, the junta agreed to a civilian government led by an unlikely Malian-American astrophysicist who once worked at NASA, Cheick Modibo Diarra, a political neophyte known for emotional outbursts.

While camouflaged by civilians, soldiers continue to pull the strings, according to human rights advocates, journalists who have been victimized and some opposition politicians.

Rather than taking on the Islamists who have seized northern Mali, the military in the south appears intent on striking back at rivals who carried out a failed counter coup in late April.

Human Rights Watch accused the army of engaging in a campaign of “horrific” abuse against opposing soldiers at the junta’s headquarters outside Bamako. One witness reported to the group that Capt. Amadou Sanogo, the junta leader, was seen kicking a detainee who has since disappeared.

“Torture, sexual abuse and inhumane and degrading conditions” are reported by Amnesty International, at the base where Captain Sanogo has his headquarters, in a report to be released next week.

“Since they have been in power, there has not been a single shot fired in the north,” said Tiébilé Dramé, a leading opposition politician. Meanwhile, the press, mostly critical of the junta and the country’s military, has been singled out for attack. “They want people to shut up,” said Kadidia Sangaré Coulibaly, a lawyer who leads the National Human Rights Commission in Bamako.

In the last four weeks, two of the country’s most prominent journalists have been hauled at gunpoint into the backs of pickup trucks and beaten with clubs and rifle butts. The attackers were not in uniform, but some wore army boots and carried weapons common with the Malian army. The beatings followed summonses to state security issued to two other prominent journalists.

“You journalists, you make us sick,” the assailants shouted at Saouti Haïdara as they beat him on a muddy ground outside town in the early hours of July 13, he said. Mr. Haïdara, editor of L’Independent and considered the dean of the Malian press corps, suffered a broken arm and bruises throughout his body.

“It is you who are undermining this country!” the men beating Abderrahmane Keïta yelled at him, he recalled, on the night of July 2. A trap had been set for Mr. Keïta, editor of L’Aurore: he had been promised news from the Islamist-held north.

“We have denounced the cowardice of the Malian Army for failing to defend and protect the populations of the north,” Mr. Keïta said in an interview on Wednesday, recalling how he was left in a muddy field covered in bruises and robbed of more than \$2,000.

Much of the opposition, having given up on the Malian Army, wants an outside force to come in to clean up the mess in the north. The Economic Community of West African States, known as Ecowas, is willing, but so far there has been no invitation from what remains of authority here, or backing from the United Nations or United States.

Johnnie Carson, the assistant secretary of state for African affairs, said in an interview that military force would likely be needed to roll back the Islamists' gains in the north, but he said the Malian troops would have to take the lead in any such effort, something he acknowledged they were incapable of right now.

"Over time, it will be necessary to go in and root out the terrorist elements, but any operations in the north must be well planned, well organized, well resourced and well thought out," said Mr. Carson, who visited Mali last week and spoke to leaders there. "It must have a significant Malian military component in front."

He gave no timetable when a reconstituted Malian military would be strong enough to take this on. "It's important that anything done be thought out and not precipitous," he said.

A sullen calm has descended on Bamako, with traffic greatly diminished, the economy at a standstill and the government taking few important decisions.

"There is a climate of intimidation and fear," Mr. Dramé said. "This is a country where you can beat up the president, and there are no consequences."

Ten days ago, hundreds of women, wives of tortured and disappeared officers, descended in the streets to protest and demand news of their husbands. "Frankly, it's a kind of psychosis," said Brahim Koné, president of the Interafrican Union for Human Rights.

At Kati, the soldiers accused of being in the coup had cigarettes stubbed out on them, were forced at gunpoint to engage in sex with one another, were suffocated by having rags pushed back into their mouths and chained and handcuffed for days on end, human rights groups say. Human Rights Watch estimates that at least 20 people have disappeared although other activists put the number higher.

"Now, power is being exercised by those who have weapons. And in a country where power rests with those who are armed, nobody is safe," said Mrs. Sangaré Coulibaly of the national human rights commission.

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