

Rights group: Mali coup leader's forces behind disappearances of 20 people, committed torture

By The Associated Press

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DAKAR, Senegal — Forces loyal to Mali's coup leader are responsible for the disappearances of at least 20 people now presumed dead and for torture that includes sexual abuse, an international human rights group said Wednesday.

Human Rights Watch said that the missing soldiers allegedly were linked to a foiled counter coup attempt that took place in April, the month after Capt. Amadou Sanogo and his forces seized power in the western African nation.

The missing detainees were last seen being taken away in the middle of the night with their eyes covered and hands bound, the report said.

"Malian authorities have a duty to the victims of torture and the families of the disappeared to ensure these crimes are investigated and those responsible brought to book," said Daniel Bekele, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Even at this chaotic and difficult time in Mali, authorities should ensure that the horrific treatment and other violations should be promptly addressed."

There was no immediate comment from the Malian government Wednesday on the allegations.

The report based on interviews with witnesses and family members describes horrific abuses, including witnesses detailing how four men were forced at gunpoint to have sex with one another.

"Fabric was stuffed in their mouths before the abuse to stifle their screams," the report said.

Other detainees suffered broken ribs and arms, or urinated blood after being beaten, Human Rights Watch said. Some 40 men were held in a windowless room measuring only 5 meters (yards) by 5 meters (yards) during May, one of the hottest months of the year in Mali.

Human Rights Watch said two witnesses described seeing Sanogo himself at the military base where detainees say they were tortured, and one accused Sanogo of kicking a detainee who later went missing.

Sanogo and a group of soldiers toppled Mali's democratically elected president in March. While the junta leaders then handed power over to an interim government in principle, they have continued to wield their authority in the country.

President Amadou Toumani Toure was forced into hiding and re-emerged to hand in his resignation in April. He then went into exile in neighboring Senegal.

After the coup, ethnic Tuareg rebels took control of the country's north but have since been driven out by Islamist rebels who want to impose a strict version of Shariah, or Islamic law. An estimated 300,000 people have fled the region.

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