

Mali: End horrific abuses targeting civilians amid conflict
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Fighting in Mali has died down and parties to the armed conflict watch each other without direct confrontation – but hostility still simmers below the surface and civilians on both sides continue to bear the brunt of horrific abuses

As conflict continues in Mali, Amnesty International has unearthed evidence that civilians are on the receiving end of horrific abuses that include amputations, sexual violence and extra-judicial executions.

After a 15-day research mission to Mali earlier this month, the organization launched a new briefing revealing such abuses in several locations across the country.

Mali: Civilians bear the brunt of the conflict also documents the recruitment of child soldiers – including in camps located on state land.

"Fighting in Mali has died down and parties to the armed conflict watch each other without direct confrontation – but hostility still simmers below the surface and civilians on both sides continue to bear the brunt of horrific abuses," said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty International's researcher on West Africa, who just returned from Mali.

"The fighting may resume at any time and it is essential that the parties ensure the protection of civilians in strict compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law."

Amputations

In northern Mali, Islamist groups bent on imposing their interpretation of Sharia law are increasingly imposing violent punishments such as amputations following sham trials of those accused of committing crimes.

The latest amputation was carried out on 16 September, and since August Amnesty International has documented a total of seven people who faced such punishment after hasty sham trials on charges of theft or robbery.

An eyewitness to one amputation on 10 September in the town of Gao's Place de l'Indépendance described the event to Amnesty International:

"...The MUJAO [Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa] members arrived in several vehicles ... provided security and prevented people from getting beyond the fence bordering the square... [The accused] was sitting on a chair; his feet, forearms and torso were tied to the chair.

"The new Police Commissioner of Gao, who bought and sold animal skins before the fall of Gao in April [2012], held the right hand of the man sitting on the chair, he cut through it with his knife and showed it off like a trophy. The crowd showed their displeasure. Then another member of MUJAO cut off the right foot. They then poured a white powder on the cut parts to avoid bleeding. The wounded man was taken for treatment at the hospital later.

"That same day, four others were amputated in the same way at the MUJAO camp. All those who have undergone MUJAO amputations so far are black. The amputated hands and feet were exhibited at the police station."

Irrespective of the offences committed, punitive amputation is prohibited under international law as it constitutes cruel treatment and torture.

Sexual violence

Women continue to be the victims of sexual violence amid the conflict. In one case, a 14-year-old girl was raped in Timbuktu by a member of the “police” established by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). A local resident told Amnesty International:

“This man, a Burkinabe national, was arrested and sentenced to one hundred blows with a stick (baton). The man was also ordered to marry the young girl, to be excluded from the police force and was also to be exiled from Timbuktu for one year. He received 11 blows at the Sankoré Square but he did not marry his victim, and has not been expelled from Timbuktu, or excluded from the AQIM police.”

Amnesty International calls upon the armed Islamist groups to put an end to sexual violence against women as well as corporal punishment, including beatings, stoning and amputations.

Use of child soldiers

Amnesty International has also documented the ongoing use of child soldiers by armed Islamist groups in northern Mali as well as self-defence militias in government-controlled areas.

On a visit to a training camp for a self-defence militia, the organization met children who had been recruited and trained ahead of a possible offensive to regain control of northern Mali, which has come under the control of armed Islamist groups.

Those in charge of the camps told Amnesty International that their militias were armed and trained by current and former Malian soldiers.

One of the leaders of the North Liberation Forces (FLN) camp in Sévaré said:

“The youths come from regions all over Mali with a single objective: to free the north and go home. Here, we are not at home, our families are in the north. The country is for everyone, it is the same Mali. We have our cattle and our belongings in the north. Here, we do military training, fighting. The only link between us and Ansar Eddin and MUJAO, it is war.”

Extra-judicial executions

Extra-judicial executions have also taken place since the conflict began.

On the night of 8 to 9 September 2012, the Malian military detained 16 members of the Dawa, a movement of Muslim preachers at a checkpoint in Diabali (around 400 km northeast of the capital Bamako). A few hours later, all 16 were extra-judicially executed.

“The Malian authorities must shed light on these facts and prosecute all those responsible for these horrendous acts,” said Mootoo.