

Islamic extremists face citizen uprising in Mali

Furious residents are fighting back at al-Qaida-linked rebels for imposing strict sharia law and destroying local culture

- **Afua Hirsch**
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Ansar Dine rebels near Timbuktu, northern Mali. Photograph: Romaric Ollo Hien/AFP/Getty Images

Islamist extremists in northern Mali are facing a growing uprising as residents in the towns held by al-Qaida-linked rebels launch a series of fight backs.

Near Timbuktu, part of the vast area of the country controlled by Islamist groups, youths have been taking to the streets armed with machetes and sticks to protest against rebel control.

"The youths are marching, they are taking up arms, they are using whatever weapons they can find," Halle Ousmane Cissé, the mayor of Timbuktu, told the Guardian. "They are protesting against the destruction of our culture, the arrest and abuse of our local residents."

Residents in towns and cities in northern Mali have expressed fury at the arrival of Islamist fighters, from countries such as Algeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan, who have imposed a strict interpretation of sharia law and have conducted public whippings. In Timbuktu, a world heritage site due to its ancient mosque and shrines to Muslim saints, half of the mausoleums and tombs are estimated to have been destroyed.

The latest protests were triggered in the town of Goundam, in the Timbuktu region, when Islamist group Ansar Dine's were said to have beaten a woman because she had failed to cover her baby's head as she carried it on her back.

"The woman was at a pump to get water, her baby on her back," said Alassane Cissé, 47, a school director and Goundam resident. "Members of Ansar Dine were passing by and started to whip her because her scarf was down around her neck and not on her head."

"This was the straw that broke the camel's back," Cissé added. "Youths immediately started coming out into the streets. They first gathered at the hospital and when Ansar Dine chased them from there, they moved to another part of the town. Youths burned tires to block roads."

Young Malians are becoming increasingly mobilised by the rebel takeover of the north of the country, saying they want to take up arms and repel extremists from Mali, which is known for its tolerant, Sufi Muslim practices.

The presence of armed groups of youths comes as the Malian army – which seized power earlier this year in a military coup – and interim civilian government are in talks with regional bloc Ecowas regarding a military intervention to reclaim the north of the country.

News also emerged today of the fate of three hostages – from South Africa, the Netherlands and Sweden – who were seized by gunman in Timbuktu last November. The hostages, who appeared in a 53-second film on You Tube, said that they were being held by al-Qaida.