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**Mali crisis: Gao protests 'stop hand amputation'**

Hundreds of people in northern Mali have protested against plans by an Islamist group to amputate the hand of a thief, reports say.

A second demonstration was held after a radio presenter was beaten by Islamist gunmen for urging residents of the town of Gao to back the protests.

The punishment has now reportedly been delayed.

Islamist groups and secular Tuareg rebels seized northern Mali after the army staged a coup in March.

The Islamists are in control of the region's three major towns - Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal - after falling out with the Tuareg groups demanding independence for the area.

They have been condemned by human rights groups for destroying ancient shrines in Timbuktu and for stoning to death an unmarried couple for having sex outside marriage last week.

'We don't care'

The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), which controls Gao, reportedly condemned one of its young recruits to have his hand amputated for stealing weapons to sell.

"We don't want to know what this young man did, but they are not going to cut his hand off in front of us," a resident said on Sunday, according to the AFP news agency.

Journalist Abdoul Malick Maiga has now regained consciousness after being beaten by MUJAO fighters, a doctor at Gao's hospital told AFP.

One resident said Mr Maiga was attacked live on air.

Oumar Ould Hamaha, a fighter who said he was speaking as a MUJAO spokesman, confirmed the incident, according to the Reuters news agency.

"We don't care about secularism, democracy, the international community or others. People must accept that we will impose Sharia whether they like it or not," he said.

"It is not tramps like journalists who are going to stop us."