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## Maliens Fear Results of Government Inaction in North

by Nancy Palus

DAKAR — Residents of Gao, in northern Mali, are watching the next moves by the al-Qaida-linked group controlling the region, after a fresh clash over the self-proclaimed jihadist group's bid to enforce strict Islamic law. It has been more than four months since armed groups chased the Malian army and government out of the north, and people from Gao say the longer the state fails to intervene, the more dangerous and irrevocable the situation becomes.

The group Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, or MUJAO, had planned to cut off the hand of an alleged thief in a public square in the city of Gao on Sunday. MUJAO has controlled Gao since it pushed out Tuareg separatist rebels in late June.

Hours before the planned amputation, local men and women gathered in the square to protest the act, singing the national anthem, some wielding stones and clubs.

They were singing the Malian national anthem, but Gao residents say they increasingly feel as if they have no nation.

And that is dangerous, Malians from the north say. They say despite a clear determination by Gao residents to resist MUJAO control, over time the jihadist group - which residents say has been quite shrewd in seeking to gain favor with the population - will succeed in recruiting more local youth.

The MUJAO head of police, who beat up a local journalist for broadcasting statements about Sunday's protest, is a son of Gao. Before joining the jihadist group he sold animal hides, according to people from the town.

With time, and absent any intervention by the state, some Gao youths are increasingly inclined to join MUJAO, says this resident of Gao who did not want his name used.

He says it's true - people in Gao are determined to fight MUJAO or any other armed group that would occupy the north. But the government must return to the north and soon, he says, to prevent more youths from being tempted to become armed mercenaries for any cause, just for easy money.

On Sunday, as on earlier occasions when the population rose up, MUJAO backed off its bid to enforce its strict interpretation of Sharia. This is part of the group's strategy, said one Gao native, who said MUJAO leader Abdel Hakim is proceeding "delicately but effectively."

Mahamadou Diouara is a native of northern Mali now living in the capital, Bamako. He leads one of many self-defense groups in Mali who say they are preparing to fight to take back the north. Back in April Diouara and some colleagues were warning that Islamic groups were recruiting northern youths. He says the longer the status quo continues, the firmer the hold the Islamic groups will have.

He says when you've got Islamic extremists very powerful at manipulating youth, who are already in a fragile situation, it's extremely dangerous to simply let that continue. Because eventually they're going to pit brother against brother in Gao - that's what we must prevent, he says.

Diouara said it will take force, not negotiations, to re-establish the Malian state in the north.

The regional bloc ECOWAS is waiting for Mali's interim government to formally request United Nations approval for an ECOWAS military intervention. ECOWAS mediator Djibril Bassole traveled to Gao Tuesday to try and speak with representatives of MUJAO and other jihadist groups.

Mali government spokesperson Hamadoun Touré would not say whether the recent events in Gao would accelerate military action.

He says the latest demonstrations against MUJAO show the people's attachment to Mali as a secular state and their rejection of Sharia, and the government is proud of that. He says the government wants to ensure the people of Gao that everything is being done at the national, regional and international level to end their suffering as soon as possible.