

Mali: War Crimes by Northern Rebels Human Rights Watch 30 April 2012 Separatist Tuareg rebels, Islamist armed groups, and Arab militias who seized control of northern Mali in April 2012 have committed numerous war crimes, including rape, use of child soldiers, and pillaging of hospitals, schools, aid agencies, and government buildings, Human Rights Watch said today. An Islamist armed group has summarily executed two men, amputated the hand of at least one other, carried out public floggings, and threatened women and Christians.

Human Rights Watch also received credible information that Malian army soldiers have arbitrarily detained and, in some instances, summarily executed ethnic Tuareg members of the security services and civilians. (...)

Human Rights Watch conducted a 10-day mission to the Malian capital, Bamako, in April and documented abuses by several armed groups that operate in northern Mali. The separatist Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) seeks autonomy for the North, which it calls Azawad. The Tuareg are a traditionally nomadic Berber people. Ansar Dine is an Islamist armed group that wants to impose a strict interpretation of Sharia – Islamic law – throughout Mali. A local ethnic Arab militia, based in and around the historic city of Timbuktu, was allied with the Malian government, but on the day Timbuktu fell, it switched sides and has since fractured into at least two groups with unclear military and political objectives. (...)

(...) The rebels' swift advance occurred as they took advantage of the political and security chaos created when junior Malian military officers staged a coup on March 22 in response to what they viewed as the government's inadequate response to the MNLA rebellion. Many Tuareg fighters in both the MNLA and Ansar Dine had previously supported the Libyan government of Muammar Gaddafi and reentered Mali with weapons from Libya after he was ousted.

The recent fighting and insecurity, scarcity of food and medicine, and lack of functioning banks, schools, and services have caused tens of thousands of Malians to flee to the government-controlled South and neighboring countries. Witnesses described buses and trucks overflowing with fleeing civilians, who often faced extortion at MNLA checkpoints as they fled.

The United Nations Office of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that since January 2012, at least 284,000 residents had fled their homes as a result of the armed conflict in the North, of whom about 107,000 are believed to be internally displaced and some 177,000 have fled to neighboring countries, notably Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, and Mauritania. (...) Human Rights Watch calls on the military and political leaders of each armed group in northern Mali to:

- Adopt all necessary measures to abide by international humanitarian law.
- Immediately issue orders prohibiting mistreatment of persons in custody, rape, pillage, and other violations of international humanitarian law.
- Immediately issue orders prohibiting attacks on civilians and civilian structures, including medical facilities, schools, and places of worship.
- Cease the recruitment and use of children under 18 in hostilities, release all children from their forces, and work with child protection agencies to return these children to their homes.

- Secure and protect the basic human rights of civilians in areas under their control, including those who fled their homes and have returned.
- Investigate and appropriately discipline commanders and fighters who are found to have carried out violations of international humanitarian law, including abductions, rape, child soldier recruitment, pillage, and other abuses. Suspend those against whom there are credible allegations of abuse, pending investigations.
- Cease cruel and inhuman punishments prohibited under international law, such as the executions, floggings, and amputations carried out by Ansar Dine.
- Facilitate impartial and unhindered access to organizations providing humanitarian assistance.
- Implement all feasible measures to warn persons in areas under their control of the threat of unexploded ordnance and seek to exclude civilians from dangerous areas, including by marking and monitoring affected areas, educating people about never handling unexploded ordnance, and sharing information with all warring parties on the types, quantities, and locations of weapons used to facilitate clearance.

Human Rights Watch also calls on the government of Mali to invite the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to monitor and investigate human rights abuses in the North. (...)

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