

Burkina Faso: Armed Islamists Kill, Rape Civilians

Army, Militia Respond with Summary Executions, Enforced Disappearances



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A government soldier walks past a group of villagers displaced by fighting in Burkina Faso's northern Sahel region, February 3, 2020. © 2020 Olympia de Maismont/AFP via Getty Images

(Nairobi) – Armed Islamist groups and government security forces and militia in [Burkina Faso](#) are committing increased abuses against civilians as the conflict there intensifies and widens, Human Rights Watch said today. The Burkina Faso government, which took power in a [January 2022 coup](#), should better protect civilians from attack and ensure that government forces respect human rights.

Armed Islamist groups that began attacking Burkina Faso in 2016 have become increasingly abusive, carrying out hundreds of killings, summary executions, rapes of civilians, and widespread pillaging. Also since 2016, government security forces and militias engaged in counterterrorism operations have allegedly unlawfully killed hundreds of civilians and suspected Islamist fighters, [fueling recruitment](#) into armed groups. The fighting has forced [1.8 million people](#) from their homes, most from the Sahel and Centre-Nord regions of the country.

“Armed Islamist groups are demonstrating day after day their profound disregard for the lives and livelihoods of civilians,” said [Corinne Dufka](#), Sahel director at Human Rights Watch. “Government forces and associated militias must scrupulously uphold international human rights and humanitarian law and desist from killing in the name of security.”

From April 7 to 21, 2022 in Ouagadougou, the capital, and in Kaya, Human Rights Watch interviewed 83 survivors and witnesses to incidents between September 2021 and April 2022 in the Boucle du Mouhoun, Cascades, Centre-Nord, Est, Nord, Sahel, and Sud-Ouest regions of Burkina Faso. Human Rights Watch also interviewed medical professionals, security analysts, government officials, foreign diplomats, United Nations representatives, and aid workers.



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Villagers said that heavily armed Islamist fighters killed civilians during attacks and planted deadly improvised *explosive* devices (IEDs). Fighters in dozens of cases raped and otherwise abused women and girls who were foraging for wood, traveling to and from the market, and fleeing the violence. The fighters also burned villages; commandeered ambulances and looted health centers; destroyed crucial water, telecommunications, and electricity infrastructure; and engaged in widespread pillage. Many villagers described seeing numerous child soldiers, some as young as 12, within the armed Islamist ranks.

A resident of Ankouna described the aftermath of an armed Islamist attack: “When I returned the next day, the village was still smoldering. [There were] bodies of six people including my brother, who had been shot trying to rescue a child 10 meters from his shop. I saw five people including a 70-year-old dead in one house. They’d been shot in the back or head.”

Other villagers said that government security forces and pro-government militias, called Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (*Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*, VDP), carried out unlawful killings and enforced disappearances of dozens of civilians and suspected Islamist fighters largely in Burkina Faso’s eastern and southern regions.

All parties to the armed conflict are bound by international humanitarian law, notably Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary laws of war, which provide for the humane treatment of captured combatants and require prosecuting summary executions, rape, and enforced disappearances as war crimes.

The government should revoke a 2021 decree that provides [immunity](#) from prosecution to members of a special counterterrorism force for acts committed “in the exercise of their functions.” In coordination with the United Nations and aid agencies, the government should increase medical and mental health support to victims of abuse including sexual and gender-based violence.

“There have been very few investigations, much less prosecutions, for the atrocities which have punctuated Burkina Faso’s conflict,” Dufka said. “The government should ensure the presence of provost marshals with responsibility for troop discipline and detainees’ rights in all military operations and adopt measures so that civilian and military courts provide fair trials for suspects.”

For details of attacks on civilians, please see below.

Abuses by Armed Islamist Groups

Several armed Islamist groups allied to both Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) are implicated in serious abuses.

Since late 2021, these armed groups have dramatically increased attacks on pro-government forces including in and around the towns of Ankouna, Arbinda, Dablo, Foubé, Inata, Namsiguia, Namissiguima, Pissila, and Tougouri, to which many people fleeing violence in surrounding villages had fled in 2019 and 2020.

The attacks, said security analysts, appeared designed to compel widespread displacement from towns perceived to support the government, thereby consolidating armed group control from their strongholds in northern Burkina Faso to the central regions. Humanitarian workers expressed alarm at the dramatic pace of deterioration. Said one, “Civilian life is being suffocated as roads are mined; villages blockaded; markets closed; and water points, telecommunication, and electricity infrastructure sabotaged.”

Armed Islamist groups have [concentrated recruitment efforts on the nomadic Peuhl, or Fulani](#), by exploiting community grievances over poverty and public sector corruption. This has inflamed tensions with other largely agrarian communities, notably the Foulse, Mossi, Dogon, and Gourmantché, who have been the targets of most armed Islamist attacks.

Villagers described fighters dressed in military camouflage or traditional robes known as *boubous*, with ammunition vests, turbans covering their faces, and military boots. They used motorcycles, motorized tricycles, and pickup trucks, often draped with white, black, or red flags with Arabic writing, and were armed with AK-47 assault weapons, PKM-12 machine guns, pistols, and rocket-propelled grenades. The fighters were heard speaking in Fulfulde, and to a lesser extent Gourmantchéma, Arabic, and Mooré.

Killing and Summary Execution of Civilians

Human Rights Watch documented the killing by armed Islamist groups of 67 civilians during attacks on villages, farms, and artisanal gold mine sites.

In late March, in Centre-Nord region, armed Islamists summarily executed three women fleeing an attack. Three witnesses to the killings believed the victims, all over 50, had been targeted because they had recognized the armed group’s commander: One witness said:

Our convoy of 40 women on donkey carts was suddenly surrounded by over 60 terrorists. They kept us there for hours, asked if our husbands were VDPs, lectured us about how to be good Muslims, and told us this land was now theirs. They stole our phones, food stocks, money, clothing, and then burned what they didn’t want. The commander asked my friend if she recognized him. She replied honestly: “Yes, I know you and your father. You killed my husband.” He ordered her onto her donkey cart, and then executed her. We gasped. He hit the donkey and the cart took off with her inside. Then he executed on the spot two other women in their 60s, who also said they recognized him.

Villagers from Ankouna said armed Islamists killed 14 civilians during an attack on January 5, including five men executed in one house and at least two children. A 39-year-old trader said:

I was in my shop when at about 4 p.m. scores of attackers burst into town, riding on motorcycles and pickups. One terrorist jumped down, spraying bullets into the market area as he walked in a half circle. Another man fired at us with a gun mounted on a pickup. They stayed for three hours yelling “Allahu akbar,” burning the village and looting animals and market stalls.

A resident said, “There were 30 VDPs [militia members] in the village but only civilians died in this attack.”

Villagers said that armed Islamists killed nine civilians during a January 15 attack on Namsiguia. “From 6:30 a.m., they flooded into town from three directions, shooting wildly, forcing open and looting shops, then burning the rest, including an ambulance, water pump, and telecommunication towers,” said one witness. Another who helped collect the dead said, “I found bodies in the street, and several women killed near the water point. The eldest was 75, and the youngest a 10-year-old girl.” A VDP militia member said, “There were over 100 jihadists on motorcycles and pickups firing machine guns. We fired a few warning shots but quickly ditched our weapons and ran.”

A 33-year-old woman described an attack near Nagraogo village on the motorized tricycle in which she and other traders were traveling. “On our way back from market, eight armed Islamists forced us to stop,” she said. “They were talking on a walkie-talkie with other terrorists. They marched the only two men in our group into the bush and executed them. This is why our men stopped traveling on the roads.”

Residents of several villages said that farmers had been forced to abandon their land and flee after dozens had been killed in their farms or as they grazed their animals. Many farmers said they had been unable to safely work on their farms over the last two or three years. A man from Bam province described the cases of 16 farmers or herders killed since 2021: “Their strategy is to isolate and starve us,” he said. A nurse from a town in Centre-Nord said, “Since 2020, I treated at least 12 men shot while working their land and registered 16 men killed – 12 in their fields and four while grazing their cows.”

A 53-year-old herder survived one such attack that killed his brother in late 2021:

My younger brother and I were tending our herd south of Dablo. We were separated by 200 meters when I saw terrorists on two motorcycles jump off, push him down, and shoot him in the head, and then steal our cows. Two other herders were killed like this the same day.

Security sources described two attacks on artisanal gold mining sites. On March 10, armed Islamists attacked Tondobi village in Seytenga commune, killing 10 people. On March 12 they attacked the Baliata artisanal mine near Dori, killing 11. A family member said that on March 18, armed Islamists abducted 50-year-old Hama Hamidou, a local official who managed cattle, took him out of a taxi traveling between Dori and Seytenga, and executed him.

Rape and Other Violence Against Women and Girls

Human Rights Watch documented several dozen cases of rape of women and girls by armed Islamist groups since late September 2021, most in the Centre-Nord region. Human Rights Watch interviewed 14 rape survivors, many of whom had witnessed other women being raped. One said that at least nine other women had been raped during the same incident. Burkinabé elders or medical workers documented other cases, sharing anonymized records detailing cases they knew of or had treated.

The armed Islamists targeted women and girls who were gathering firewood, on their way to or from market, or as they fled attacks on their villages. The women said the assailants tried to extract information about government forces and militias and told them to convey ultimatums to their villages to abandon the area. Attackers often demanded that the women demonstrate their knowledge of the Quran.

Community leaders said the frequent killings of men as they worked in their fields or went to market had increasingly pushed women into these roles, putting them at greater risk. “If a man is found by these people, you know where he will end up,” a male villager said. “Because of this, our women are forced to do the work we wish we could do.” An aid worker said, “Women are being forced to take terrible risks to care for their families.”

A nurse from a village near Dablo said she had treated over 55 women who had been raped by armed Islamists between September and December 2021. “The women came from 11 villages,” she said. “The terrorists attacked Muslims, Christians, and animists alike. They cried – they couldn’t eat or sleep and were too ashamed to tell their families what happened.”

A nurse in another area said she had treated seven women within the same time frame: “One was a girl of 16, and another, a 40-year-old Christian who told me the assailants ripped off her cross before dragging her into the bush.” A village elder from Namissiguima said 10 women from three surrounding villages who had been raped told her they had not sought medical care.

One woman described what happened to a 17-year-old family member:

We were on five donkey carts collecting wood when the girl in the last cart screamed – she had fallen into jihadists’ hands. She had lagged slightly behind because her donkey was young and slower than ours. I ran to save her, but an attacker pointed his gun saying, “If you want your life, get out of here.” We rushed to tell our men, and four hours later they found the girl emerging from the bush on foot. She was bleeding and swollen; they had violated her with brutality.”

A 35-year-old woman, one of four raped in November 2021 while foraging for wood, said:

We were on donkey carts, seven kilometers from town, when attackers captured and interrogated us about soldiers and VDPs in the village. They asked if we were Muslims, ordering us to recite the Shahada, then they each dragged the woman they wanted into the bush, covering our faces with a cloth. My rapist said, “Tell your man to put down his gun; tell him we will never be defeated.”

Islamist armed groups abducted and raped 10 women in mid-March as they fled to Kaya, the Centre-Nord regional capital. One said:

After the attack, the men fled on foot through the bush, while we women, with our children and elderly, rode on about 20 donkey carts on the road with our animals and what we managed to take. At around 6 p.m., a group of 100 jihadists emerged from the bush. They were heavily armed, some with machine guns, resembling an army. They beat us, stole our possessions, and forced 10 of us to follow them. The mothers of the younger women begged and cried saying, “Leave them! Do you read the Quran? You can’t do this!” The attackers took us into the bush. They said they were going to take us far away and marry us. Later their commander came and saved us. He seemed mad at them and said, “Leave these people, you’ve already done enough harm.”

A 25-year-old woman described being raped in late 2021 after being abducted from her home:

My husband wasn’t home that night. Two jihadists pointed their guns, forcing me and my toddler to ride on a motorcycle between them for three hours to their base. They interrogated me about the whereabouts of the soldiers and the local nurse. I recognized one, who I used to sell to in the market. I fought so hard, several of them had to hold me down.... One jihadist held my baby while another raped me. They told me to tell others to abandon the village, or they’d kill us all.

Many women said the armed Islamists whipped them during the sexual assault, typically on the back with rubber cords. Several said the whipping caused welts and bleeding.

A 36-year-old woman who was beaten and raped along with two others on her way home from the market in Barsalogo said, “I received 22 lashes with an electric cord, while my friends were hit 17 times. They said if we cried, they would restart the count.” A 37-year-old woman beaten with four others before being raped, said, “They ordered us down from the donkey cart, and to sit down in the bush, then struck us 25 times each. They said we were fake Muslims and told us to call our VDP husbands to save us. Later, one attacker took me behind a tree and did what he wanted.”

Villagers said older women and breastfeeding mothers were usually spared sexual assault but were often beaten. A 30-year-old Christian woman said that over 40 women were beaten during a late 2021 attack on a village near Bourzanga:

During the attack, the attackers gathered all of us in one house, screaming at us to tell them where our men were and saying “Why are you still here? We told you leave this place!” One of them ordered me to remove my crucifix, and I refused saying even if death awaits me, I wouldn’t abandon my faith. He ripped it off my chest and whipped and beat me and the others with branches.

A woman said that while she traveled to Kaya in late October, armed Islamists severely beat her, another woman, and nine adolescent girls:

We were taking our girls to school in Kaya. They stole the school fees and held us for hours asking about the government forces. They cocked their guns to terrify us, and tried to drag the girls off, but we fought them. That’s when they beat us with a cable. The girls received 17 lashes and the older women, 20. My back bled from the beating.

Use of Child Soldiers

Numerous villagers described seeing children they estimated to be as young as 12, many armed with military assault weapons, among armed Islamist ranks. They were seen in assaults on the towns of Namissiguima, Namsiguia, Foubé, Rofenga, Pensa, Dablo, and in several areas of Est region, as well as during attacks on convoys of fleeing civilians. Any use by armed forces of children under 18 is a violation of [international law](#) and may be a war crime.

A witness to an attack in Centre-Nord region in late 2021 said, “I cowered with my baby as attackers, half of whom seemed to be children, fired into the market area. A few were so small – their guns dragged on the ground. One had a string of bullets weighing down his neck.” A witness to the March attack on Namissiguima said, “From where I hid, I saw well over a hundred attackers including around 20 children – ages 14, 15, 16, many armed.” A rape survivor said, “While the older terrorist dragged me away, the children guarded the road.”

A witness described the November 26 attack on Dablo: “In previous attacks there were just a few children, but in November, almost half the group of 40 were adolescents. I saw some firing crazily all over the village.” A man who had been abducted and held for several days in 2021 said, “Of the dozen terrorists who captured me, four were children. I feared what they might do – children don’t measure the value of life as adults do.”

Many child soldiers were observed pillaging, especially livestock, or robbing civilians as they fled attacks. “They were mostly around 14 or 15 years old, and had brought cords to take away our animals,” a witness said. A woman in a convoy of civilians fleeing a March attack in Centre-Nord said, “Scores of jihadists, including many children ages 13 to 15, emerged from the bush, interrogating us and stealing everything. Three children, all armed, rounded up the animals.”

Several people described seeing child soldiers setting fire to houses and market stalls. “I saw more than 40 jihadists,” said a witness to a 2022 attack on Namissiguima. “While the men fired in the air, another group, including children, set the house next door on fire. I called out for water because I heard screams coming from inside.”

IED Attacks on Roads and Shelling of Villages

Philippe Renard, chief of the UN’s Mine Action Service (UNMAS) office in Burkina Faso, told Human Rights Watch that IEDs have killed 73 civilians and injured 36 since 2021, most in Boucle du Mouhoun, Centre-Nord, Est, and Nord regions.

Humanitarian workers said these weapons, whose use is often unlawfully indiscriminate, isolated communities and undermined the ability of groups to deliver crucial aid and services to vulnerable populations. “Roads we used just months ago are now littered with burned-out vehicle carcasses,” an aid worker said. “We’re terrified of hitting a mine every time we set off to deliver aid,” another said.

Civilians were killed or injured by IEDs while on donkey carts, bicycles, motorized tricycles, motorcycles, buses, and other vehicles while searching for firewood and water; traveling to and from local markets; and fleeing attacks on their villages.

A woman who was wounded by an IED explosion in Centre-Nord in 2021 said:

My family was fleeing in a bus after our village, Kougri-Koulga, was attacked. As we approached a bridge near Boulga village, there was a huge explosion, followed by another and a ball of fire ... the bus turned over. We struggled to escape. I fainted seeing so much blood and the dead – 11 including a pregnant woman and a baby. Another passenger took me under a tree, and a few hours later, we walked to safety.

On March 6 and 7, several mortar rounds struck Namsiguia in Bam province. “The jihadists fired shells, one crashing into the home of a 60-year-old woman, killing her,” a villager said. “There aren’t soldiers based here and our VDPs don’t have a base to target.”

“The jihadists consider everyone living here to be their enemy,” said a resident of Bourzanga, where a civilian was killed by mortar shelling in March. Human Rights Watch confirmed the weapons based on photos of the shell casings collected after both attacks.

Pillage and Destruction of Property

Villagers described armed Islamist groups carrying out successive waves of pillage during attacks: on their villages, on the larger towns to which they had fled for safety, and after they fled for a second time, typically to Kaya or Barsalogho. Fighters stole sacks of grain, cellphones, jewelry, money, clothing, animal carts, motorcycles, and cooking utensils. Shopkeepers said attackers had looted their entire inventory, and nurses said the armed Islamists stole medicines and supplies from clinics.

Struggling residents described the impact of the losses. “From where I hid, I watched them round up all my 42 cows – all the riches of our family,” said a herder from a village near Dablo.

Describing the January 5 attack on Ankouna, a villager said, “I was powerless. My family lost 31 cows and 47 sheep. They stole our motorized tricycles and used them to cart away the merchandise from our shops. How do we recover from this?”

Many civilians, ambushed on roads as they fled, said that the armed Islamists took everything they owned, even their shoes. Three women in a convoy of 30 donkey carts fleeing to Kaya after the March attack on Foubé described the pillage by scores of attackers. “They took what little we had – sacks of millet, clothing, our animals, then burned the rest,” one said. “They even cut the cords of our donkeys and sent them running. Then they ordered us to take off our shoes, saying this would remind us not to return to our villages. We walked for days barefoot.”

Armed jihadists robbed traders plying market routes of their money and goods. “I’d collected money from several women to buy goods at the market, but on our way back, jihadists attacked us, stealing onions and bags of beans I was going to sell,” one trader said. “I returned with only the clothes I wore.”

“They even poured out the water we’d brought with us, saying the zone had become theirs,” said a victim of a similar attack.

Aid workers described the looting by armed Islamists of medicines and supplies from clinics, and the theft of several ambulances since mid-2021. “In December, an ambulance carrying a critically ill woman from Dori to Kaya was commandeered. They forced people out, and the woman was returned to Dori by donkey cart, but she later died,” one aid worker said. They had also documented a few cases where wounded suspects had been removed from medical hospitals by pro-government forces.

Abuses by the Army and Pro-Government Militias

Human Rights Watch documented 42 alleged summary executions and 14 enforced disappearances of civilians and suspected Islamist fighters by state security forces and members of the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland, at times coordinating operations.

The majority of victims were ethnic Peuhl. In several cases, the incidents documented provoked the displacement of entire families and in some cases, communities. The incidents reported occurred between September 2021 and April 2022 and merit further investigation.

Summary Executions and Enforced Disappearances by the Military

Some of the reported abuses occurred within the context of major counterterrorism operations. Four witnesses said that soldiers detained about 40 men on November 23 in Djigoué, near the border with Côte d’Ivoire, 18 of whom were later found dead several kilometers away. On November 30, the then-minister of security, Maxime Koné, said the army had “neutralized about 30 terrorists” in an incident in the same area and at around the same time. Witnesses provided a list of the dead. A man whose 38-year-old brother was among the victims said:

Over 100 soldiers riding on pickups and motorcycles flooded the [Djigoue] market while an airplane flew overhead. I was in my shop having tea with my brother when some soldiers asked us for our ID cards. We complied and they left. Some minutes later, my brother left to check on the workers at his shop. I later learned another group of soldiers had arrested him minutes later after leaving my shop. We found his body among the dead.

Another resident said:

The soldiers left around 3 p.m. taking the detained men on several motorized taxis. We heard shots about an hour later. The next day, after the soldiers left the area we found them, dead in a line, near where the soldiers had made an overnight camp. The dead were nearly all Peuhl from 20 to 65 years old, bound and blindfolded with their own clothing. Now, nearly the entire village has fled, fearing both the army and the jihadists.

On September 12, soldiers arrested seven men during a night operation in Ouangolodougou near the Ivorian border. Their bodies were found the next day about one kilometer away. Residents said they believed the army was implicated because there had been a large military operation in the area around the same time. Witnesses said a father and two of his sons were among the dead. A resident said:

At around 1 a.m., we heard motorcycles, then banging on the door. I saw soldiers standing at the doors. They shone flashlights into our eyes. They ordered the women and children into one room, searched the house, and bound Ali Diallo [age 52] and two of his sons, Amadou, 23, and Mahamadi, 21, a university student who was home for a visit. They also arrested four other people from a nearby house. The families begged for their lives.... I heard a soldier saying in French, "It's over for you."

"We heard shots that night, and found their bodies – six in one group, then the seventh some meters away," said another resident. "They'd been shot in the head or neck, and their hands were tied with cords or with their own clothing. The family filed a case with the local gendarmerie but to our surprise, they were also arrested! They were finally released after much pressure. But no one has investigated the death of our people."

Six of 15 men arrested on February 21 by soldiers in Todiane, Nord region were forcibly disappeared. One resident said:

Around 11 a.m. soldiers in over ten pickups and on motorcycles surrounded the village, firing in the air. People fled into the mosque, and from there the soldiers checked everyone's ID card. They tied the hands and blindfolded 15 people, including an elderly man, and put them into a few army vehicles. They beat them savagely as they took them away.... Nine people were released a few weeks later after being held in the gendarmeries in Titao and Ouahigouya. We've searched for the other six – in police and gendarme stations, bases, and prisons – but they are nowhere to be found.

Enforced Disappearances, Killings by VDP Militia

The government [authorized](#) the VDP as a self-defense group in 2020, providing them arms and minimal training. Most abuses implicating the VDP occurred in Cascades, Sud-Ouest, or Est region, especially in and around Fada N'Gourma.

Community leaders from these regions, which border Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, and Togo, said there has been considerable ethnic tension between the pastoralist Peuhl, for their perceived support of armed Islamists, and farming communities, who are perceived to be pro-government and who make up the majority of VDP militia members in the area. Peuhl leaders consistently described being victimized by both armed Islamists and pro-government forces.

Numerous Peuhl men were allegedly summarily executed after being detained by men who witnesses believe were VDP militia, several of whom the witnesses knew by name. In several cases, the reason for the detention, killing, or enforced disappearance of the victim was unclear to the family members. In several cases they speculated that the militia used counterterrorism operations as a pretext for settling personal or community scores.

Three residents said they saw the bound bodies of eight men whom VDP militia had detained two days earlier, on February 17, in Fada N'Gourma. One witness described the detention of four of the eight men: "We were gathered for a food distribution when VDPs in red t-shirts went up to the men saying, 'You and you.... Come with us.' They knew exactly whom they were looking for. They took them away, hands tied, on motorcycles." Another witness said, "I saw eight VDPs in this operation, three of whom I know personally." Family members said four other men were arrested elsewhere in the town, including a man with a physical disability who was arrested at his home.

A man who attended the burial on February 19 said, "The bodies were behind the Bougie village primary school, 10 kilometers from Fada. Their hands tied; they had been executed." A family member said, "Terrorists had [burned the school](#) a few days before. But we're confused – our men *and* the VDP both fear the terrorists! We think this is a settling of scores and that the VDP are using the fight against terrorism to cover up their deed."

Two men detained by alleged VDP militia members on March 28 in Dankibaroum, five kilometers from Fada N'Gourma, were found dead several days later. "Three VDPs armed with AKs, one of whom I recognized, arrested my cousin Boureima, who was working in a shop," said a resident. "They handcuffed him and later also arrested the shop owner. We found their bodies seven kilometers away – both had been shot in the head."

VDP militia members told Human Rights Watch about three incidents in which they had executed Peuhl suspects in late 2021 and early 2022 for their perceived support of armed Islamist groups. Describing one incident, a VDP member said, "We used to turn suspects over to the gendarmes, but they always released them, so we decided to sort this problem out ourselves." Another said, "In January 2022, we captured a Peuhl spy at the market and guarded him for three days until he told us about his collaborators. Then we dealt with all of them."

Community leaders from Cascades and Sud-Ouest regions showed Human Rights Watch records of 10 people who had in recent months been either forcibly disappeared or executed by local VDP militia. The VDP members are sometimes referred to as "Dozos," traditional hunters, many of whom have joined the militia.

A Peuhl community leader from Cascades region said:

The agrarian communities blame all Peuhl for the jihadist presence and are killing and driving us from our villages and looting our property. Nearly all the Peuhl have fled either to bigger towns, or into the national protected forests with their cows, which are jihadist strongholds. In the forests, they're forced to live by the terrorists' rules, but at least they aren't being killed.

Several Peuhl villagers described VDP members engaging in criminal behavior. One Peuhl elder said:

In mid-March, my brother and his two sons, ages 30 and 19, were kidnapped by Dozos while watering their animals near Mangodara. The Dozos said they were "terrorists." We went to the Dozo chief who demanded 3 million CFA (US\$5,000) to secure their release, but after we gave it to him,

they refused to free our people. After that, we all fled. The gendarmes are investigating, and called us to make a statement but honestly, we're terrified to return because of all the VDP and Dozo checkpoints in that area.

Other allegations of killing and enforced disappearance allegedly involve VDP militia and government security forces working together. Two witnesses described the arrest on February 27 of Ali Diallo, 44, a local community leader, by VDP militia and the security forces. One witness said, "I saw Ali [Diallo] in the market while he was buying things for his wife, who had just given birth in the hospital. As he was buying water, he was intercepted by two uniformed soldiers and two VDPs, whom I recognized. They put a sack over Ali's head, handcuffed, and drove off with him."

His body was found four days later. A second witness said, "It was under some trees a few kilometers from the military camp. A sack was on his head, and his pants were down to his ankles. He'd been shot several times in the back."

A relative who witnessed the arrest of Amadou Bande, 46, in Fada N'Gourma on March 16, said that "He was buying a sack of rice when two VDP on motorcycles jumped down, handcuffed and lifted him onto a military vehicle, which was just behind them. We've looked everywhere for him." Bande's whereabouts remain unknown.

Deadly Attack on Civilians by Unidentified Forces

On February 28, a powerful explosion killed more than 30 traders at an animal market in the town of Béléléde, Sahel region, which was largely controlled by an armed Islamist group. The cause of the explosion and responsibility have not been identified. One witness said he heard a whistle coming from south of the village before the explosion, but two others present did not hear anything or see any helicopters or airplanes overhead.

A witness said:

It was a busy market day. The thunderous explosion went off just as traders rushed toward two cows driven into the market on a motorized tricycle. A dust cloud covered the market. When it settled, I saw that the driver, cows, and everyone in the vicinity had been pulverized. People were running, blood and pieces of human beings were everywhere. Around 30 died on the spot, and a few more later.

"We live under the yoke of the jihadists and a few were in the village that day," said one villager. "But the vast majority of people killed in this incident were ordinary traders, including some adolescents, working the cattle market."

A coalition of civil society organizations have [reported](#) that at least 80 men – all civilians – were killed during government military operations April 10 and 11 in villages in and around Oursi and Tin-Akoff communes, Sahel region.

