

Burkina Faso: Perpetrators of Nouna killings must face justice



According to witnesses interviewed by Amnesty International, auxiliary forces to the government of Burkina Faso killed dozens of civilians in Nouna, in Kossi province, on 30 December 2022 and more than 80 corpses were buried.

The targeted and unjustified killings, of mainly ethnically Fulani residents of Sectors 4 and 6 of Nouna, took place on the morning of 30 December 2022, shortly after an attack by Islamist militants on a local gendarmerie station and a base used by Dozos, a government proxy force, in the town.

Amnesty International calls on the government to ensure an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation.

Samira Daoud, Director, Regional Director of West and Central Africa, Amnesty International

“Amnesty International urges the authorities in Burkina Faso to protect civilians and to make sure that those suspected of responsibility for the horrific killings in Nouna are held accountable. These deliberate killings of civilians may amount to crimes under international law. We are calling on the government to ensure an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation takes place which will bring the perpetrators of this atrocity to justice,” said Samira Daoud, Director of the Amnesty International Office for West and Central Africa.

According to survivors the attack was carried out by local members of a Dozos hunter’s brotherhood, an auxiliary force to the military, who went house-to-house shooting people unable to escape.

The killings in Nouna, a town of 30,000 residents not far from Mali, followed an attack on a Dozo base and a gendarmerie post by Islamist fighters a few hours earlier.

On 2 January a local prosecutor opened an investigation into the killings of 28 civilians.

Survivors said the death toll is substantially higher, as on 31st December, at least 86 corpses were retrieved from Sectors 4 and 6 and buried. In the ensuing days, other corpses riddled with bullets were still being found and buried.

The government must ensure that all of its aligned forces respect international humanitarian and human rights law and halt any attacks on civilians immediately.
Samira Daoud

Amnesty International calls on the government to condemn this atrocity and hold accountable anyone found responsible for the attacks.

“We call on the government to strongly and publicly condemn these killings and to ensure such abuses are never repeated by anyone under its authority. The government should also protect civilians from the activities of any armed groups and government forces” Samira Daoud said.

“The government must ensure that all of its aligned forces strictly respect international humanitarian and human rights law and, in particular, halt any attacks on civilians immediately.”

Survivor accounts

In the early morning of 30 December 2022, a gendarmerie post in Nouna and a camp used by Dozo hunters, a group which acts as a government auxiliary security force, were attacked by Islamist militants belonging to the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims.

Three witnesses interviewed by Amnesty International who were in Nouna described how after the initial attack, Dozo militiamen moved into two neighbourhoods of Nouna, seemingly targeting Fulani families, going door-to-door and shooting scores of unarmed civilians in their homes. Almost all men over the age of 16 were killed, mainly by Dozo hunters, according to the witnesses.

One man whose father was killed, in Sector 6, on 30 December told Amnesty International: “I had just hanged up from talking with my father when my stepmother called 30 minutes later frantically, telling me that armed men were in the compound. They were two and armed and asked in Dioula and French, for my father to follow them. He tried to resist, and my stepmother was shouting for them to let him be, but they took him with them. My stepmother managed to call the gendarmerie after a time, but they found his body not far afterwards. He was shot and already dead, and they had taken his ring and all the money in his wallet”

“Thirty-eight people were killed in Sector 6 [one of the neighbourhoods] from what I heard. Those were the ones that were buried under the authority of the traditional chieftain of Nouna, so it could be more. With 48 corpses buried in Sector 4 [the second neighbourhood], this amounts to at least 86 dead,” one survivor said.

Another survivor told Amnesty International how he had been forced from his home by armed men: “They came to my house and told me to follow them to the gendarmerie. I was apprehensive but decided to go along because I did not have much choice. But they were not driving me to the gendarmerie but into the bush and at one point, when they were not watching, I decided to run. They shot at me but I managed to get away.”

Days after the attack, following the initial burial of 86 victims, bodies were still being discovered.

There is no safety for us, and I would like to leave the town
Survivor; Nouna

Once survivor interviewed on 2 January, said:

“Even today two bodies were picked up in Sector 4 and buried. They were found after the burials of the 86 on 31 December. I haven’t dared leave my house since 30 December. There is no safety for us, and I would like to leave the town.”

Background

Burkina Faso has grappled with an Islamist insurgency since 2016 in a conflict which has caused the deaths of thousands of civilians and forced the displacement of almost 2 million Burkinabè, about a tenth of the population.

In January 2020 the government legally constituted the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDPs), an auxiliary militia which assists the military in its counter-insurgency efforts. VDP members receive 15 days of training. Their deployment is often in response to the demands by local communities but has also led to frequent accusations of ethnic targeting and other abuses. In October 2022, the government announced the recruitment of 50,000 additional VDPs.

The killings in Nouna follow a similar pattern to events in the northern village of Yirgou in 2019, in which more than 100 unarmed civilians, mainly ethnically Fulani, were killed as reprisals by members of the Koglweogo, another government auxiliary force, over several days. The killings followed the murder of a traditional chieftain, allegedly by members of Ansaroul Islam, an Islamist armed group. No one has been tried for any of the deaths. Fulani communities are often blamed by other groups for supporting, or being sympathetic to, Islamist insurgent groups.