



Mali: Islamist Group Abuses, Banditry Surge

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Islamist armed groups in northern and central [Mali](#) have executed numerous people and are increasingly imposing restrictions on village life. The Malian government has largely been unable to protect vulnerable civilians in northern and central Mali, while security forces summarily executed at least 10 suspected Islamists and tortured many others during counterterrorism operations in 2016.

In addition to abuses by the Islamist armed groups, civilians have suffered from bloody intercommunal clashes and surges in banditry. Despite a 2015 peace accord ending Mali's 2012-2013 armed conflict, signatories have failed to implement many of its key provisions, notably the disarmament of thousands of combatants. United Nations peacekeeper fatalities reached 29 in 2016, double those in 2015.

"The human rights climate grew increasingly precarious over the past year, a result of execution-style killings and intimidation by Islamist armed groups, bloody intercommunal clashes, and surges in violent crime," said [Corinne Dufka](#), associate Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "The government's failure to assert control and curtail security force abuses has added to the deteriorating situation."

A 2013 French-led military intervention pushed back armed groups occupying Mali's north, but lawlessness and [abuses steadily increased from mid-2014](#), including by groups linked to Al-Qaeda. In 2015 and 2016, abuses worsened and increasingly [spread to Mali's central regions](#).

Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 70 victims and witnesses to abuses in central and northern Mali in April and August 2016 in Bamako, Sévaré, and Mopti, and by phone throughout the year. Those interviewed included members of the ethnic Peuhl, Bambara, Dogon, and Tuareg communities; detainees in government custody; local government, security, and Justice Ministry officials; and diplomats and UN officials. The findings build on Human Rights Watch [research in Mali since 2012](#).

In 2016, Islamist armed groups executed at least 27 men, including village chiefs and local government officials, Malian security force personnel, and fighters from parties to the peace accord. Most were accused of providing information to the government or French forces engaged in counterterrorism operations.

Many of the executions took place in central Mali, where Islamist armed group presence and intimidation of the population steadily increased through the year. Villagers described how Islamist groups of up to 50 armed fighters, including teenage boys, occupied villages for hours and threatened death to anyone collaborating with French forces, the government, or UN peacekeepers.

In several villages, the groups imposed their version of Sharia (Islamic law), threatening villagers not to celebrate marriages and baptisms. A villager described a wedding he attended in December in Segou region: "Our traditional customs are no longer allowed because of the presence of jihadist fighters from our own villages. Our way of celebrating is now *haram* [forbidden]." Another said that families are "pressured to give their children" to the Islamist armed groups in central Mali.

Armed groups carried out at least 75 attacks on UN forces in 2016, killing 29 peacekeepers with the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and wounding some 90 others. Groups linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) took responsibility for many of these attacks, which largely targeted logistic convoys and UN bases. Particularly deadly incidents included a February attack that killed seven peacekeepers from Guinea, as well as two incidents in May that killed five peacekeepers from Togo and five from Chad.

Residents and community leaders described rising levels of banditry and violent crime. Human Rights Watch estimates that several thousand civilians in northern and central Mali were victimized during about 400 incidents of banditry in 2016. This assessment is based on interviews with victims, witnesses, and security sources, as well as media monitoring and security reports. Armed bandits killed at least eight people and wounded over 30, routinely targeting public vehicles and buses, animal herders, and traders. Victims alleged that government security forces were either unable or unwilling to protect them and rarely investigated the crimes.

A number of people said they had been robbed more than once. One trader had been robbed four times in as many months. "It can't get any worse," said another trader. "We can hardly move out of Gao without getting hit by bandits lying in wait," said a third. The traders said the slow implementation of the peace accord – notably provisions for disarmament, the cantonment of armed groups, and joint patrols comprising Malian soldiers, pro-government militia and former rebels – had greatly contributed to the rise in criminality.

Insecurity also significantly affected basic health care, education, and humanitarian aid. At least 35 attacks on aid agencies took place in 2016, the vast majority by bandits in the north. At least six vehicles carrying health workers and the sick were robbed, with patients forced out of the vehicles in several cases. Several civilians were killed by landmines and improvised explosive devices planted by armed groups on major roads.

The Malian army and other government security forces conducted counterterrorism operations that on several occasions resulted in arbitrary arrests, executions, and torture and other ill-treatment. During 2016, Human Rights Watch documented the killing of 10 detainees, all in central Mali, and the torture or severe mistreatment of 20 others. Malian authorities made little effort to investigate and hold accountable those implicated in these violations.

International humanitarian law, or the laws of war, applies to all sides in the armed conflict in Mali. Applicable law includes Common Article 3 to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, Protocol II to

the Geneva Conventions, and customary laws of war. Common Article 3 and Protocol II specifically prohibit the killing of captured combatants and civilians in custody.

Individuals who deliberately commit serious violations of the laws of war may be prosecuted for war crimes. Mali is a party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

"The authorities need to do much more to fulfill their responsibility to protect civilians in north and central Mali," Dufka said. "After so many years of insecurity, civilians deserve to see more security dividends from the peace process."

Mali's Conflict Since 2013

Military operations by French and Malian forces since 2013, along with a 2015 peace accord, sought to eliminate the presence of Islamist armed groups, disarm thousands of fighters, and re-establish Malian state control over the north. However, clashes among various armed groups both before and after the 2015 accord have generated insecurity in the north and increasingly in central Mali.

Large swaths of territory in the north have been left largely devoid of Malian government presence, allowing armed groups, pro-government militias, and bandits to commit abuses with impunity. Since early 2015, Islamist armed group activity and abuses have [spread down to central Mali](#), engulfing [additional civilians in the conflict](#).

According to one security analyst, "During 2016 there were more bandits, more terrorists, and attacks from both are getting more and more complex and violent." Though armed groups infrequently targeted civilians, the worsening insecurity undermined efforts by the Malian government and its international partners to strengthen the rule of law and deliver basic health care, education, and humanitarian assistance.

Meanwhile, persistent intercommunal conflicts in central and northern Mali left dozens dead and were exploited by armed groups to garner support and recruits.

Executions by Islamist Armed Groups

Human Rights Watch documented the summary executions of 27 men by Islamist armed groups during 2016. Those believed to be responsible included AQIM, Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front (also known as Ansar Dine Katiba Macina, *Katiba du Macina d'Ansar Dine*), and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).

The killings took place in Mopti, Ségou, Timbuktu, and Kidal regions. At least two of the victims were beheaded. Those targeted included mayors and deputy mayors, village chiefs, and teachers; Malian security force members including a member of the National Guard, a soldier, and agents of the Forest and Water service; members of armed groups signatory to the 2015 peace accord, notably the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA); and, in one case, an Islamist group fighter who had engaged in criminal practices.

Witnesses and intelligence sources said that many victims had been accused of being informants for the government and French troops engaged in counterterrorism operations. Community leaders in central Mali said they believed a few local leaders had also been targeted as punishment for allegedly corrupt practices against local villagers.

There were numerous other unlawful killings in 2016, including of local authorities, that Human Rights Watch determined were linked to intercommunal or interpersonal conflicts over land, water, and community leadership.

Executions of Civilians

On November 7, an alleged Islamist armed group executed the chief of Diaba village, Kola Kane Diallo, 45, in front of his family. Diaba is 70 kilometers from the UNESCO cultural heritage site of Djenné. A villager said he believed Diallo had been killed as a warning to the community not to collaborate with the Malian army, which had recently increased its presence in the area. A witness said:

He had been threatened a few times by the men... but refused to leave, saying, "I didn't do anything wrong... why should I leave my village?" That night, he was in his house watching TV, about 10 p.m., when three men came to the door. Only one entered, saying he was a shepherd looking for his missing animals. The chief said he didn't have anyone's animals. But then the man stated his true intention: "It is you we are looking for."

The chief had his toddler in his arms... the armed man ordered him to hand his child to a family member. He begged, saying, "In the name of God, don't kill me." But they shot him, three times, inside his house... We suspect it had to do with a visit he had received from the Malian army – it is normal to receive them; he is the chief. This was like a sign for the rest of the village not to collaborate.

In mid-September, a Quranic teacher, or *marabout*, from Sofara village – 40 kilometers from Djenné – was killed for his alleged relationship with the Malian army. Witnesses said he had on several occasions welcomed soldiers in his house during their patrols through the zone, which is also frequented by Islamist armed groups.

Two witnesses said that just after 1 a.m. on July 18, three alleged members of an Islamist armed group burst into the home of Issa Garibou Onguiba, killing him in front of his wife and children. The summary execution occurred near the village of Boumbam, 60 kilometers south of Douentza. One witness said:

I had just gone to bed when I heard two screams, then at least three shots. The wife begged and offered the killers money and livestock, but they told her, "We have been sent to kill him... we will complete our mission." Issa was a hunter – he used to see the jihadists a lot in the bush. They had recently preached in our mosque and warned us never to tell the FAMA [Malian armed forces] where they were.

Two witnesses described the July 11 killing of Amadou Kola Dia, 50, as he worked in his field. Dia was a teacher and the deputy mayor of Ouro Modi village, 60 kilometers from Mopti. They said Dia had fled his village in 2015 after receiving threats from Islamist armed groups, but had returned in July to celebrate the end of Ramadan with his family. "These people have infiltrated and paralyzed our zone," a witness said. "They have informants in every village. That's how they knew Amadou had come back."

Two witnesses described the March 21 killing, by armed Islamists from Niger, of 49-year-old Amadou Mamoudou Dicko in a hamlet near the village of Yogodoji, 40 kilometers from the border with Burkina Faso. Dicko had reportedly organized a village self-defense force. One witness said:

I saw eight of them on four motos [motorbikes], firing from the moment they entered. There were 20 people seated, talking. They ordered all to lie down and one of them said, "That is him... the one we are after." Dicko ran, but they trapped and shot him there. I counted 153 spent bullet casings.

Islamist armed groups in Mali have held the deputy mayor of Boni since September 2016, along with seven foreign civilians.

Executions of Armed Group Members

On November 4, AQIM released a video, *Traitors 2*, taking responsibility for the summary execution of four Malians. The group claimed that the four had provided intelligence to French, Malian, and Mauritanian forces, which had resulted in the loss of AQIM fighters and weapons. The video, released by the AQIM-affiliated outlet Andalus Media, shows the Sharia court trial and execution of Mohamed Ould Beih and El-Hussein Ould Badi. *Traitors 2* appears to be a sequel to a December 2015 AQIM video called *Traitors*, in which two Malians and a Mauritanian were executed for similar reasons.

The two other executions mentioned in *Traitors 2* were those of Bachir Ould Afad, a national guardsman on September 25 in Timbuktu, and Efad Ag Arifek, a member of the Tuareg group MNLA abducted on June 6 in Ber, 53 kilometers east of Timbuktu. Arifek had been the Ber spokesman for a coalition of armed groups. His beheaded body was found on July 21 in Timbukri, 27 kilometers northeast of Ber, with the bodies of three other men who had reportedly been captured a day earlier during an AQIM attack on the MNLA.

AQIM also took responsibility for the June 20 killing of Alassane Ag Intouwa in Ber. Intouwa, a former fighter for the Tuareg group, had been serving as a representative for another group, the High Council for the Unity of Azawad.

Of all the armed groups that signed the 2015 peace accord, the MNLA has suffered the most killings. Community leaders told Human Rights Watch that some members may have been killed in leadership or power struggles, particularly with certain members of the Arab community.

According to Mohamed Ag Attaye, the MNLA officer in charge of human rights, at least 33 men associated with MNLA had been executed in the custody of armed Islamist groups and five more abducted in 2016.

The majority of those killed – 28 men – were executed in the Kidal region. Fifteen were killed after being captured during clashes, while others were killed in their homes or months after being abducted. Attaye said that either AQIM, Ansar Dine, or MUJAO took responsibility for most of the killings. He told Human Rights Watch that six MNLA fighters, captured by pro-government militias near Anefis, were executed after being handed over to MUJAO. Some of the men were tortured before their execution, he alleged.

Human Rights Watch was unable to verify all of these cases but urges the Malian authorities to investigate the MNLA's very serious allegations.

Repression by Islamist Armed Groups in Central Mali

Islamist armed groups operating in central Mali frequently imposed harsh restrictions against the civilian population, often based on the groups' strict interpretation of Islam.

Threats were usually communicated in meetings that villagers were obligated to attend. Human Rights Watch spoke with villagers who attended these meetings in at least eight villages in Mopti and Ségou regions. During the meetings, which would last for several hours, armed men preached in several languages and threatened anyone providing information to the Malian government or international forces. They also appealed for support in adhering to a strict interpretation of Islam.

In some villages, groups prohibited celebrations including marriages and baptisms. On a few occasions they fired shots in the air to disperse the events. Other regulations included a ban on girls and women riding on motorcycles driven by men other than their husbands, orders to wear

certain types of clothing, instructions to teachers to separate girls and boys in classrooms, and orders not to participate in the November 2016 local elections. In a few villages, groups threatened to cut off the hands of bandits and to execute adulterers.

Victims, witnesses, and security analysts said the Islamist armed groups destroyed communication antennas and burned government vehicles and buildings, including mayor and gendarmerie offices, town halls, and prisons.

A man who attended four weddings in different villages near the Malian border with Mauritania said that the presence of Islamist fighters had altered Peuhl traditional practices:

We used to spend days celebrating a marriage or baptism – dancing and singing together – but now, we can only do so where the Malian Army is present. During the marriages I attended, men and women weren't allowed to mix. ...The bride was brought to the groom's house and that was that. ...Before, we had fun, it was joyful – but now, you'd not know a marriage had taken place.

Another villager said, "They're even forcing us to pray in a different way... in some villages, we have to cross our hands in front of our chest when praying... we never did that before."

A trader from a village near Dogofiri said, "Jihadists fired in the air and ordered the bar man to turn the music down and for people not to go there. He said they don't allow music and alcohol in this village."

A 30-year-old Quranic student, who made his living by selling handwritten verses of the Quran that are placed in amulets, said that Islamist armed groups forbade the practice. "The jihadists came every week during our market," he said. "One day they found the verses I was writing in my notebook. I sell them to our women, who sew them into small leather pouches, which we wear for protection. I begged, but they burned my notebook, saying this kind of traditional practice was *haram*."

Attacks on Peacekeepers

Islamist armed groups frequently attacked MINUSMA peacekeepers, killing 29 and wounding some 90 during 2016. In total, more than 70 peacekeepers have been killed since MINUSMA was created in 2013.

A security analyst said that while MINUSMA was attacked about the same number of times in 2016 as in 2015, the 2016 attacks were "better organized on the ground" and that the groups "were more likely to claim responsibility for them."

Most of the attacks either targeted logistic convoys bringing food, water, and other supplies to UN bases or the bases themselves, including those in Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. AQIM, Ansar Dine, and Al Mourabitoun took responsibility for many of these attacks. Those included the February 12 suicide bomber and rocket attack on the MINUSMA base in Kidal, which killed seven peacekeepers from Guinea, and the May 18 ambush 15 kilometers north of Aguelhok, Kidal region, which killed five Chadian peacekeepers.

In previous years, attacks on peacekeepers almost exclusively took place in northern Mali. However, in 2016, at least two such deadly attacks were in the Mopti region of central Mali. On May 29, five peacekeepers from Togo were killed in an ambush 30 kilometers west of the garrison town of Sévaré. On November 6, a Togolese peacekeeper was killed in an attack on a supply convoy 45 kilometers north of Douentza. Two Malian civilians were also killed in the incident.

On November 29, Al Mourabitoun forces committed the war crime of perfidy by driving two UN-labeled vehicles laden with explosives into the Gao airport. Only one exploded, damaging the fuselage of a MINUSMA plane and the airport terminal. The second vehicle was found with 500 kilograms of explosives inside, an intelligence source said. An attack on a compound in Gao on May 31 killed a Chinese peacekeeper and a French civilian de-mining expert.

International humanitarian law prohibits attacks on personnel involved in peacekeeping missions and grants them the same wartime protections as civilians. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and customary laws of war prohibit attacks on UN peacekeepers and UN facilities as war crimes. The UN Security Council requires peacekeepers to be impartial and not use force except in self-defense or defense of the mandate.

Malian Security Force Violations

Human Rights Watch documented the detention of more than 60 men by Malian security forces in 2016, allegedly for their suspected support for or membership of Islamist armed groups in central and northern Mali. The vast majority of these were ethnic Peuhl. Malian soldiers summarily executed at least 10 of them and tortured or otherwise mistreated at least 20.

In all but a few cases, army soldiers committed the abuses during *ad hoc* interrogations in the first two days after detention, though the soldiers are not authorized to interrogate detainees. The most serious cases, the majority of which took place during the first half of 2016, were allegedly by soldiers based in Diabaly, Boni, Boulekessi, and Mondoro. In several cases, officers, including a lieutenant and a captain, were present during the abuse. As has been the case since 2012, the vast majority of detainees said the abuse stopped after they were handed over to government gendarmes.

The abuse did not appear to be systematic and, as compared with accounts by several hundred detained men in 2013, 2014, and 2015, the mistreatment appeared to have declined. However, the military and civilian justice systems made little effort to investigate and hold to account soldiers implicated in violations against detainees.

Summary Executions

Three villagers told Human Rights Watch that Malian forces had detained two brothers, Mamoudou Allaye, 53, and Ousman Allaye, 48, on January 8, 2016, and that their bodies were found hours later in a shallow grave near the village of Karena, Mopti region. One witness said:

The [soldiers] told Mamoudou to get in their vehicle and took him away. We heard shots. Worried, his brother went in search of him. When, over an hour later, neither returned, we set out after them. ... We found the brothers a kilometer away in a freshly dug, shallow grave.

Four witnesses said three of seven Peuhl men detained on April 7 near the town of Sokolo, in the Ségou region, died of their injuries after Malian soldiers severely beat them near their base in Diabaly. One of those detained described what happened after the men were taken to the military base:

Around midnight, the soldiers tied our arms, put cord in our mouths, bound our eyes, then drove 10 minutes. The beating started... it was severe... with wood and rocks. I was kicked many times and burned on my feet. "Where are the jihadists?" they asked. When we returned to the cell hours later, Hamadoun Diallo was missing. I heard soldiers saying in Bambara, "He is dead."

At about 4 a.m., Aye Nissa died in the cell. "I am dying..." he kept saying, until he stopped talking. We hit the door, saying they should take him to the doctor. About 6

a.m., the FAMA [soldiers] ordered us to get up. ... "He [Nissa] cannot," we told them. Then they took his body.

About 9 a.m. they took the remaining five of us to the Niono gendarmerie. Seeing the shape we were in, the gendarmes got angry; they sent us to the clinic for care. We returned to our cells, but Aly Bah was so sick... since his beating, he couldn't even sit up; every time he drank water, he vomited blood. The Gendarme commander took him back to the hospital... and it was there he died.

In Mopti region, army soldiers taking part in counterterrorism operations in the Douentza administrative area in December were implicated in summary executions, torture, and looting of several villages. Villagers found the bodies of five men detained by soldiers on December 19 two days later in a mass grave near the village of Isseye, 85 kilometers from Douentza.

Torture and Mistreatment

Human Rights Watch documented six incidents in 2016 in which Malian security forces severely mistreated at least 20 detainees. The detainees, many of whom had scars and showed visible signs of torture, described being hogtied, pummeled with fists and gun butts, kicked, suspended from trees, burned, and subjected to simulated drowning akin to "*waterboarding*" and other mock executions. They were also routinely denied food, water, and medical care.

Two witnesses to the April 8 beating of the seven men in Diabaly said the men were severely beaten with belts and wood, kicked, and repeatedly threatened with death. Soldiers stripped one, a 35-year-old shop owner they accused of selling goods to Islamists, hung him by his feet on a tree, and "water boarded" him for 30 minutes. A witness said: "While hanging there, they forced his head in a bucket four times, asking, 'Where is the Islamist's base? ... You sell goods to these people, no?'" Another man was burned so severely on his back that he required medical attention for several weeks. "He had been found with a lot of money," a witness said. "They punched, kicked and burned him severely all over his back... the soldiers kept asking him where he got all that money."

In mid-April, soldiers severely beat six Peuhl men who had been apprehended in their villages near Boulekessi, subsequently subjecting them to mock execution. One said:

As they removed the blindfold, I saw a pick and a shovel. "We're going to ask you questions and if you lie, it is here you will die." I answered, but they accused me of lying. They told me to dig and ordered me in... I felt the sand entering my ear and a gun at my temple... I begged for my life... I heard the others screaming nearby but they didn't kill us.

We thought our ordeal was over, but then they did it again. This time four soldiers walked me into the bush, and ordered me to say my last words. I begged, saying I have nothing to do with the jihadists. They stripped and beat me with branches until the leaves fell off. I was bleeding... they ordered me inside, covered my body with sand and threw in my clothes... they cocked a gun, then fired two shots near my head. From the grave I was silent, thinking it was there I would die. Minutes later, the soldiers brought the others who pleaded to live while a soldier said, "Look at the tomb... Is he dead or alive? ... Now talk."

Unchecked Banditry and Crime in North and Central Mali

Human Rights Watch spoke with 16 men and women who had been robbed on their way to and from local markets in the Gao and Timbuktu regions in northern Mali. Several had been robbed two, three, and even four times during 2016. A number were beaten, or saw others beaten, after

they refused to hand over money. Two women were raped during the assaults and one said a fellow passenger had been gunned down after bolting from the scene.

The Timbuktu and Gao regions were the hardest hit, though dozens of incidents were also reported in Kidal and Mopti regions. Human Rights Watch obtained and reviewed reports from various public and private sources that added up to approximately 380 separate incidents. With the addition of the cases investigated by Human Rights Watch, 400 incidents of banditry can be estimated to have occurred in 2016, though the actual number is likely higher. Most of these cases involved the robbery of groups of passengers.

The highway robberies have typically been carried out by small groups of men on motorcycles, armed with military assault rifles. They targeted transport vehicles, buses, animal herders, and traders who travel from village to village buying and selling their wares. The incidents were concentrated on market days and along several key strips of highway and land routes used by traders.

Typically, bandits fired in the air to force drivers to stop, ordered the passengers to descend, and then robbed them of money, cellphones and other goods. At least eight people were reportedly killed and 33 wounded when bandits opened fire on vehicles that refused to stop, or when they shot frightened people who tried to flee.

A 38-year-old trader, whose transport vehicle was robbed on October 14 en route to Gao after market day, saw bandits shoot a man who tried to run away:

Two men dressed half in camouflage, half in civilian clothes forced us to stop and robbed all 17 of us of our phones and money. They stole 200,000 francs CFA [US \$320] from me. Five passengers didn't have anything to give... the men started to tie them up, beating and shouting at them. One of them fled, afraid he would be killed, and they fired, hitting him in the head. We started wailing, thinking they would kill all of us. This was the second time in a month that I had been robbed like this. We pray to God the disarmament starts soon... maybe it will stop this madness.

Human Rights Watch documented two cases of sexual assault during robberies. A 50-year-old trader said she was raped by two of the three men who stopped the vehicle taking her back to Gao from a market about 60 kilometers away:

I saw people watching me during the market, and think someone informed them I was carrying a lot of money – 500,000 francs CFA [US \$800]. I'd hidden it in my clothing – and when they ordered everyone at gunpoint to hand over their cash, I told them I had nothing... but they knew... They threatened me, then dragged me behind a tree, tore off my clothes to find the money, then used me.

A trader on her way back to Gao from a market in Djebok, 45 kilometers north, said that in November, four gunmen stopped the convoy of three cars in which she was travelling. The assailants separated the men and women, forcing the youngest woman in the convoy away for 30 minutes. The trader said that when the woman returned, "She was crying... She said they had used her. Their rifles were pointed at us... If someone is stronger than you, what can you do?"

Several animal herders said that armed men on motorcycles drove off entire herds of livestock, while traders said they had been ambushed and robbed. These attacks took place on their way to local village markets and even on the streets of larger towns in the north.

A 55-year-old man from a village north of Gao said that at dusk one day in October, armed men on motorcycles drove off his entire herd of cows, on which he and his family of 10 depended:

They took all of my 16 cows, including several that were pregnant – even more of a loss. They left me with nothing. I am sick and have no money for medicine. My family needs food, we have nothing. I am not alone – I know about 10 other herders who have suffered the same thing.

Several victims said they had reported the incidents to the authorities, but none of these cases had been investigated. They expressed no confidence in either the government forces or the UN to protect them from the rampant banditry, which all of those interviewed said had worsened in 2016.

The victims said they rarely saw armed government patrols on the highways, much less on the smaller roads, allowing bandits to operate with little fear of being apprehended. "We are so fed up... with the security people," said an animal trader from Gao. "Even when we tell them a robbery is happening now, and only five kilometers away, they refuse to respond."

One 35-year-old driver from Timbuktu said he was robbed three times last year. "The bandits left me and my passengers standing on the road, then drove away with my truck, my livelihood," he said. "I didn't notify the police. I've never seen a patrol of Malian forces. The state is absent. Anyone can get an AK-47 [assault rifle], and in Mali, he who is armed can do whatever he wants."

However, residents from Gao said the security forces and the UN had increased patrols on major roads in and around Gao following a strike by local transportation companies in September and October that had been organized to protest the attacks on roads connecting Gao with several other towns.

All those interviewed believed the stalled progress on three provisions of the peace accord – cantonment of fighters, disarmament, and joint patrols comprising Malian soldiers, pro-government militia and former rebels – had contributed to the rising banditry levels. They hoped progress in implementation of these areas would improve the situation.

Humanitarian Impact

Throughout 2016, the rampant banditry and armed group attacks dramatically affected the delivery of health services, education, and aid to north and central Mali. In November, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that the number of schools affected by insecurity in north and central Mali had increased, with 421 schools closed at the beginning of the 2016 school year in October, compared to 296 closed at the end of the previous school year. Approximately 2.5 million people nationwide face food insecurity, OCHA said.

There were scores of attacks on aid agencies during the year, the vast majority by armed bandits in the north, undermining the groups' ability to deliver assistance to people in need. At least 35 vehicles used by aid groups were either stolen, pursued, or stopped by armed bandits, and numerous offices or staff residences were burglarized, resulting in the loss of motorcycles, computers, cameras, money, phones, and other supplies. On several occasions, the attackers threatened, tied up, or beat aid agency personnel, including drivers and guards.

On at least six occasions, ambulances and vehicles used by both the Malian government and aid organizations to deliver health care were attacked or robbed. These attacks took place near the northern towns of Lere, Gao, Niafounké, Gossi and Menaka. In four of these incidents, sick passengers, drivers and health workers were forced out of the vehicles and robbed, and the vehicles stolen.

Recommendations

To the Government of Mali

- Take necessary steps to ensure that security forces abide by international humanitarian law;
- Take all necessary measures to protect civilians and ensure adequate security, including from banditry and criminality in areas under government control;
- Investigate and appropriately prosecute members of the Malian security forces and non-state armed groups who commit violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses, including those documented in this report; and
- Ensure government gendarmes fulfill their mandated role of provost marshal by accompanying the Malian army on operations at all times.

To MINUSMA Peacekeepers

- Adopt a robust stance in general and ensure that protection of civilians remains a top priority for the mission, including through strategic and proactive patrolling, especially on market days.

To UN Troop Contributing Countries

- Ensure that MINUSMA has the necessary resources, personnel, equipment, and training to carry out its mandate to protect civilians in an extremely challenging security environment in which armed groups have targeted civilians and UN personnel.

To Non-State Armed Groups

- Abide by international humanitarian law, including by treating all persons in custody humanely;
- Cease attacking UN peacekeepers and personnel;
- Investigate and appropriately punish fighters who commit serious abuses; and
- Respect basic rights to freedom of religion and other rights in areas under effective control.

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