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Guinea

By the end of 2008, hope that nationwide protests in 2007 would improve governance and respect for human rights was replaced by growing concern over the human rights fall-out from Guinea's emergence as a major drug-trafficking hub. The chronic problems of endemic corruption, a fractious and abusive military, the rise of drug trafficking and the involvement of state agents in it, threaten to further erode the rule of law and the government's ability to meet the basic needs of its citizens.

Meanwhile, chronic state-sponsored violence by members of the security services, including torture, assault, and extortion, continues. Ordinary Guineans have scant hope for redress, as the government has taken no steps to tackle impunity for abuses committed by security forces. The National Commission of Inquiry, created to investigate the killings and abuses by security forces during the January and February 2007 strikes, is not yet operational due to inadequate government support. However, the newly appointed prime minister supported the creation of a National Observatory for Human Rights, which shows some promise if allowed to function independently.

International actors, most notably France and the European Union, are reluctant to bring public pressure to bear on the government, pinning their hopes for change on the legislative elections. However, in a further blow to good governance, in October these were postponed for a third time.

Insecurity and Abuses in Law Enforcement

In May grievances over pay and decreased rice subsidies within Guinea's military escalated to mutiny. Soldiers recklessly fired in the air killing or wounding dozens of civilians with stray bullets, kidnapped a senior officer, occupied the airport, and looted shops. Some weeks later, police and customs agents attempting a similar "strike" were violently put down by the military, resulting in the deaths of at least

eight policemen. Meanwhile, several protests against spiraling food and fuel prices, electricity blackouts and water shortages were violently suppressed by security forces. In October soldiers responding to protests against mining companies killed two, including a thirteen-year-old boy, and raped three women. In November at least four were killed and forty wounded when security forces in the capital Conakry opened fire on protesters demanding lower fuel prices.

Governance and Legislative Elections

The 2007 mass protests against widespread corruption, poor governance, and deteriorating economic conditions resulted in concessions by autocratic President Lansana Conté. Most notable was the appointment in February 2007 of a consensus prime minister, Lansana Kouyaté, who during his tenure managed to mitigate Guinea's spiraling inflation and restore the confidence of international donors. In May 2008, President Conté removed Kouyaté and replaced him with Ahmed Tidiane Souaré, dealing a serious blow to hopes that mass protest and "people power" could bring reform. However, since taking office, Prime Minister Souaré has appointed several reform-minded ministers to his cabinet. Nevertheless, given obstruction by President Conté and his highly influential family and inner circle, it remains unclear whether reforms proposed by Souaré will be implemented.

Legislative elections originally scheduled for June 2007 were postponed in October 2008 for a third time. They are now scheduled for the first quarter of 2009 at the earliest. The postponement is due to phenomenal shortcomings in preparations, a long delay in establishing the national electoral commission, and inadequate governmental support for the process. President Conté, age 74, is rumored to be gravely ill, and observers fear a military takeover should he die before his term ends in 2010.

Drug Trafficking

Reports about the involvement in drug trafficking of Guinean politicians, high-level members of the military, police, and presidential guard, and members of the president's family, generate considerable concern among Guinea's international partners. Efforts to combat the growing problem are undermined by widespread corruption within the judiciary and by rivalries between different security forces for

control of the drug trade. In June the military ransacked the offices of Guinea's counter-narcotics unit, destroying records and office equipment. Prime Minister Souaré took some steps to address the scourge of drug trafficking, and following a visit by the executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in July, declared a "war" against it.

Commission of Inquiry for 2007 Strike-Related Abuses

The government showed limited interest in establishing a functioning commission of inquiry into the 2007 strike-related violence that left at least 137 dead and over 1,700 wounded. During the crackdown, security forces—particularly the presidential guard—fired directly into crowds of unarmed demonstrators. In May 2007 the National Assembly adopted legislation creating a national commission of inquiry into the violence and in September 2007, 19 commission members were sworn in. However, at this writing the commission has yet to receive funding or logistical support from the government. Although both France and the European Union promised financial support, they have conditioned disbursement on the government successfully establishing and supporting the commission.

National Observatory for Democracy and Human Rights

In late July Prime Minister Souaré supported the creation of a National Observatory for Human Rights to investigate human rights abuses and conduct human rights education, primarily within the security forces. At year's end, the Observatory has yet to become fully operational, and it is unclear to what extent the government would fund, support, and allow it to function independently.

Rule of Law

The judiciary in Guinea is plagued with deficiencies, including lack of independence from the executive branch, inadequate resources, corruption, poorly trained magistrates and other personnel, and insufficient numbers of attorneys. Many people are denied justice because they cannot afford to bribe judges, magistrates, and other officials.

In October the government for the first time acknowledged responsibility for the political violence committed during the 1958-1984 presidency of Ahmed Sekou Touré, but failed to reiterate an earlier commitment by Prime Minister Kouyaté to establish a truth commission into the thousands of Guineans—including ministers, ambassadors, judges, businessmen, and army officers—killed during Touré’s regime.

Police Conduct

Guinean police continue to engage in unprofessional and often criminal conduct, including routine torture and mistreatment of criminal suspects, widespread extortion from citizens, involvement in drug trafficking and, in a few cases, sexual abuse of female detainees. During interrogation, suspects are frequently bound with cords, beaten, burned with cigarettes, and otherwise physically abused until they confess to the crime of which they are accused. Failure to prosecute perpetrators remains the largest single obstacle to ending these abuses.

Detention-Related Abuses

Prison and detention centers remain severely overcrowded and operate far below international standards. In 2008 the largest prison in Guinea housed nearly 900 prisoners in a facility designed for 300. Malnutrition and inadequate healthcare and sanitation led to the deaths of tens of detainees. Prison officials consistently fail to separate convicted and untried prisoners, and in some centers, children from adults. Unpaid prison guards regularly extort money from prisoners and their families, exacerbating problems of hunger and malnutrition.

Prolonged pretrial detention remains a serious human rights issue, although in 2008 local human rights organizations continued efforts to secure trials for prisoners and to free some who had spent more time awaiting trial than the maximum sentence for the crime of which they were accused. Nevertheless, over 80 percent of those held in Guinea’s main prison in Conakry have not been brought to trial; some have been awaiting trial for more than five years.

Child Labor

Significant numbers of children continue to labor in gold and diamond mines and quarries where they perform dangerous work for little pay. Tens of thousands of girls—some trafficked from neighboring countries—work as domestic laborers, often in conditions akin to slavery. They are routinely denied education and healthcare and are forced to work up to 18 hours a day. Beatings, sexual harassment, and rape at the hands of employers are frequent. The government took some steps to combat the problems of child labor and trafficking. In May parliament passed The Child Code that contains several enhanced protections for children, and throughout the year government and international organizations engaged in a public awareness campaign to combat trafficking. A special police unit to investigate child prostitution, trafficking, and other abuses resulted in a few arrests; however, there have been few prosecutions.

Key International Actors

Guinea remains averse to diplomatic efforts to improve human rights. Meanwhile, Guinea's key partners—France, the European Union, the United Nations, and the United States—are largely reluctant to publicly criticize the government on pressing human rights and governance issues.

In 2002, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the African Development Bank suspended economic assistance to Guinea because of poor economic and political governance. In 2005, the EU invoked article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement to suspend all but humanitarian assistance due to concerns over governance and human rights. While EUR 86 million from the 9th European Development Fund was released in December 2006, renewed concerns about governance led to the postponement of funds due to be disbursed under the 10th EDF. The holding of free and fair parliamentary elections is widely viewed by Guinea's partners as the key strategy for improving governance and respect for human rights.