

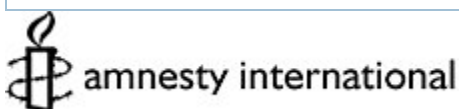
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Nigeria: Killing of unarmed pro-Biafra supporters by military must be urgently investigated

10 June 2016, 00:01 UTC

An on-the-ground investigation by Amnesty International has confirmed that the Nigerian army gunned down unarmed people ahead of last month's planned pro-Biafran commemoration events in Onitsha, Anambra state.

Evidence gathered from eyewitnesses, morgues and hospitals confirms that between 29-30 May 2016, the Nigerian military opened fire on members of the Indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB), supporters and bystanders at three locations in the town.

"Opening fire on peaceful IPOB supporters and bystanders who clearly posed no threat to anyone is an outrageous use of unnecessary and excessive force and resulted in multiple deaths and injuries. In one incident one person was shot dead after the authorities burst in on them while they slept," said M.K. Ibrahim, Country Director of Amnesty International Nigeria.

"These shootings, some of which may amount to extrajudicial executions, must be urgently and independently investigated and anyone suspected of criminal responsibility must be brought to justice."

The exact number of deaths is unknown, partly due to the fact that the Nigerian army took away corpses and the injured.

Amnesty International has received reports from various sources on the ground alleging that at least 40 people were killed and more than 50 injured.

After visits to hospitals and morgues, the organization has confirmed - based on this initial investigation - that at least 17 people were killed and nearly 50 injured. The real number is likely to be higher.

Some of the dead and injured IPOB supporters seen by an Amnesty International researcher were shot in the back, an indication that they were fleeing the scene when they were shot.

The leadership of IPOB claim more than 50 of their members were killed. The Nigerian army has said in a statement that they acted in self-defence, and five IPOB members were killed. However, Amnesty International has seen no evidence that the killings were necessary to protect life. Although the police also claim that IPOB supporters killed two policemen the next day in neighbouring Asaba, Delta state, Amnesty International cannot confirm this claim. However, such killings would not substantiate the army's argument they acted in self-defence.

A joint security operation was carried out by the Nigerian army, police and navy between the night of 29 May and throughout 30 May, apparently intended to prevent a march by IPOB members from the Nkpor motor park to a nearby field for a rally. Before the march began the military raided homes and a church where IPOB members were sleeping.

IPOB supporters told Amnesty International that hundreds of people who had come from neighbouring states, were asleep in the St Edmunds Catholic church when soldiers stormed the compound on 29 May.

A 32-year-old hair dresser who was in the church told Amnesty International: "At about midnight we heard someone banging the door. We refused to open the door but they forced the door open and started throwing teargas. They also started shooting inside the compound. People were running to escape. I saw one guy shot in the stomach. He fell down but the teargas could not allow people to help him. I did not know what happened to the guy as I escaped and ran away."

Another witness told Amnesty International that on the morning of 30 May he saw soldiers open fire on a group of around 20 men and boys aged between 15 and 45 at the Nkpor Motor Park on the morning of 30 May. He says that five of them were killed. "I stood about two poles [approximately 100 metres] away from where the men were being shot and killed. I couldn't quite hear what they were asking the boys, but I saw one boy trying to answer a question. He immediately raised his hands, but the soldiers opened fire... He lay down, lifeless. I saw this myself."

The witness described how military officers loaded men with gunshot wounds into one van, and what appeared to be corpses into another.

Later that morning, another witness described how police shot a child bystander as a group of young men protested the shootings, blocking a road and burning tyres along the Eke-Nkpor junction.

He told Amnesty International: "I heard a police siren and everybody started running helter-skelter. I ran away with other people, but before we left, the police fired tear gas at us and shot a boy in my presence. He was just hawking in the street. He wasn't even there to protest," he said.

An Amnesty International researcher visited three hospitals in Onitsha and surrounding towns and saw 41 men being treated for gunshot wounds in the stomach, shoulder, leg, back and ankle. The researcher also visited mortuaries in Onitsha and saw five corpses with bullet wounds, all brought in by IPOB members on 30 May.

Amnesty International has been informed that many of those killed or injured are still held by the military and police. Several witnesses said that the military loaded corpses in their vehicles and took them to Onitsha military barracks. Amnesty International was not able to confirm this.

One witness told Amnesty International that around 30 people were held in the military barracks, while another witness said 23 people who were held in State Criminal Investigation Department were brought to court.

Following the shootings, the military told media sources that the soldiers only opened fire after being shot at first, but Amnesty International's research has found no evidence to support this. All the people the organization interviewed said that the protesters were not armed; one young man said that he threw stones at the police and military after they shot teargas at the IPOB members. He said the military then fired live ammunition in return.

Information gathered by Amnesty International indicates that the deaths of supporters and members of IPOB was the consequence of excessive, and unnecessary use of force.

International law requires the government to promptly investigate unlawful killings with a view to bringing the perpetrators to justice. Amnesty International is also calling for those IPOB supporters still held in detention without charge to be either immediately charged or released.

"This is not the first time that IPOB supporters have died at the hands of the military. It is becoming a worrying pattern and this incident and others must be immediately investigated," said M. K. Ibrahim.

"In addition there must be an end to the pattern of increased militarization of crowd control operations as soldiers are frequently deployed to undertake routine policing functions."

Background

Amnesty International interviewed 32 witnesses between 1-3 June in Onitsha and an additional five people on the phone.

The IPOB members had informed the Anambra State Police Commissioner of their plans for Biafra Remembrance day and requested for security to be provided for the procession.

Amnesty International has been conducting research into violence and killings of IPOB members and supporters in south east Nigeria since January 2016. A comprehensive report will be published in the near future.

The organization's research shows that since August 2015, there have been at least five similar incidents in Onitsha alone where the police and military shot unarmed IPOB members and supporters. Amnesty International has documented cases of alleged unlawful killings by the Nigerian army between August 2015 and May 2016.

In August 2015, military officers opened fire on peaceful supporters of IPOB calling for an independent Biafran state. The killings and mass arrests of members and supporters of IPOB by a joint military and police operations continued in October, November and December 2015.

On 17 December 2015 for example, the military killed five people when they opened fire on members of the IPOB who were demonstrating in Onitsha in a celebration of a court order for the release of their purported leader, Nnamdi Kanu.

In February 2016, the Nigerian military used excessive force to disperse a peaceful gathering in a school compound in Aba. At least nine people were killed and many more injured.

The Nigerian government has not conducted any independent investigation into any of these incidents.

The right to peaceful assembly and association, as well as the right of freedom of expression, is protected by the Nigerian constitution. International human rights standards also require that law enforcement officials must, as far as possible, apply nonviolent means. The intentional lethal use of firearms is only permissible when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

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