

Burkina Faso: Army Linked to Massacre of 156 Civilians

African Union, United Nations Should Press for Credible, Independent Inquiry



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An animal pen burned by apparent Burkinabè soldiers on April 20, 2023 in the village of Karma, Yatenga province in northern Burkina Faso, April 27, 2023. © 2023 Private

- Burkina Faso authorities should ensure an independent inquiry into the summary execution of at least 156 civilians by alleged military forces on April 20, 2023, in the village of Karma.
- The African Union and the United Nations should ensure that the government's promised investigation is credible and independent and that all those responsible are brought to justice.
- Unlawful killings of civilians by Islamist armed groups and Burkinabè armed forces have spiked since 2022, exacerbating a humanitarian crisis.

(Nairobi) – [Burkina Faso](#) authorities should ensure an independent and impartial inquiry into the summary execution of at least 156 civilians by alleged military forces on April 20, 2023, Human Rights Watch said today. Apparent soldiers killed 83 men, 28 women, and 45 children, and burned homes and looted property in the village of Karma and vicinity in northern Yatenga province in one of the worst massacres in Burkina Faso since 2015.

The public prosecutor in the provincial capital, Ouahigouya, [said](#) on April 23 that “men wearing Burkinabè army uniforms” killed 60 people in Karma, and announced that an investigation was underway. On April 27, Communications Minister Rintalba Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo condemned the attack and promised that the government would “do everything within its prerogatives for the total manifestation of the truth in this dramatic event.”

“Burkina Faso authorities have condemned the massacre in Karma and said there will be an investigation,” said [Carine Kaneza Nantulya](#), deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “But if the victims and family members of these gruesome killings are to obtain justice, the international

community will need to make sure that the promised investigation is credible and independent and that all those responsible are brought to justice.”

Between April 25 and May 2, Human Rights Watch interviewed by telephone 14 people, including 6 witnesses to the killings, 2 people who visited Karma after the attack and attended the burials, 3 local civil society activists, and 3 members of international organizations knowledgeable about the facts. Human Rights Watch reviewed reports by Burkinabè organizations, as well as 135 photographs showing the massacre aftermath in Karma, including the dead and injured, as well as gunfire damage to buildings and burned houses.



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The mosque in Karma with marks from bullets fired by apparent Burkinabè soldiers on April 20, 2023, Yatenga province, Burkina Faso, April 27, 2023. © 2023 Private

Nearly all the bodies were found in Karma, including those of 11 villagers who were bound and blindfolded. Nine more bodies were found in the nearby villages of Dinguiri, Kèrga, and Ramdola.

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Human Rights Watch obtained three lists of victim names compiled by survivors and others who visited the village. Most of the bodies were buried in four mass graves throughout Karma.

Survivors said the killings occurred during a six-hour operation carried out by the army. They believed the massacre was in retaliation for attacks by Islamist armed groups against Burkinabè troops and pro-government militias earlier in the month.

Witnesses said that on April 20, a convoy of hundreds of apparent Burkinabè soldiers arrived in Karma at about 7:30 a.m. on motorbikes and in pickup trucks and armored cars. They said the soldiers surrounded the village and went door to door, searching and looting homes, beating and ordering out villagers. The soldiers then rounded up the villagers in groups and opened fire, including on people who ran for cover, hid in houses, or begged for their lives.

“The soldiers told us to sit down,” said a 40-year-old villager. “In my group we were more than 30. Suddenly, they started shooting.” He said he played dead to save his life. “I was lying on my belly after the first shot. I was wet with the blood from others’ bodies. I kept still, terrified, until the soldiers left. Two of them came back to finish off those who were moving and still alive.”

The convoy left the village at about 2 p.m., accompanied by a military helicopter.

On April 29, a group of Karma residents and survivors read a statement at a news conference in Ouahigouya: “We [...] have no doubt that it is the security and defense forces that are the perpetrators of this carnage. We are not fooled, we know our security and defense forces well.”

Local organizations, including the [Collective Against Impunity and Stigmatization of Communities](#) (*Collectif contre l'Impunité et la Stigmatisation des Communautés*), a leading domestic rights group, attributed the killings in Karma to the Burkinabè army.

Three townspeople told Human Rights Watch that they saw members of the Rapid Intervention Battalion 3 (*Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide*, or BIR, 3), a [special force](#) involved in counterinsurgency operations against Islamist armed groups in Burkina Faso, in the convoy leaving Ouahigouya early on the morning of April 20 and heading toward Karma. “I saw ‘BIR 3’ on their uniforms,” said an Ouahigouya resident.

Unlawful killings of civilians by Islamist armed groups and Burkinabè armed forces have spiked since 2022. The violence has exacerbated a humanitarian crisis, with [5.5 million people](#) needing assistance and nearly [2 million people](#) forced from their homes.

Various Burkinabè, regional, and international human rights institutions, including the [African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights](#), the [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), and the Burkinabè National Human Rights Commission, issued statements condemning the massacre and calling for an investigation.



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The body of a man killed in Karma by apparent Burkinabè soldiers on April 20, 2023 is brought to the site of a mass grave to be buried, Yatenga province, Burkina Faso. © 2023 Private

All parties to the armed conflict in Burkina Faso are bound by international humanitarian law. Applicable law includes Common Article 3 to the 1949 [Geneva Conventions](#) and [customary international law](#). [Common Article 3](#) prohibits murder, torture, and ill-treatment of civilians and captured fighters. Individuals who commit serious violations of the laws of war with criminal intent, including mistreatment of people in custody, deliberate attacks on civilians, and pillage of civilian property, are responsible for war crimes. Commanders who knew or should have known about serious abuses by their forces and do not take appropriate action may be prosecuted as a matter of command responsibility. Burkina Faso [ratified](#) the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court in 2004. The government has an obligation to exercise criminal jurisdiction over those who carry out war crimes and other international crimes.

“The Karma massacre will be even more devastating if the Burkinabè authorities don’t follow up on their commitment to ensure that the promised investigation is thorough, independent, and results in impartial prosecutions,” [Kaneza Nantulya](#) said. “Given the gravity of the crimes, the government should seek cooperation and assistance from the AU and UN to carry out the investigation.”

For witness accounts and other details, please see below. The names of those interviewed have been withheld for their protection.

Retaliation

Karma is in an area where Islamist armed groups linked to al Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara [control](#) territory and carry out attacks on civilians and the armed forces. On April 15, suspected Islamist fighters [killed](#) 6 Burkinabè soldiers and 34 members of pro-government militias in Aeroma, a village about 17 kilometers from Karma.

Villagers believed the killings in Karma were in retaliation against villagers suspected of collaborating with Islamist armed groups. “The soldiers asked us: ‘Why are you still around? Nearby villages have all been deserted. All those who stayed behind are jihadists or their accomplices,’” said a 49-year-old farmer. “We replied that we didn’t leave because we weren’t asked to do so. This doesn’t make us jihadists.”

Killings in Karma

Survivors described the horror of apparent Burkinabè soldiers moving house to house in Karma for six hours, rounding up villagers and executing them. They shot some people point-blank in the head, while others were sprayed with gunfire.

A farmer, 48, said:

“I saw soldiers walking through the courtyard and breaking into homes. They took out five men, including my brother, rounded them up and shot them. The imam [Muslim preacher] was also killed in his house. I found the bodies when the soldiers left. My brother was lying on his back. He had been shot in the head.”

A 40-year-old man said he watched helplessly as soldiers shot his deaf and non-verbal brother.

He said:

“I was home. Soldiers broke in. They asked for my ID [...] and took me out. My brother, who lives next to me and who is deaf and non-verbal, was on his doorstep. He came out. I told him to go back inside. But he didn’t understand because of his disability, so he stepped outside, and soldiers just killed him. They shot him in front of me. I was in shock.”

A 30-year-old woman said her sick husband was killed in front of her: “Soldiers broke inside our home, grabbed my husband who was in bed and dragged him outside. Then, they shot him. They also shot 13 other men in our courtyard.”

Witnesses said soldiers also shot people as they ran for cover, attempted to escape, and finished off those who were still alive.

A 49-year-old man said:

“Soldiers rounded us up and asked us to show them our identity cards. They took our phones and money. Then they asked us to go to a place they indicated. In this place there were soldiers stationed. I found it weird that soldiers took our belongings and asked us to go there. I had this feeling that they wanted to kill us. So, on the way to this place, I ran away and hid. I jumped through the hole in a wall. But they shot at me, they chased me, but I managed to escape. Another person who also ran away was shot in the middle of a yard in front of some women, who started crying.”

Villagers found the bodies of 11 men who had been tied up and blindfolded on the side of a hill.

One villager said:

“I saw the soldiers entering my brother’s house, which is just next to mine in Moingayiri neighborhood. They took him and two other people out and took them towards the hill. Then, I heard gunshots. After the attack, I found the body of my brother, the two other men and eight others tied up and blindfolded with their own clothes. We buried them like this. We could not touch them, as the bodies were in an advanced state of decomposition.”

The assailants also killed women and children. Witnesses said that soldiers rounded up women and children in the Moingayiri neighborhood and executed them all together. The children were between 10 days and 14 years old.

“I saw a pile of dead bodies of women and children,” said a man who helped bury the bodies. “Newborns were still on the backs of their mothers. There were so many children. It was a horrifying scene.”

Some soldiers spared at least 19 men whom they hid behind a wall. “Soldiers pointed their guns at us three times and didn’t kill us,” said a 54-year-old villager. “They hesitated. One of them brought us water and told us: ‘Pray god to ensure the other soldiers don’t discover you.’”

At least nine men were killed in the villages of Dinguiri, Kèrga, and Ramdola, as the apparent military convoy left Karma. The villager said, “When the soldiers left, we saw their convoy going north. We heard gunfire from far and saw a military helicopter following the convoy.”

Burning and Looting in Karma

Villagers and others who helped Karma’s survivors assess the damage after the massacre said that soldiers burned 12 granaries, 17 barns, and 40 homes. Human Rights Watch reviewed 30 photographs showing the burning of homes and barns. “I have seen at least 25 burned homes, everything inside was just ashes,” said a man who visited Karma after the killings. “I also noted that animals’ pens were set on fire, with animals also burned.”

The soldiers also looted homes, stealing money and at least 10 motorbikes. “Soldiers stole things from people, looted homes taking away valuable items, [and] they stole money from peoples’ pockets,” said one man. “They took 20,000 CFA [US\$33] from me.”

Trauma

People who survived the massacre described symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress and depression, including fear, anxiety, sleeplessness, and lack of appetite.

One man who lost his 72-year-old brother and witnessed killings of other people said: “I can’t even eat. I am shocked and traumatized. I can’t cope with the suffering.”

“When I saw bullet-riddled bodies of women and children I cried and threw up,” said a man who visited Karma in the aftermath of the massacre and spoke to many survivors. “There were dead bodies scattered around the village. “It was a slaughter. I am struggling to cope with what I’ve seen and heard. It’s a tragedy.”

Another survivor said: “I am not sure I will be able to recover from this. “What we went through was horrible. I can’t sleep at night.”

A mother of three said her children watched soldiers kill their 47-year-old father. “Since then, my children are sick. My youngest child of four years is traumatized and exhausted. He cries a lot.”

Justice and Accountability

The survivors of the attack who spoke to Human Rights Watch all said they wanted to know why the massacre happened, who ordered it, and that those responsible would be held accountable. “We want justice for the victims and their families,” said one survivor. “We want the truth to be told.”

“Not only our people were slaughtered, but their image has been tarnished,” said a 40-year-old survivor. “Some have called us terrorists. We’re not terrorists. We’re civilians who now want justice for what happened. We want to know who did this to us and why.”

“All we are asking for is justice and accountability,” another man said. “It’s unthinkable that those who are meant to protect us, came to massacre us.”

Dr. Daouda Diallo, a prominent Burkinabè human rights activist, Secretary-General of the CISC, and winner of the 2022 Martin Ennals human rights award, said, “we want explanations from the authorities. We want justice for the victims.”

