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Nigeria: President Should Make Rights a Priority

(Dakar) - Nigeria's president, Goodluck Jonathan, should take immediate and concrete steps to address pervasive human rights problems in Nigeria, Human Rights Watch said today. He should focus in particular on large-scale violence, endemic corruption, and a lack of accountability for abuses, Human Rights Watch said. Jonathan's inauguration, scheduled for May 29, 2011, follows post-presidential-election riots and sectarian killings in April that left more than 800 people dead in northern Nigeria.

Inter-communal, political, and sectarian violence have claimed more than 15,700 lives since Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999. Government security forces are widely implicated in serious abuses, including extrajudicial killings and torture. The ruling elite has squandered and siphoned off the nation's tremendous oil revenues, while neglecting basic health and education services for the vast majority of ordinary citizens. Those who commit these abuses are rarely held accountable.

"The profound challenges facing Nigeria are, at their heart, human rights problems," said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The Jonathan presidency should place human rights, and long overdue reforms, at the top of the administration's agenda."

Nigeria's elections in April - the fourth general elections since the end of military rule 12 years ago - were heralded by many as the country's fairest. Still, widespread allegations of vote buying, ballot-box stuffing, and inflation of results, most noticeably in rural areas of southeastern Nigeria - President Jonathan's stronghold - marred these elections, Human Rights Watch said.

Violence linked to the party primaries and campaigns, and on the days of the elections, have left at least 165 people dead since November 2010. Following the April 16 presidential election, protests by opposition supporters in 12 northern states soon degenerated into three [days of violent riots and sectarian killings](#) that left hundreds dead, both Christians and Muslims.

On May 11, Jonathan appointed a 22-member panel to investigate the causes and extent of violence linked to the elections. Past administrations have set up similar committees

and commissions of inquiry in response to previous outbreaks of communal violence, but the reports are usually shelved and their findings ignored. In Jos and surrounding communities in Plateau State, in north-central Nigeria, at least 1,000 people were killed in [communal and sectarian violence](#) in 2010 alone.

"Committees and panels aren't going to break the cycle of violence," Dufka said. "Federal and state authorities should address the root causes of the violence and ensure that those who orchestrated and committed these crimes are brought to justice."

State and local government policies that discriminate against members of [ethnic groups classified as "non-indigenes"](#) - those who cannot trace their ancestry to what are said to be the original inhabitants of an area - have exacerbated existing tensions and perpetuated ethnic-based divisions in Nigeria, Human Rights Watch said. Jonathan should begin to address the causes of communal violence by sponsoring federal legislation that bans discrimination against "non-indigenes."

The Nigeria Police Force, and to a lesser extent the Nigerian military, continue to be implicated in serious human rights violations. The police have largely failed to fulfill their mandate to provide public security, and are often instead implicated in [extortion and other forms of corruption](#).

The federal government should promptly order a thorough and impartial criminal investigation into alleged abuses by the security forces in recent years, and ensure that authorities follow through with prosecutions in compliance with domestic and international law, Human Rights Watch said. This should include investigations into incidents of [extrajudicial killings by police and soldiers](#) during the post-presidential-election rioting, [summary executions by the police](#) of suspected members of the militant Islamist group Boko Haram in July 2009, and [unlawful killings of more than 130 people](#) by police and soldiers while responding to the November 2008 sectarian violence in Jos.

Endemic corruption and poor governance, driving widespread unemployment and poverty, have created an environment in which militant groups thrive, Human Rights Watch said. These groups tap into public discontent over government failings and find easy recruits in the vast cadre of the unemployed youth.

In the north, Boko Haram militants since 2009 have targeted and killed police officers, politicians, and opposing clerics. Criminal gangs and militants in the oil-rich Niger Delta, meanwhile, have carried out kidnappings, bombings, and attacks on oil facilities despite a government amnesty in 2009 for armed militants.

The Jonathan presidency should tackle the scourge of corruption by improving financial transparency at all tiers of government, Human Rights Watch said. The government should strengthen the capacity and independence of Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions, and ensure that government officials implicated in looting public funds are investigated and appropriately prosecuted, regardless of how highly placed, without interference from the executive.

The new administration should begin these initiatives by targeting corruption and political violence in the Niger Delta, Human Rights Watch said. It should ensure that state and local government politicians, who have [embezzled and mismanaged](#) the region's vast resources, and [funded armed criminal gangs](#) for their own political gains, are investigated and brought to justice.

"President Jonathan should reverse the failures of Nigeria's past leaders and get serious about the country's lawlessness and corruption," Dufka said. "The basic needs of Nigeria's citizens should come first."

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