



Mali: New Abuses by Tuareg Rebels, Soldiers

Publisher [Human Rights Watch](#)

Publication Date 7 June 2013

Cite as Human Rights Watch, *Mali: New Abuses by Tuareg Rebels, Soldiers*, 7 June 2013, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/51b6e2c84.html> [accessed 2 July 2013]

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Renewed abuses by ethnic Tuareg rebels and Malian army soldiers are a step backward for human rights protection in northern Mali, Human Rights Watch said today. On June 5, 2013, army forces began a military offensive to recapture the Kidal region.

On June 1 and 2, forces of the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which still controls parts of the Kidal region, arbitrarily detained about 100 people, most of them darker-skinned men from non-Tuareg ethnic groups. Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that the MNLA robbed, threatened, and, in numerous cases, severely beat the men.

Since early May, Malian soldiers have committed serious abuses, including torture and other mistreatment against at least 24 rebel suspects and villagers in the Mopti region, witnesses and victims told Human Rights Watch. The majority of those held were ethnic Tuareg or Bellahs, a Tuareg caste.

"The recent abuses by both sides and renewed fighting around Kidal underscores the urgent need for Malian soldiers and rebel combatants to respect the laws of war, minimize civilian harm, and ensure the humane treatment of detainees," said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher

at Human Rights Watch. "Civilians across the ethnic divide have already suffered enough."

Malian authorities should accelerate redeployment of gendarmes, police and Justice Ministry personnel throughout the north to deter abuses by government soldiers, Human Rights Watch said. The MNLA should end abuses against civilians and hold those responsible to account.

Kidal remains the only region of Mali that is not fully under government control since the French-led military operation in January drove armed rebel and Islamist groups from the north. Since May, the Malian army had appeared poised to retake the town of Kidal in advance of planned July elections. The army has been conducting patrols and other military operations throughout the north, where the security situation remains precarious on account of periodic infiltration by armed Islamist groups, as well as criminal banditry.

The recent abuses in northern Mali and renewed fighting could intensify already elevated ethnic tension ahead of the July elections, Human Rights Watch said. The government has said Kidal must be under government control before the elections and the MNLA has said it will resume fighting if the Malian army tries to recapture Kidal. Negotiations to reach a political solution to the standoff in Kidal are underway. Human Rights Watch had earlier called on all warring parties to abide by the laws of war in the event of a Malian military offensive against opposition armed groups in the Kidal region.

Enhanced civilian protection along with robust measures by the Malian government to investigate and prosecute abuses by all sides is crucial for improving human rights in northern Mali, Human Rights Watch said.

"There are real security threats in Mali, but brutalizing detainees and civilians is not the way to address them," Dufka said. "The military command should fulfill its pledges to hold soldiers to account for their unlawful actions and counter this wave of indiscipline within the Mopti region."

MNLA Abuses

The MNLA reported to the media that in the first few days of June it had detained in Kidal approximately 100 men it suspected of being government spies, but that all but 10 have since been released. The MNLA human rights representative, Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, told Reuters that those still held are "considered prisoners of war and are being interrogated. Civilians who were picked up during the sweep have been released."

Seven of the men who had been held for about 24 hours by the MNLA told Human Rights Watch by phone that MNLA fighters detained non-Tuareg men, robbed them of money, cell phones and other possessions, and beat them. One had suffered a broken rib; another victim said he saw one man "kicked so hard they broke his arm and another one beaten until he lost consciousness." Ibrahim Harouna Touré, the head of a Gao-based human rights group, told Human Rights Watch that he had spoken with 25 non-Tuareg men detained by the MNLA in Kidal, all of whom were put on a truck by the rebels and told to leave. He said eight of them needed outpatient medical care for the injuries they received while in MNLA custody.

A Gao-based truck driver told Human Rights Watch that MNLA fighters apprehended him in Kidal and robbed him of about 300,000 CFA (US\$600). They took him to a building that was being used as a detention center where MNLA members beat him and many others: "They hit me with the butts of their guns until I could no longer walk. ... [They hit me] on my stomach, head, and neck.... One rib on my left side is broken." While he was detained, MNLA fighters told him, "You blacks, Kidal is not for you. It is for us. ...If you're not with us, we're going to make you leave our town."

An ethnic Peuhl truck driver described how he and a dozen other drivers were badly beaten and robbed when MNLA fighters surrounded the parking lot where they were asleep in their trucks. He told Human Rights Watch:

A few of them attacked each truck. One hit me twice with his "kalash" [assault rifle] and told me, "We don't need black people in the Azawad," One of us was hit hard in the face, another in the neck, another was coughing blood.... They robbed us - from me they took 40,000 CFA. They tore all our Malian ID cards saying we had no need for them.

A Bambara trader on his way to Gao said that MNLA fighters detained him and three other men after they crossed into Mali from Algeria. Before they were taken to Kidal, the four were robbed at gunpoint by the fighters. The trader said, "I gave him all I had, but he pointed his gun and told me he wanted more. ...When I told him I didn't have it, he whacked my head several times with his gun." The trader said the MNLA held the men overnight with 17 others, many of whom told him that they had been beaten and showed signs of physical abuse. The next morning, the MNLA put all of the men on a truck to Gao.

Malian Army Abuses

Human Rights Watch spoke by phone with 12 victims and witnesses to several incidents of abuse involving Malian army soldiers in the Mopti region in May. Most victims were ethnic Tuareg or Bellah. While Malian

authorities acted swiftly to investigate and arrest four members of a pro-government militia implicated in the May 26 killing of two Tuareg shepherds in the town of Gossi, they have yet to investigate the incidents described below. Victims told Human Rights Watch that from May 6 to 8, army patrols detained, severely beat, and tortured nine men who were taken into custody in two separate groups from villages and nomadic camps between the towns of Sourango, 30 kilometers south of Léré, and Tenenkou. Four of the men were between 58 and 70 years old.

The men said the soldiers repeatedly made death threats and used racial slurs, and on several occasions paraded, abused, and humiliated them in front of the local population. One detainee said that the group he was with "stopped in six villages, where people cheered and gave presents to the soldiers." Another man said soldiers threw detainees to the ground in front of groups of villagers "like a soccer ball." The soldiers accused them of being rebel or Islamist fighters and at times tried to get them to confess. Several of the men said that when they were apprehended, soldiers robbed them of money, livestock, and other belongings.

Soldiers severely beat the nine men over two days in and around the towns of Toguéré Koumbé and Dioura.

Several detainees said that the soldiers pummeled them with fists and gun butts; kicked them in the face, neck, and stomach; choked them with ropes; and tied them to trees, including four for over 12 hours. One man said the skin on his back had been "ripped open raw" when he was kicked in the stomach while tied to a tree. The men said they suffered broken ribs, vomited blood, and were heavily bruised, including on their faces and heads. Three said they lost consciousness from the abuse. One said that "the oldest among us almost died of strangulation. ... It was only when the soldiers saw he was losing consciousness that they let him go." Two men said they noted the presence of an army lieutenant during some of the mistreatment, and believed that the soldiers were following orders from their superiors.

All the men said the abuse stopped only after they were handed over to gendarmes in Niono and later Ségou. One man, detained on May 8 with four others, told Human Rights Watch:

From the moment of arrest they whacked us with their guns and kicked us with their rangers [boots]. On the first night they tied us to trees where we remained from 4 p.m. to 9 a.m. the next morning. Every few hours groups of two or three [soldiers] came by to beat us and kick us in the stomach, causing cuts and deep scratches in our backs from the tree bark. The officer in charge told his soldiers to make us say the names of the chief of the MNLA or al-Qaeda. The next day in Dioura they punched and kicked

us and slammed our heads against the pickup truck the entire way until they handed us to the gendarmes. Only then did the abuse stop.

Several victims and witnesses from three nomadic camps of Tuareg and Bellah within the same area said that, between May 26 and 28, soldiers on patrol severely beat 14 pastoralists, including three children. They said the soldiers had stolen several of their animals and watched as local men, working with the army as guides, rounded up and walked away with many cows, goats, and sheep taken from the villagers.

A shepherd, 28, was one of nine people, including three children - ages 9, 12, and 17 - who were severely beaten by soldiers as they searched their camp for arms. He told Human Rights Watch that soldiers had arrived at his camp aboard four trucks:

[They] yelled for us to get on the ground, tied our hands and feet behind our backs with rope, and then hit all of us, even the children, with the gun butts everywhere on our body and kicked our faces. Some of us were bleeding from the nose and mouth. They told us: "You are Islamists, criminals, where are your weapons? Now you are dead." Then they loaded up two cows and two men from the village, and left."

Another shepherd hid as he saw a convoy of four vehicles full of soldiers heading toward a nearby camp of pastoralists on either May 25 or 26. He said that after seeing the vehicles leave, "I found five men really suffering. The eldest, who was around 70, had been beaten up so badly he was unconscious. The four others were coughing blood, their faces were swollen and bruises were starting to appear. They said they'd been kicked again and again with their rangers [boots]."

Two witnesses said that on about May 25, soldiers conducting a search in a village northeast of Douentza shot an elderly man in the foot twice to force him to confess to the location of weapons. One witness said:

They arrived in a vehicle convoy to search for weapons. ...They went to [the man's] house and demanded that he show them the weapons. When he refused, a soldier shot him with a pistol in the foot. He fell to the ground. They asked him again, and again he said they didn't have any. The soldier shot him in the right foot. The old man then pointed out a house to the soldiers. After searching the house they found a lot of weapons and ammo. The soldiers took it all away. The old man was on the ground bleeding. The soldiers lifted him into the car up and left with him."

The elderly man's whereabouts remain unknown, but friends of the family told Human Rights Watch that they were told by state officials in Douentza that the man had subsequently died.