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Guinea

Events of 2009

The bloodless coup in December 2008 by a group of young military officers following the death of Guinea's longtime authoritarian president, Lansana Conté, brought initial hope for improvement in Guinea's chronic human rights problems. However, this hope was dashed as the military government consolidated control of the country's political affairs, failed to hold free and fair elections as initially promised, and steadily and violently suppressed the opposition, culminating in a large-scale massacre of some 150 demonstrators in September 2009. The perpetrators of these abuses enjoyed near-complete impunity.

International actors-including France, the United States, the European Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union, and the United Nations-consistently denounced abuses by the coup government and, following the September violence, took concrete steps to both isolate the government and push for accountability for the violence, including through the formation of a UN-mandated international commission of inquiry.

Bloodless Coup and Reversed Promises

A group of Guinean military officers calling themselves the National Council for Democracy and Development (CNDD) seized power hours after the death, on December 22, 2008, of Lansana Conté, Guinea's president for 24 years. The coup leaders, led by a self-proclaimed president, Captain Moussa Dadis Camara, quickly suspended the country's constitution, and pledged to hold elections in 2009 and relinquish control to a civilian-led government.

With early public support, the CNDD committed to rooting out the high levels of corruption and involvement by officials in drug trafficking that plagued the country for years. However, the CNDD took few concrete steps to organize elections. Under mounting pressure from key international stakeholders, Dadis Camara, in August, set January 31, 2010, as the presidential election date. Shortly thereafter, he reversed his pledge not to run for office, saying that any member of the CNDD should be "free to put forward their candidacy for the national election if they so desire."

Dadis Camara's presumed candidacy, the appointment of military officers to all administrative posts country-wide, and CNDD control over most political and economic affairs of the state generated considerable domestic and international concern about the likelihood of free and fair elections.

Conduct of Security Forces

Throughout the year, Guinean soldiers were implicated in regular acts of theft, extortion, and violence against businesspeople and ordinary Guineans. Soldiers in groups numbering up to 20-nearly all heavily armed and in red berets typically worn by elite units-raided shops, warehouses, medical clinics, and homes in broad daylight and at night. Soldiers stole cars, computers, generators, medicine, jewelry, cash, mobile phones, and large quantities of wholesale and retail merchandise, among other items, from their victims, which included Guineans and foreigners. The victims were often also threatened or physically assaulted. Many of these abuses were committed within the context of the CNDD's crackdown

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against drug traffickers and corrupt practices. The CNDD undertook no efforts throughout the year to investigate or hold accountable soldiers implicated in these serious abuses.

Political Opposition and Freedom of Expression

Upon taking power, Dadis Camara quickly suspended the country's constitution, dissolved the parliament and government, and declared a ban on political and union activity. As opposition parties increased their campaign activities in anticipation of elections, the CNDD restricted freedoms of political expression and assembly through intimidation and attacks. At various times throughout the year, Dadis Camara lifted and reinstated the ban on political and union activity.

CNDD suppression of opposition supporters increased further in response to a wave of criticism and calls for mass demonstrations against the military that began in August. During a news conference on August 19, Dadis Camara warned political leaders not to protest publicly, saying, "Any political leader who makes trouble by organizing strikes or protests or any other form of mass mobilization will simply be removed from the list of candidates and will also be prosecuted." Opposition leaders who continued to criticize the CNDD were summoned to the Alpha Yaya Diallo military camp-the ad hoc seat of government-and urged to desist from commenting on Dadis Camara's possible candidacy. In addition, the CNDD president imposed in late August a ban on mobile phone text-messaging and in September a ban on political discussions on popular radio-phone-in shows. Both bans were later lifted in response to domestic and international criticism.

September 28 Massacre

On September 28, 2009, tens of thousands of protestors gathered at the main stadium in the capital, Conakry, to demonstrate against continued military rule and Dadis Camara's presumed candidacy in the January 2010 presidential elections. In response to the peaceful demonstration, members of the Presidential Guard and some gendarmes working with the Anti-Drug and Anti-Organized Crime unit carried out a massacre that left some 150 people dead, many riddled with bullets and bayonet wounds, and others killed in the ensuing panic. The violence appeared to be premeditated and organized by senior CNDD officials. During the violence, the Presidential Guard fired directly into the crowd of protesters and carried out widespread rape and sexual violence against dozens of girls and women at the stadium and in the days following the crackdown, often with such extreme brutality that their victims died from the wounds inflicted. The armed forces then engaged in a systematic attempt to hide the evidence of the crimes during which they removed numerous bodies from the stadium and hospital morgues, allegedly burying them in mass graves. The CNDD claimed that opposition supporters had stolen arms from a police station, and that the 57 official dead had been mostly crushed to death after an altercation with the security forces.

Rule of Law

The rule of law in Guinea suffered serious setbacks in 2009. This was manifested in a further weakening of the judiciary due to meddling by the military, an official call for vigilante justice to be meted out against suspected thieves, and an attempt by the government to set up an informal, parallel judicial system run by the military from the Alpha Yaya Diallo military camp. Meanwhile, there were no attempts to investigate, much less hold accountable, those responsible for ongoing or past state-sponsored violations, most notably by members of the security services. This failure to act, coupled with a weak judiciary characterized by a lack of independence from the executive branch, inadequate resources, and corruption, has left ordinary Guineans with scant hope for redress.

Detention Conditions and Arbitrary Detention

Guinean prison and detention centers remain severely overcrowded and operate far below international standards. In 2009 the largest prison in Guinea housed over 1,000 prisoners in a facility designed for 300. Malnutrition and inadequate healthcare and sanitation led to numerous deaths in detention. 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. Meanwhile, over 80 percent of those held in Guinea's largest prison have not been brought to trial; some have been awaiting trial for more than five years.

Prolonged arbitrary detention of perceived opponents of the CNDD government remains a serious human rights issue. From late December 2008 through October 2009, some 20 military personnel and an unknown number of men believed to be opposition supporters were detained without charge in several military detention centers in and around Conakry. Many of the military officers detained formed part of the late President Conté's Presidential Guard, while others were detained following an alleged coup attempt against the CNDD. Those in detention were subjected to various forms of mistreatment, including torture, and were often prevented from receiving family visits.

Key International Actors

The December 2008 coup, delays in organizing elections, and persistent abuses by the military, most notably those associated with the September violence, were met with consistent, strong, and unified condemnation by key international actors, including France, the United States, the European Union, ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations. The international response was organized through an International Contact Group for Guinea, which consistently pressured the CNDD to respect human rights and organize elections without delay.

The September 28 violence was harshly denounced by Guinea's international partners, most notably by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. It also led to the imposition of arms embargos by ECOWAS and the EU, and travel bans and asset freezes of CNDD members by the EU, US, and AU, as well as the withdrawal or cancellation of economic and military assistance from the EU, US, and France.

The international community was equally definitive about the need for those responsible for the September violence, including Dadis Camara himself, to be held accountable. As a result, an AU and ECOWAS-proposed international commission of inquiry was established by the UN Security Council. The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court also initiated a preliminary examination—a move that may precede the opening of an investigation—of the situation in Guinea, which is a party to the court.

Unfortunately, continued economic and diplomatic support from Libya, Senegal, and China, which signed a large natural resources agreement just weeks after the September violence, threatened to undermine the otherwise united international response in favor of respect for rule of law and accountability.

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