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Central African Republic: Government must take action against soldiers who killed, injured and displaced unarmed civilians in the northwest

Amnesty International is gravely concerned about a continuing failure by the government of the Central African Republic to take action against members of its security forces who reportedly killed and injured dozens of unarmed civilians and displaced tens of thousands more in Ouham-Pende and Ouham provinces.

"The Central African government has an obligation to protect its citizens from human rights abuses committed by members of the security forces and armed groups. This protection must include investigating the abuses, identifying suspected perpetrators, bringing them to justice, and providing full reparations to the victims," Amnesty International said today.

The organization has received reports that members of the security forces in Ouham-Pende and Ouham provinces unlawfully executed dozens of unarmed civilians and injured many others when insurgents attacked government forces at the end of January and in February 2006. Tens of thousands of civilians fleeing attacks are internally displaced or have fled to neighbouring Chad, with little or no access to humanitarian assistance.

Amnesty International has learned that following a 29 January 2006 attack by insurgents on Paoua, government forces, particularly members of the Presidential Guard, targeted unarmed civilians, including children. Some of those killed are reported to have been boys as young as 10 years of age. A large number of those killed in and around Paoua are reported to have been students from Paoua college (lycée).

At least 35 people are reported to have been killed by regular government forces in Paoua. The victims include Florent Djembert, Vincent Bozoukon and William Béré. Four bodies of unidentified people are reported to have been burned in the local gendarmerie compound.

A unit of the elite Republican Guard arrived in Paoua on 31 January and is reported to have carried out numerous indiscriminate killings of men, many of them students. Some students are reported to have been killed inside the college. Three young men are reported to have been summarily executed by members of the Republican Guard after the youths failed to show the soldiers the whereabouts of insurgents and arms caches. Journalists who visited Paoua in March 2006 reported that at least 17 students from Paoua College were extrajudicially executed by members of the Republican Guard in and around Paoua. Thirteen men, including local policeman Luc Miabé, were killed in Bémal, near the border with Chad.

At the start of February, local security and government officials are reported to have convinced the internally displaced people to return to their homes. However, they were forced to flee again when they were attacked by members of the Republican Guard on 11 and 18 February. One student was reportedly the sole survivor of an incident in which eight of them were arrested by soldiers and taken to a military camp. The seven others were reportedly beaten to death. The survivor was reportedly spared after local church officials intervened on his behalf, but he too had already sustained wounds to the body as a result of the beatings. Others killed in February include Alfred Gala and a chief of Bonté village.

The killings in Ouham-Pende and Ouham provinces of northwest Central African Republic have forced at least 7,000 people to flee to southern Chad since the end of January. This number has joined a further 43,000 Central Africans who had fled there during the armed conflict which ended with the overthrow of former President Ange-Félix Patassé in March 2003.

"We are seriously concerned about the well-being and security of these refugees in southern Chad. Chad is politically unstable with an on-going insurgency and its government has no capacity to protect the refugees or provide them with food, medicine and shelter. Humanitarian organizations are already over-stretched with some 200,000 Sudanese refugees," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is calling on the government of the Central African Republic to do all in its power to guarantee full protection for its people. People who have fled to Chad or who have been internally displaced, as well as those whose relatives have been killed, will only have confidence that the government is capable and has the will to protect them if the perpetrators of the recent atrocities are brought to justice. The government should undertake immediate measures of protection, including the removal and replacement of the units of the security forces suspected of involvement in the atrocities and the suspension from duty of their commanders.

The government must make it clear to its forces that human rights violations will not be tolerated and that perpetrators will be brought to justice. To emphasise this position, the government should urgently set up an independent commission of inquiry to identify the perpetrators and victims of the human rights abuses in January and February 2006, with a commitment to act on the commission's recommendations. The commission should comprise Central African nationals and any foreign experts recognized for their competence, independence and impartiality.