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Guinea-Bissau: No peace without human rights

As international efforts to end the conflict in Guinea-Bissau multiply, Amnesty International is calling on all involved to ensure that any peace agreement implemented builds respect for human rights.

Efforts to restore peace have been made by Guineans including the Bishop of Bissau and representatives of the Angolan and Portuguese governments. Today foreign and defence ministers of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are meeting in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. They will discuss possible deployment of the regional intervention force, ECOMOG, in Guinea-Bissau.

"It is imperative that all those involved in this conflict protect the lives and physical integrity of non-combatants," Amnesty International said today. "Those trying to bring peace to Guinea-Bissau should also ensure that any agreement contains strong provisions for the protection of human rights."

Since the first shots were fired in the civil war on 7 June there have been rumours of human rights abuses by forces loyal to the government and by their opponents.

More detailed reports are now filtering out about threats to the lives of members of opposition parties and government critics who may be suspected of supporting the rebels and about prisoners held by the rebel forces. Refugees have told Amnesty International that they have seen bodies or heard about people who have been deliberately killed by unknown assailants, some apparently for looting, some may have been suspected of supporting the opposing side and others were possibly killed in personal vendettas.

According to one report received by Amnesty International, Ezekiel Ferreira, a communications engineer, was arrested on 15 June on suspicion of passing information to the rebels. His family do not know what has become of him.

"It is crucial that the government ensures the safety of Ezekiel Ferreira as well as that of any other detainees," Amnesty International urged, pointing out that in the past torture has been used on people detained in connection with politically sensitive issues.

Several people are reportedly in hiding to evade possible arrest. They include members of a parliamentary commission of inquiry into allegations of arms trafficking across Guinea-Bissau's northern border to separatist rebels in the Casamance area of Senegal. The inquiry is said to have found evidence that senior government officials were involved. There is also fear for the safety of others who have criticized the government, including journalists and human rights activists.

The rebels are said to be holding more than 200 foreign civilians, mostly Senegalese, who are held separately from about 20 others from Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Prisoners are reported to have been tied up and beaten with gun barrels.

Background

The fighting began after Ansumane Mané, the army Chief of Staff, was dismissed. The government had suspected him and other soldiers and civilians of involvement in the arms traffic. The conflict escalated as army units rallied in support of Mané. Troops from Senegal and Guinea-Conakry are fighting on the government side. The conflict has brought great hardship to more than 13,000 who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries and an estimated 200,000 people who have been internally displaced.

International law obliges those involved in the fighting to protect the lives and personal safety of prisoners and those taking no active part in hostilities. Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 prohibits, among other things, violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, as well as cruel or degrading treatment and torture.
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