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## **Nigeria: Reported reprisal killings by government soldiers must be investigated.**

Amnesty International today called for a prompt, effective and impartial inquiry into reports that troops have shot dead more than 100 people in central Nigeria in reprisal for the murder of soldiers.

"It appears that the attack by the troops was an act of revenge which went on for three days. There was no imminent danger to the life of soldiers who took part in this military operation. It can only be described as a killing spree," the organization said.

Although reports differ, it appears that more than 100 inhabitants of villages along the border between Benue and Taraba States -- and possibly as many as 200 -- were killed between 22 and 24 October 2001 when government soldiers went on the rampage, opening fire on civilians. Troops are also reported to have destroyed numerous buildings. The final number of victims -- including those wounded -- is not yet known.

A Benue State official reportedly confirmed that over 100 people had been killed, while a Benue State police spokesperson was unable to confirm any deaths. However, a Nigerian army official categorically denied that any civilians had been killed. He said that the armed forces had carried out an operation to recover weapons taken from the murdered soldiers.

"Rather than seeking to deny, minimize or justify these extrajudicial executions, the government of Nigeria must -- if it is to prevent further deaths -- condemn the killings publicly and make it clear that those responsible will be held accountable," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International calls upon the government to take immediate steps to identify both those responsible for the murder of the 19 soldiers and the officers who ordered or took part in unlawful reprisal actions. All those suspected to be responsible for criminal offences should be promptly and fairly brought to justice, tried before an independent and impartial court and without recourse to the death penalty.

In November 1999 large scale killings over several days were reported in the village of Odi, Bayelsa State, in the Niger Delta region, in reprisal for the murder of 12 police officers. Human rights groups and journalists were denied access to the area for several days and the government was accused of covering up the true facts. A local human rights group, the Civil Liberties Organisation, has called for an independent investigation and for immediate access to the area for human rights groups. President Olusegun Obasanjo told an Amnesty International delegation in June 2000 that he would not hold an independent and open inquiry into the reported killings by government forces.

The government must take action now following these grave reports. The security forces should not be allowed to continue to benefit from the impunity they enjoyed under years of military

rule up to the return to civilian government in May 1999. As a matter of urgency, the government must put in place measures which will prevent a recurrence of this massacre, and protect the civilian population from further human rights violations by the forces which are supposed to protect them.

**Background:**

A longstanding and violent conflict between communities in the area has resulted in many deaths among the population and left others homeless.

The attacks in Benue and Taraba States were apparently in reprisal for the killing of 19 soldiers, whose mutilated bodies were found on 12 October 2001 near to villages in Benue state including Gbeji, Vaase, Anyiin and Zaki-Biam. The killings were attributed to the local population, although no investigation is known to have taken place and no one is known to have been arrested.

These villages were reported to have been the targets of military action. In Gbeji, troops were reported to have gathered inhabitants in the market square before separating out the men and shooting dead more than 100 of them.

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