

# GUINEA-BISSAU

## human Rights under fire

The violent conflict in the West African state of Guinea-Bissau which began on 7 June 1998 has generated an estimated 300,000 internally displaced people and some 13,000 refugees, out of a population of one million. The two opposing sides in the conflict, a faction of the armed forces loyal to former Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Brigadier Asumane Mané and troops loyal to the government, as well as Senegalese troops assisting the Guinea-Bissau Government, have committed violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. The protection of the lives and physical integrity of non-combatants is a central tenet of international humanitarian law. Amnesty International is appealing to all those involved in the conflict, the governments of Guinea-Bissau and Senegal as well as the rebel military junta, to stop the torture and deliberate and arbitrary killings that are taking place. The organization is also appealing to representatives of the international community who are trying to end the conflict to insist on respect for human rights.

The fighting began following the dismissal by President João Bernardo "Nino" Vieira, on 6 June 1998, of Brigadier Asumane Mané from his position as Armed Forces Chief of Staff. He had already been suspended in January 1998, as the government had suspected him of involvement in the traffic of arms to armed separatist groups in the Casamance region of Senegal. At the same time, in December 1997 and January 1998 the government also arrested over 20 people including Guinea-Bissau soldiers and civilians and Senegalese civilians whom it suspected of involvement in the arms trafficking. This led to increased tension within the armed force, many of whom were already dissatisfied about low wages and poor conditions of service. Many rallied in support of Brigadier Asumane Mané following his dismissal and staged an armed rebellion.

Under a security agreement signed between the governments of Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, the Republic of Guinea and the Gambia in October 1997, troops from Senegal and the Republic of Guinea are assisting the Guinea-Bissau government to quell the armed rebellion. Already, the conflict has had devastating effects, though the number of dead is not known. Those displaced by the conflict have suffered severe shortages of food and medical supplies and unless peace is soon restored there will not be time to plant the next rice crop. Epidemics, particularly of cholera, are feared. The shelling in Bissau, the capital, has reduced many buildings to rubble.

### **Human rights abuse by all warring parties**

Soon after the fighting began, communications with Guinea-Bissau were cut and it became very difficult to monitor respect for human rights. More recently, however, Amnesty International has received reports which suggest widespread abuse of human rights, including torture and deliberate and arbitrary killings by forces fighting on the government side, including Senegalese troops, and beatings of prisoners held by the rebel soldiers. According to these reports, threats have been made against the lives of critics or suspected opponents of the government. The

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rebels are reportedly holding over 200 civilian detainees and subjecting them to severe beatings. Refugees have told Amnesty International that they have seen bodies or heard about people who have been deliberately killed by unknown assailants. Some were apparently killed for looting, some may have been suspected of supporting the opposing side in the conflict and others were possibly killed in personal vendettas.

Several people are reportedly in hiding, fearing possible arrest by the government forces. 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.

Government forces have arrested civilians; some were released shortly after their arrest, other remained in detention. Most of those arrested have been reportedly tortured. Among those civilians held in custody by the government are Ezequiel Ferreira, a communications engineer, who was arrested on 15 June 1998 on suspicion of passing information to the rebels. He was reportedly taken to the Amura military barracks in the centre of Bissau. There has been no further news of him. Asumane Fati, a member of the opposition political party, *União para a Mudança* (UM), Union for Change, was arrested on 4 July 1998 and accused of criticizing President João Bernardo "Nino" Vieira. He had left his house to try to find food when a soldier arrested him and took him to a cell in the central police headquarters. There he was beaten all over the body with a military uniform belt. One blow lacerated his right ear. He was released after the beating. Soon after the conflict began Asumane Fati had organized a petition for a peaceful end to the crisis and he believed that this was the reason for his arrest. Edmundo Antero Luis Alsama "Yala", a civil construction engineer, was arrested on 6 July 1998 by the municipal police in Bissau and taken to the central police headquarters where he is being held. He was reportedly tortured. His arrest occurred after rebel soldiers approached his father, Duke Djassy, a retired high ranking military officer, and asked him to join the rebellion, but he apparently he refused saying that he was too old to fight. Edmundo Antero Luis Alsama "Yala" remains in detention in the central police station. Amnesty International is concerned about the safety of those who have been detained, including those arrested in December 1997 and early 1998 suspected of smuggling arms to the Casamance rebels. In the past torture has been used on people held in connection with politically sensitive issues. Most recently, torture was used during the interrogation of people detained in late 1997 and early 1998 on suspicion of smuggling arms to the Casamance rebels.

Senegalese troops supporting the Guinea-Bissau government have carried out human rights violations. Refugees have reported that Senegalese soldiers have committed violations including raping women, beating civilians who do not hand over money or other possessions and detaining people in a building in a part of the city known as Pequeno Moscovo (Little Moscow)

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and beating them to obtain information. In late June 1998 Senegalese soldiers at Pequeno Moscovo reportedly arrested a young man, bound his legs and arms with cord, beat him severely and then covered him in some substance which burned his skin. He fled and bystanders helped him and took him to a hospital. Amnesty International has previously received evidence of Senegalese soldiers using this form of torture in the Casamance area of Senegal. The substance used is reported to be a mixture of molten plastic and petrol<sup>1</sup>.

In another incident also in late June 1998, a Senegalese soldier shot at two unarmed security guards guarding the United States Embassy, killing one and wounding the other. The two unarmed security guards were sitting on a piece of wood outside the gate of the embassy when a group of Senegalese soldiers passed by. According to a report of the incident, one of the Senegalese soldiers suddenly turned and opened fire without warning with a machine gun. The two security guards had been at their post every day for the previous two weeks.

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.

Efforts to restore peace between the Guinea-Bissau government and the rebels have been made by people in Guinea-Bissau and by representatives of the Angolan and Portuguese governments. On 4 July 1998 members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) who had been meeting in Ivory Coast released a statement reaffirming their support for the elected government of Guinea-Bissau and for the backing already given to it by the armies of the Republic of Guinea and Senegal.

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 each of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 applies to all parties to a conflict. It prohibits, among other things, violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, as well as cruel or degrading treatment and torture. Guinea-Bissau acceded to the Geneva Conventions in 1974. In addition, international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, forbids the use of torture and the arbitrary deprivation of life in all circumstances. The prohibition of torture is a non-derogable right and cannot be suspended even during a state of emergency or war.

Amnesty International is appealing to all involved in the fighting to respect human rights. It calls on the international community, particularly those involved in peace negotiations, to impress on the parties to the conflict the need to conform to the provisions of Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions. It also urges them to ensure that any peace agreement that is

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<sup>1</sup> See *Senegal: Climate of terror in Casamance* (AI Index AFR 49/01/98) of March 1998.

implemented builds respect for human rights, including mechanisms to protect and monitor human rights.