

# Central Mali: Populations caught between terrorism and anti-terrorism

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**FIDH and AMDH publish an alarming report on the situation in Central Mali, which emphasized the entrenchment of terrorist armed groups, the intensification of inter-communal violence and the abuses committed in the context of anti-terrorism operations. While several jihadist leaders have called for the continuation and the expansion of the conflict and have cynically stirred up community differences, our organizations call on the Malian government to finally prosecute the perpetrators of serious crimes and abuses committed in the region - including those committed by the military.**

40% of all jihadist attacks carried out in the country are now committed in Central Mali. In the past two years, 1 200 civilians have been killed, around 50 villages were burned and at least 30 000 people have fled the region.

« The escalation of violence in Central Mali is about to become out of control and cannot be resolved by spectacular military operations. Without the re-establishment of a strong and fair State that would seek to restore ties between all communities, the jihadist terror and the confrontations between communities will continue to happen »

Moctar Mariko, lawyer and president of AMDH.

The report presented today is based on more than 120 interviews and testimonies of survivors, witnesses, former jihadists and local leaders collected during a field investigation conducted between May and July 2018. It lists a series of murders and killings and inscribes them within the context of a regional dynamic of violence.

## **The jihadists bear the main responsibility for the terror and instability**

Ever since they have started to consider Central Mali as an area to be conquered by terror in 2012, jihadists have constantly tried to destabilize the region, and even more so since 2015. Led by Amadou Koufa, a former local preacher who became one of the leaders of the infamous Al Qaida in the Sahel, the Katiba Macina has targeted the military, State representatives, traditional and religious leaders and anyone opposed to their rigorous vision of religion.

Several dozen villages in Central Mali are currently in the hands of the group, which imposes totalitarian type rules, carries out serious and repeated abuses (kidnappings, acts of torture, killings, sexual violence), and closes public schools (750 schools have been closed according to UNICEF in May 2018).

## **Community-based militias fill in the void left by the State's withdrawal**

In Central Mali, the collapse of State services starting in 2012 - year of the jihadist attack in the North - led to a security and judicial void. This void led to the proliferation of self-defense militias, usually

constituted along community and ethnic lines and now equipped with light weapons. Whether Fulani, Bambara or Dogon, they have contributed to the infernal cycle of attacks and reprisals. The passivity of the State in addressing the abuses committed by several militias, notably Dozo militias, raises questions about the potential political support these militias may benefit from.

### **The abuses stemming from anti-terrorist operations hinder a re-establishment of the State.**

The Malian Army has been heavily impacted by the jihadist wave of 2012 in Northern Mali and subsequent relentless attacks by Islamist groups. In early 2018, the Malian authorities launched an "Integrated Security Plan" for the central regions, calling for an additional 4000 military personnel and additional budgetary means. It came into action as the "Dambé" anti-terrorist operation in February 2018, during which nearly 100 people are thought to have been summarily and extra-judicially executed.

During several operations, six of which are detailed in the report, certain Malian army units arrested and executed people presented as "terrorists" and made their bodies disappear in mass graves. Among the six cases featured in the report, 67 deaths were counted; a majority of victims were Fulani civilians assimilated to the jihadists.

« Certain anti-terrorist operations by the Malian Army have been genuine punitive expeditions following a consistent operating mode : arrests on the basis of established lists, summary executions, burying of bodies in mass graves. Although these crimes were committed against unarmed civilians - whether affiliated or not with jihadists - there have been no convictions. This could lead to more violence »

Drissa Traoré, FIDH Vice President.

These abuses contribute to the spiral of violence and the marginalization of certain communities. They hinder the re-establishment of the State in certain zones, which are on the verge of becoming support bases for more destabilizing maneuvers, as it has been observed in other States of the region.

« The continuous expansion of jihadist armed groups in Mali and in the rest of the region reveals the failure of responses that are solely based on security. There must be a definite change of direction and of policy in Mali as well as in the rest of the Sahel region. The military strategy must align with political objectives and give the State its role of protector and fair and impartial arbitrator back. The people ask first and foremost to live in peace. Restoring their confidence will necessarily involve judging those responsible for serious crimes, whether jihadists, members of militias or State agents »

Florent Geel, FIDH Africa desk Director.

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