

BAMAKO, ¶ Mali , September 22 (Infosplusgabon) - More than 150,000 children are unable to go to school due to a lack of security in northern and central Mali, Amnesty International said on Friday in a report released ahead of the country's review by the UN's Human Rights Council.

'Mali: Violations and abuses as instability spreads' released ahead of Mali's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in January next year, reveals that by June 2017 more than 500 schools had been closed in regions where armed groups are operating including Gao, Kidal, Ségou, Mopti and Timbuktu. Some, especially in the central region, were forced to close after members of armed groups threatened staff.

"Tens of thousands of children are paying a high price as violence and insecurity continue in the north and has now spread to the central region of Mali. The denial of their right to education has reached a crisis point. This has to stop," said Gaetan Mootoo, Amnesty International's West Africa researcher.

"As Mali celebrates today the 57th anniversary of its independence, authorities must take all necessary measures to prevent the closure of schools and ensure the safety and security of children and school staff," he said.

The report also draws attention to the appalling conditions in Bamako Central Prison as well as other prisons outside the capital. During a visit to the prison in Bamako in April 2017, the prison authorities told Amnesty International that 1,200 detainees were held there and had to take turns to sleep due to the limited space. The prison has capacity for only 400 inmates.

Amnesty International said it confirmed that conditions in Bamako Central Prison had not improved since its last visits in 2013 and 2014. For example, none of those arrested and charged with terrorist acts since 2013 have been allowed to exercise outside the prison cells, which are cramped and poorly ventilated.

In November 2015, armed groups killed 19 civilians during a siege at the Radisson Hotel in Bamako in which more than 150 people were taken hostage. They were later released when the security forces intervened.

Amnesty International said it has learnt from organizations working on the ground in Mali that at least 15 persons, including both foreigners and Malians, are currently being held hostage by armed groups.

The human rights group said since the beginning of 2017, the number of attacks by armed groups in the centre and the north of the country has increased, including targeted attacks on imams, village chiefs and state representatives, and resulting in numerous human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law.

On 18 January 2017, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) attacked the Operational Mechanism of Coordination camp in Gao, and more than 70 people were killed, including civilians. On 18 June 2017, four civilians were killed during an attack on a hotel on the outskirts of Bamako by the armed Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM).

Amnesty International said in 2013, when Mali last underwent the UPR process, it accepted a recommendation made by the Human Rights Council to hold armed groups accountable for serious human rights abuses.

"However, there has been very little progress. Impunity persists for abuses and violations of international humanitarian law, such as killings, torture and looting, especially when committed in the context of the conflict. As a result, victims and their families are deprived of truth, justice and reparation."

Amnesty International called on authorities in Mali to set up the international commission of inquiry as provided in the Algiers Peace Agreement. The commission should conduct prompt and effective investigations into allegations of extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances and other crimes under international law by the Malian security forces and armed groups.

“A situation where individuals suspected of involvement in serious human rights abuses are not held accountable would spell disaster for a country that is struggling to end a conflict that has led to horrific abuses in its northern and central parts,” said Mootoo.

The 29th session of the UPR working group for Mali will be held in January 2018. Mali accepted 111 recommendations during its 2013 UPR, including instigating a ban on female genital mutilation (FGM), protecting children from recruitment by armed groups, and investigating extrajudicial executions.

However, it rejected 14 recommendations, including those providing for investigations into allegations of extrajudicial executions of the Tuaregs and allegations of torture by state security services.

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