



Mali: Islamist Armed Groups Spread Fear in North ^[1]

Treat Population Humanely; Release Child Soldiers; End Attacks on Religious Shrines

September 25, 2012

(Nairobi) – Three Islamist armed groups controlling northern [Mali](#) ^[2] have committed serious abuses against the local population while enforcing their interpretation of Sharia, or Islamic law, Human Rights Watch said today. Human Rights Watch in recent weeks has interviewed some one hundred witnesses who have fled the region or remain there.

The three rebel groups – Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – have recruited several hundred children into their forces; carried out executions, floggings, and at least eight amputations as punishment; and systematically destroyed numerous religious shrines of cultural and religious importance. In April 2012, the rebel groups consolidated their control over the northern regions of Kidal, Timbuktu, and Gao.

“The Islamist armed groups have become increasingly repressive as they have tightened their grip over northern Mali,” said [Corinne Dufka](#) ^[3], senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Stonings, amputations, and floggings have become the order of the day in an apparent attempt to force the local population to accept their world view. In imposing their brand of Sharia law, they have also meted out a tragically cruel parody of justice and recruited and armed children as young as 12.”

Since July, Human Rights Watch has conducted 97 interviews in Mali’s capital, Bamako, with witnesses and victims of abuses, as well as others knowledgeable about the human rights situation, including religious and traditional leaders, medical personnel, rights activists, teachers, diplomats, journalists, and government officials. Many witnesses had fled the affected areas; those who remained in rebel-controlled areas were interviewed by telephone. Witnesses described abuses taking place in the northern towns of Gao, Timbuktu, Goundam, Diré, Niafouké, Ansongo, Tissalit, Aguelhoc, and Kidal.

In January, the rebel groups had undertaken a military offensive to gain control of northern Mali, originally alongside separatist ethnic Tuareg group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). They have since largely driven the MNLA out of the north.

Ansar Dine aims to impose a strict interpretation of Sharia throughout Mali. AQIM, affiliated with al Qaeda since January 2007, has been implicated in attacks against civilians and kidnaping for ransom of tourists, businessmen, and aid workers, some of whom have been executed. MUJAO, created in late 2011 as a largely Mauritanian offshoot of AQIM, has claimed responsibility for kidnapping several humanitarian workers and, on April 5, seven Algerian diplomats. MUJAO and Ansar Dine have claimed responsibility for many abuses, including killings, amputations, and the destruction of religious shrines and other

culturally important structures.

The Islamist groups' advance took advantage of the political and security chaos that followed a coup in Bamako on March 22 by junior Malian military officers, which reflected their dissatisfaction with the government's response to the MNLA rebellion. The interim government established in April has since then been dogged by infighting and power struggles, paralyzing their response to the situation in the north.

Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and AQIM appear to be closely coordinating with each other, Human Rights Watch said. While particular groups seem to control particular regions – for example, Ansar Dine in Kidal and Timbuktu and MUJAO in Gao – their forces often move fluidly between areas and have reinforced each other during unrest. Furthermore, several commanders and fighters from MUJAO and Ansar Dine were identified by multiple witnesses as having previously been affiliated with AQIM. Many residents said they reached the conclusion that, in the words of one witness, “Ansar Dine, MUJAO and AQIM are one in the same.” Witnesses said the majority of commanders were non-Malian, and came from Mauritania, Algeria, Western Sahara, Senegal, Tunisia, and Chad.

The Islamist armed groups have carried out beatings, floggings, arbitrary arrests, and executed two local residents, all for engaging in behavior decreed as “*haram*” (forbidden) under their interpretation of Sharia, dozens of witnesses and five victims from the north told Human Rights Watch. These included smoking or selling cigarettes; consuming or selling alcoholic beverages; listening to music on portable audio devices; having music or anything other than Quranic verse readings as the ringer on cellphones, and failing to attend daily prayers.

On July 30, the Islamist authorities in Aguelhocstoned to death a married man and a woman he was not married to for adultery, reportedly in front of 200 people. They also have punished women for failing to adhere to their dress code – which requires women to cover their heads, wear long skirts, and desist from wearing jewelry or perfume – and for having contact with men other than family members.

Throughout the north, the punishments for these “infractions” as well as for those accused of theft and banditry were meted out by the Islamic Police, often after a summary “trial” before a panel of judges hand-picked by the Islamist authorities. Many of the punishments were carried out in public squares after the authorities had summoned the local population to attend.

Many witnesses described seeing men and women detained or whipped in marketplaces and on the street, often by armed adolescents, for smoking, drinking alcohol, or failing to cover themselves adequately. Some frail elderly residents collapsed from the floggings.

Many residents of Timbuktu, Kidal, and Gao regions told Human Rights Watch that they saw children inside apparent training camps of the Islamist armed groups. They also observed children as young as 11 years manning checkpoints, conducting foot patrols, riding around in patrol vehicles, guarding prisoners, enforcing Sharia law, and cooking for rebel groups. One witness described children being taught to gather intelligence by walking through town and later “having to repeat what they had seen

and heard.”

Since April, the Islamist groups have amputated the limbs of at least eight men accused of theft and robbery, seven in the Gao region. Human Rights Watch interviewed the victim of the August 8 hand amputation in Ansongo and two witnesses to the five amputations that took place in Gao on September 10. Amputating the hands, feet, or limbs of an individual as a criminal punishment is torture, in violation of international law.

Islamist militants in Timbuktu have destroyed numerous structures – including mausoleums, cemeteries, and shrines – which hold great religious, historical, and cultural significance to Malians. Timbuktu residents described feeling deeply shaken by the destruction. One woman told Human Rights Watch that, “It only took them about an hour and a half to break apart our heritage, our culture.” A man who witnessed the destruction of the tomb of Sidi Mahmoudsaid, “As they broke the tomb, yelling ‘Allah hu Akbar’ for all to hear, hundreds of us were weeping both inside and out.”

International humanitarian and human rights law prohibits any mistreatment of people in custody, including executions, torture, and pillage. The use of child soldiers and the deliberate destruction of religious and cultural property are also prohibited. Leaders of the rebel groups may be liable under international law for abuses committed by forces under their command, Human Rights Watch said.

The Islamist groups should immediately cease their mistreatment of residents and destruction of heritage sites, make a commitment to abide by international law, and free all children recruited for their forces, Human Rights Watch said.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Islamist armed groups in northern Mali to:

Halt killings, amputations, floggings, and other torture and cruel and inhuman treatment of people in custody; treat detainees humanely in accordance with international standards.

End all recruitment of children under age 18 in accordance with Mali’s international legal obligations, release all children previously recruited, and avoid using schools for military purposes, such as military training.

Publicly acknowledge the obligation to comply fully with international humanitarian law.

Publicly commit to respecting international human rights law, such as found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; respect the rights to due process and free expression, association, and assembly.

Cease all attacks against religious sites in Timbuktu and elsewhere, and adequately compensate local authorities for the cost of repair and reconstruction of those destroyed or damaged.

Amputations and Executions

One of the recent amputations took place on August 8, when Islamic Police amputated the hand of Alhader Ag Almahmoud, 30, who was accused of stealing livestock in Ansongo. On September 10, they amputated the right hand and left foot of five suspected thieves in Gao. On September 16, they amputated the hand of a man in Gao who allegedly broken into a store and stole merchandise. MUJAO took responsibility for the seven amputations in Ansongo and Gao. In April, Islamist authorities

had amputated the hand of an alleged thief in Kidal.

On September 2, an online news agency published a statement from MUJAO claiming to have executed the Algerian vice-consul, Taher Touati, at dawn that day. The report has yet to be confirmed by the Algerian government. MUJAO had on August 24 given an ultimatum to Algeria, threatening to kill Touati unless several MUJAO members being held in Algeria were released. MUJAO had earlier claimed responsibility for the April 5 abduction of seven Algerian diplomats from their consulate in the town of Gao. Three of the hostages were freed in July.

The amputations in Ansongo and Gao were carried out after what victims said was an “Islamic trial.” Almahmoud, whose hand was amputated on August 8, described his ordeal to Human Rights Watch:

I’m married with three children, ages 6, 4 and a few months. I come from a village not far from Ansongo. In late July, a pickup full of armed men came to my home. They said they were investigating the theft of livestock, and that their investigation had revealed motorcycle tracks near where the animals were stolen that had led them to my house. They ordered me to go with them. They put me and my motorcycle on a truck with five armed men, and later put me in their jail in Ansongo where I remained for two weeks. There, I was never interrogated – not one question about the case.

On August 8 at around 10 a.m., they took me to an office building that now serves as their courtroom [*le palais de justice*]. There, I found a dozen or so unarmed men seated on mats on the ground in a circle. They asked me to sit in the middle and to tell them the facts. I said I was innocent and explained my version of events. The MUJAO boss in Ansongo said they should apply Sharia, after which they discussed my case among themselves. They were speaking in Arabic, but most of what they said was translated into Tamashek so I could understand. None of them presented solid proof. Of the 10 men, three were against imposing Sharia, but the others won.

At around 3 p.m. they took me to the public square, which was full of people. They tied my hands, feet and chest firmly to a chair; my right hand was tied with a rubber cord. The boss, himself, cut my hand as if he were killing a sheep. As he cut it, which took about two minutes, he shouted “Allah hu Akbar.” I received no drugs before, but a few pills in the cell after it was done by the guy who bandaged me up. I stayed in the cell for a week without seeing a doctor. I shared the cell with two others accused of theft... The Islamists said their day was coming. Later they gave me money to repair my motorcycle, and to buy tea, sugar and clothes and brought me back home. I am innocent: I didn’t steal those animals.

Of the five amputations carried out on September 10 in Gao, one was at the *Place de l’Indépendance* while the other four were carried out hours earlier inside a military camp several kilometers away. MUJAO told the media that the suspects’ alleged crime, highway robbery, called for the right hand and left foot to be cut off. An elder with knowledge of the incident told Human Rights Watch: “They were judged and sentenced the same day as the amputation. There were five judges – including a few foreigners, and a Mauritanian Arab named Hamadi. There were no lawyers in the process. The judges ask questions, then

give their verdict. In this case, the judgment was done in the morning and they immediately proceeded to the amputation. Hamadi himself publicly pronounced the punishment at the plaza.” Another witness to the amputation said:

At around 1:20 p.m., I was working in the market when I heard MUJAO calling for the population to gather at the plaza. About 60 of us gathered and some minutes later MUJAO arrived in 10 Land Cruisers. Inside one of them was the police commissioner, Aliou Mahamar Touré, and a young man. At about 1:45 p.m., Aliou told an Islamist to tie a chair to a concrete pillar with a rope. While the guy was still in his car, he received two injections. Ten minutes later, Aliou asked the young man to cover his face, then two of his bodyguards walked him out and bound him to the chair. First the right hand, the left foot and finally his chest.

Aliou took two butcher knives, laid them on a piece of black rubber and said, “Allah hu Akbar,” which the other Islamists repeated. Then he put one knife down, and with the other, cut off the young man’s hand – it took but 10 seconds to chop it off. He held it up for all to see. Another Islamist with a beard took the second knife, said “Allah hu Akbar,” and cut off the foot. The MUJAOS started to pray and said that they were doing what God asked them to do. Aliou ordered the man to be untied, and at the same time asked for a bag in his car. It was the bag with the four feet and hands amputated from the other thieves. He then placed the new foot and hand inside and they said, “Allah hu Akbar.”

Several Islamists then carried the young man to the hospital. MUJAO – who were about 40 in number – had taken people’s camera cellphones before the operation but returned them after the deed. Nobody dared to talk. We were in shock and they were heavily armed.

The summary trials described above fall far short of international fair trial standards. The Geneva Conventions of 1949 provide that during internal armed conflicts, parties to a conflict are prohibited from “passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples.” It is recognized that these judicial guarantees can be found in international human rights law, as well as customary international humanitarian law.

Residents of northern Mali have on at least two occasions protested the planned amputations. In Gao they were initially successful. One witness described how on August 5, Islamic Police taking several men toward the plaza for amputations were met by “hundreds of residents yelling for them to stop, and throwing stones at them. They completely blocked the entrance to the Independence Plaza. The Islamists fired several times in the air but the crowd was too big. It made their job impossible.”

However, protesting may result in reprisal by the Islamist authorities. A respected local journalist for Radio Adar Khoïma and Voice of America, Malick Aliou Maïga, who condemned this and other abusive practices, said that on the day of the protest he was detained and severely beaten by the Islamic Police, who were led by a senior Islamic police official:

On Sunday, August 5, the day the people of Gao revolted and stopped MUJAO from amputating the hands of five people, I was in the studio, transmitting live. I was saying each man should have the right to a proper

defense. Five minutes after starting my program at around 8:40 p.m., MUJAO burst into the studio. There were three pickups full of men. Many were hooded; they pointed their guns at me, hit me on the back and neck with their guns, then dragged me into a 4 by 4 [vehicle]. They continued to beat me with guns and pieces of wood and kick me.

They took me behind the town, told me to get down, beating me. Some walked on top of me, stomping, while others hit me with their guns. They said, "You just can't shut up, can you? You're trying to put hatred in heart of people. They take you as a hero but you're nothing." I was covered in blood. One said, "Leave him, it's enough, he's dead." The boss in charge of this operation was [a senior Islamic Police official], a native from there. I lost consciousness and later found myself in the hospital. I have five stitches in my head, and on my back.

Floggings and Beatings

In April, the Malian government police, gendarmerie, judiciary, and corrections officials fled the towns in the north, and the rebel Islamic Police have since taken over many law enforcement functions. But none of the means the Islamist armed groups controlling northern Mali are using to enforce their interpretation of Sharia meet international standards of fair and humane treatment.

The Islamic Police impose punishments against alleged wrongdoers either out on the streets or after a suspect is taken to a police station, military camp, or informal place of detention. Punishments are also imposed after summary trials by an impromptu panel of judges chosen by the Islamist authorities. In Timbuktu the courtroom is housed in a former hotel; the judges were identified as religious leaders, or *Marabouts*, from Timbuktu region. A resident of Gao explained the legal process there:

City hall has been converted into the justice palace. When someone is arrested, the person is brought to the *commissariat* [Islamic Police] and interrogated. If the issue is something that can be settled out of court, the person is freed. If not, they are detained in the commissariat; there are a few dozen there now. Trials are heard every Monday and Thursday, and the detained are transferred to the justice palace to be judged. There are five judges, some of whom are foreigners, but no lawyers in this process, so the right to defense is not respected. The population can attend the trials which take place in a big room.

The Islamic police often wear blue vests on which "Islamic Police" is written in French and Arabic. Many punishments were carried out in public squares after Islamist authorities summoned the local population to watch. Victims are typically flogged with a tree branch, a camel hair switch, or in a few cases, electrical cord. Victims and witnesses said such floggings often caused open sores and welts.

Many residents who spoke to Human Rights Watch credited the Islamic Police with helping restore order and security and conducting patrols to stop banditry. A village elder from Ansongo said:

We've lost control of our youth who engage in rampant banditry of cars, markets, animals. For years we'd ask the gendarmes to react but the Malian authorities did practically nothing to stop this descent into lawlessness,

which created a lack of confidence in the state. Now, MUJAO have stepped in to stop this slide. MUJAO are the new authority.

Residents routinely file complaints with the Islamic Police, including for crimes committed before the Islamist armed groups took over the north, and the Islamists have investigated them. While those taken into custody have few due process protections, detainees held by the Islamic Police in police stations and military bases in Ansongo, Timbuktu, and Gao said officers normally did not physically mistreat them.

The treatment of the local population by the Islamist rebels differed from town to town, often appearing to take the lead from the commanders in charge. The majority of amputations reported to Human Rights Watch were carried out in or around the town of Gao. The residents of the Timbuktu region appeared to be subjected more widely to physical abuse from the authorities. Residents from Kidal, Aguelhoc, Diré, and Goundam, with a few exceptions, reported significantly fewer instances of abuse than people from other towns.

Several witnesses described seeing men and youth beaten for smoking or for selling cigarettes. On August 13, a witness said, a blacksmith who was smoking inside his house in Timbuktu was “seriously beaten by a group of Islamists who saw him as they were driving by. They got down, went into the house and whipped him. But due to the intervention of neighbors, they only took him to the police station and by the end of day released [him].”

A market seller said that a sickly elderly man caught smoking in the market and beaten by an adolescent member of the Islamic Police “urinated on himself after about five strokes – the punishment for smoking is 10 – it was too much for him.” A teacher from Gao had since July witnessed 10 men beaten in public within the public plaza in Gao for smoking. Another witness described the beating and arbitrary detention in June of a man in his late 60’s for refusing to put out his cigarette:

They ordered him to put out his cigarette, but he refused, saying, “I like smoking. I will smoke today, I will smoke tomorrow...in fact, I will smoke every day until the day I die. Is this the work of God, beating people for smoking?” They got so mad they started whacking him and a 15-year-old Islamist dragged him into the Islamic Police [station], where he was forced to spend the night. Imagine, doing this in front of his grandchild! I saw the old man the other day; he was still smoking.

A bricklayer who had been accused of drinking alcohol in mid-June in a northern town was handcuffed and detained overnight in the Islamic Police station, and later subjected to 40 lashes with a camel skin-hair switch. He insisted he was set up by an enemy working with the Islamists, but said he “finally accepted [the beating] because they weren’t going to give up. They called people inside the camp to watch; it was the boss who administered the beating. He hit me 40 times, counting in Arabic and moving from the legs up my body. It was terribly painful. I had many welts.”

About 15 residents of Timbuktu, Goundam, and Gao saw women beaten for refusing to cover their heads adequately. An ambulant trader who works in Timbuktu market saw the Islamic Police flogging market women for failing to cover up “many, many times.” He told Human Rights Watch:

For example, in July, I saw three members of the Islamic Police beat a fish seller because she wasn't properly covered. Among them was a Senegalese, a big man in the police, who hit her several times until she covered her head, until she cried. Around the same time, they told a middle-aged woman selling mangos to cover up but she refused. They started hitting her; she tried to protect her face, all the while saying defiantly, "No, forget it...you people took the village and drove away all our business, it's you who must submit to Sharia." They beat her, 5, 10, 20 times but still she refused.

The Islamist authorities have forbidden – and often harshly punished – residents listening to any kind of music on radios, live, or on cellphone ringers, insisting that residents should only listen to recordings of Quranic verses. One youth who lives next to the Islamic Police headquarters in Timbuktu described how a young man was beaten until he bled for talking back to Islamist authorities who had demanded his phone after the ringer played Malian music: "He frantically tried to hit the answer button in his pocket. They told him to come but the youth talked back; two Islamists whipped him with a switch until he bled, saying, 'if we were the Malian army you wouldn't be speaking to us like that!'"

Some residents said Islamic Police threw the residents' phones on the ground or removed their SIM cards and returned them a few days later filled with Quranic verses. A former tour operator told Human Rights Watch:

One afternoon I was drinking tea and listening to Ivorian music with about six friends. We've always done this – discussed the day's events while we enjoy our tea. Suddenly, a pickup with armed men from the Islamic Police screeched to a halt and four of them came down. One, speaking in Arabic, said the music is condemned by God. We were afraid, they had pistols and were aggressive. They removed the memory card from the boombox and three days later returned it. They'd erased the music and put on Quranic verses.

Many northern residents, young and old, said the behavioral changes enforced by the Islamist groups had undermined their ability to take part in cultural life. One young man said, "We're Muslims, good and faithful Muslims, but honestly, these people have taken all the *joie de vivre* from our lives." Another man commented, "There are no baptisms, marriages, circumcisions – all are forbidden, *haraam*. Usually if you have a baby, people beat the drums but now, forget it... no music, no gatherings, no parties.... I only started to see life again when I exited their territory."

A 23-year-old driver who'd fled to Bamako in July said, "When we're young we should enjoy our youth – we want to dance, listen to music, flirt with women, smoke, drink tea with our friends, but with these people, we can't do anything." A seamstress who left the north in July said: "The north feels dead. As a woman I can't dress up, wear perfume, go for a stroll with my friends. ...They've even outlawed chatting in groups. They say instead of talking we should go home and read the Quran."

Several other northern residents described restrictions on public gatherings. One man said: "In May we were sitting outside watching the UEFA Champions [football] semifinal on TV. We were enjoying ourselves, each one rooting for his team, yelling 'Yay!!' But the Islamists came and said it's forbidden to watch TV in public."

Islamist authorities have actually restricted many children from playing. One man described how on August 4, several angry

parents stormed into the Islamic Police station in Gao to complain after their children, ages 8 to 13, had been beaten for swimming in the river.

"The Islamists said this is now forbidden, especially if they were boys and girls together," the man said. A man who had in early August fled Timbuktu with his family said that in June the Islamist authorities had ordered him to move two foosball tables inside because "[t]hey are a bad influence for children. The boys should be praying, not playing in the street."

Women from Gao, Kidal, Aguelhoc, and Timbuktu described the restrictions they endured in the north. One woman from Timbuktu was stopped and questioned by an Islamic Police patrol for wearing perfume. An officer asked if she was married, then reprimanded her, "If you're married, then why are you wearing something to attract more men?" Several witnesses described how Islamic Police intimidated, flogged, or beat women for how they dressed, or because they wore bracelets, rings, or other jewelry. Several residents said the stoning to death of the couple in Aguelhoc had provoked many unmarried pregnant women to flee the north for fear of similar fate.

Child Soldiers

The Islamist armed groups controlling northern Mali have recruited, trained, and used children in their forces in violation of international humanitarian law.

Mali is a party to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts, which bans the recruitment and use in hostilities of children under 18 by non-state armed groups. Recruitment of children under 15 is a war crime under international humanitarian law, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Dozens of residents from the northern towns of Kidal, Timbuktu, Gao, Ansongo, Aguelhoc, and Niafouké described seeing children, some estimated to be as young as 11 or 12, within the ranks of the Islamist groups. Altogether, the number appears to be in the hundreds. Recruitment of children is mostly by the Islamic Police allied with both Ansar Dine and MUJAO, while others were serving with a vigilante force organized by MUJAO, sometimes referred to as MUJAO's "army." Two adults approached to join AQIM's "Jihadist army" told Human Rights Watch that some children were at their bases.

Residents of Timbuktu, Kidal, and Gao regions said they saw children at apparent rebel training camps engaged in fitness training, learning to arm, disarm, and fire a gun, and in one case, throwing a rock "like he was training for using a grenade." One account described children being taught to gather intelligence by walking through town and later "having to repeat what they had seen and heard." Human Rights Watch identified 18 places where witnesses reported that new recruits including children were being trained, including military bases, Quranic schools, and private and public schools.

Residents observed the children manning checkpoints, conducting foot patrols, riding around in patrol vehicles, guarding prisoners, and cooking for the fighters. A few witnesses showed Human Rights Watch photographs they had taken in June, July, and August of children holding both Kalashnikov assault rifles and local hunting rifles. Some appeared to be no older than

12.

The Islamist armed groups began recruiting shortly after they seized control of the north and have continued steadily since then. Community leaders, residents, and adult recruits told Human Rights Watch that many recruits join because of both recent and longer-standing grievances, including rampant banditry, most recently by Tuareg separatists. Other reasons include high unemployment, which has dramatically worsened since the government lost control of the north, and a lack of confidence in Malian state institutions, such as the courts. The Islamist rebels are believed to be recruiting substantial numbers of men and boys from small villages and hamlets, particularly those who have long practiced Wahhabism, a very conservative form of Islam.

Community leaders and residents believed that recruiting in the north was aimed in part at boosting the ranks of Malians and thereby debunking the perception that the Islamist armed groups were "foreign occupiers." Gao and Timbuktu residents said well-known Quranic teachers and local *marabouts* worked with the Islamist groups there to recruit youth. Many of the trainers were identified as non-Malian, and came from Mauritania, Algeria, Senegal, and France.

Most residents from the Timbuktu and Kidal regions who spoke to Human Rights Watch noted the presence of a disproportional number of children from the Arab and Tuareg ethnic groups, many of whom they believed had joined together with older family members. They did not believe the Islamist rebels were engaged in forced recruitment, although international law bans all recruitment of children, whether forced or not. A teacher from Timbuktu said that 12 of his students, all Arab or Tuareg, who initially joined the MNLA and Arab militias had since June been recruited by Islamist groups.

In Gao, many recruits came from the Songhai ethnic group. Residents and community leaders said recruitment in the Gao region increased beginning in May in response to the formation of training camps by ethnic Songhai militias – the Ganda Kio and Ganda Iso, which were loosely allied to the government and based around government-controlled Mopti. Some commanders in Gao appeared to engender fear and hatred against the Tuareg ethnic group as a strategy for recruitment.

A 25-year-old man who was recruited and trained by Islamist rebels in Timbuktu in May said that of the 100 or so recruits who trained alongside him, about 20 were under age 18 and all were Tuaregs and Arabs. He said the training lasted four days during which, "We learned how to use guns, about Sharia and what it means to be a mujahidin."

A tradesman who had been contracted to do some work in a Quranic school and training camp in a northern town in July described seeing about 20 children both studying the Quran and receiving weapons' training. He and others who spoke to Human Rights Watch recognized some of the boys as Arab Islamist fighters. A Timbuktu resident observed about 50 new recruits for the Islamic Police training in the old gendarmerie: "Of those training – about half were younger than 18. The youngest was about 12. On that day they were getting in condition – running, jumping, maneuvering – it looked like military training."

Another man in Timbuktu said one day in July, he heard shots and saw "an Islamist with a beard teaching four or five kids

around 12 to 14, how to shoot. I saw this from 200 meters. It was behind the military camp of Timbuktu. He'd given them a firearm and they were firing in the air."

This account from one resident is typical: "There are many, many children with them. Nearly every morning I see a few adolescents, even young ones of 11 or 12, inside the vehicles when Ansar Dine drives by, and many others going on foot patrols with the Islamic Police." Two residents had seen children training in the former gendarmerie of Timbuktu. A driver now living in Bamako told Human Rights Watch:

I've seen the new recruits, including the children, training in the Escadron de Gendarmerie to be Islamic policemen. I see them running, sometimes with their guns, sometimes not, and firing in the air once. The last time I saw the training was in June around 4:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. There were about 25 to 30 people all mixed, about 12 or so were children. I was about 7 meters away and watched for about 30 minutes. The trainer was a Senegalese, who's an officer in the Islamic Police.

Several residents from the Ansar Dine strongholds of Kidal and Aguelhoc similarly described seeing numerous children either in training or already in the ranks. A local businessmen in Kidal said one-third of the 30 recruits he saw undergoing training in the Islamic Police in early August were under 18. He said: "The youngest was about 15. I've seen them do many things in Kidal: go on patrol with Ansar, cook food and guard prisoners." A student nurse from Aguelhoc said when she last passed through in July, about 30 of the 100 or so armed men in town were under age 18, many of whom "couldn't even properly hold a gun." She recognized three of them as neighbors whom she estimated to be about 12, 15, and 16 years old.

Gao residents described armed children conducting foot patrols. One said: "On August 8, on my way back to Bamako, I saw six children, including 12 to 14 year olds – [ethnic] Peuhls and Songhai – manning a checkpoint towards the exit of Gao. Their job was to make us stop. They asked for our for ID papers." Another man saw four armed adolescents manning the checkpoint at the entrance of Ansongo, 80 kilometers away.

Over a dozen witnesses and victims identified children, including as young as 12, taking part in abuses meted out by the Islamic Police. One saw a patrol of four Islamic Police, three of whom appeared to be between 12 and 15, enter a boutique to see if the vendor was selling cigarettes. They beat and threatened him when they discovered he was. Another saw an elderly fruit seller beaten after she reprimanded armed adolescents for showing her disrespect. The witness said, "She yelled, 'I'm older than your mother and you're telling me to cover my head!' They beat her, hitting her many, many times until she broke down." This account from June by a petty trader was typical:

The Islamic Police patrol in groups of two or three – very often including child soldiers armed with AK-47s [assault rifles]. I've seen the police hit women on their backs with a switch, saying, 'Cover up, now!' Some do it lightly, while others are really rough. A few times I've seen women cry, and seen welts, swollen [skin], on their backs. On several occasions, the Islamists doing this are children – 12 or 15 years old. Can you imagine, boys this young, and new recruits at that, beating a woman of over 60?

Destruction of Malian Heritage

Islamist armed groups in Timbuktu have destroyed numerous structures that hold great religious, historical, and cultural significance to Malians, including mausoleums, cemeteries, and shrines in which are buried many of Timbuktu's revered scholars, imams, and philosophers. Islamist fighters with axes, shovels, and hammers in April destroyed the tomb of Aljoudidi Tamba Tamba; on June 2 destroyed Sidi Yahya's tomb and great door; on June 30 destroyed the mausoleum and tomb of Sidi Mahmoud (Ben Amar); and on July 10 destroyed the tombs of two Muslim saints within the compound of Timbuktu's largest mosque, Djingareyber.

Islamist groups claimed responsibility for the destruction of the buildings and shrines, which are classified as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

"It's very simple," an Ansar Dine spokesman was quoted as saying after the destruction of Sidi Yahya, "It doesn't correspond to the rules of Islam."

Many Timbuktu residents, including imams, students, tour guides, professors, and market women, described in compelling terms the impact of the destruction. They all felt the Islamist authorities were purposefully destroying part of their history. One woman said, "It only took them about an hour and a half to break apart our heritage, our culture." A student, 16, said, "My parents, grandparents, great grandparents spoke to me of these tombs. Now my own children will never see them." A civil servant watched as, "a piece of the tomb of Sidi Amar fell onto the grave of my father with a thud. I cried, we all cried, but could do nothing for they were armed men all around, poised to stop us."

A seamstress explained the significance of Timbuktu's 333 Sufi saints who are buried in Timbuktu:

We pray to them for everything we look for in life: the barren pray to have children; the pregnant pray for a safe birth; mothers pray for their children to be healthy, safe and marry a good man or women. If you, or a family member, are to travel, we pray to deliver us safely home.

They said the Islamist groups now forbid them from visiting the grave of their departed family members, an important weekly ritual for many Timbuktu residents. One man explained:

After prayers we always visit the graves of our dead. We clean the sand the winds have left. We pray for them. For us it is a sign of respect and a reminder not to forget them or where we've come from. There were about 40 or 50 Islamists in the operation. Eight or ten were breaking all that stood more than 20 centimeters high – the tomb of Sidi Mahmoud and at least 20 others. They are trying to erase the memory of this town. As they broke the tombs, yelling "Allah hu Akabar" for all to hear, hundreds of us were weeping both inside and out.

Residents also lamented the refusal of the Islamist authorities to allow Malians, who have a diverse and rich musical tradition, to listen to, perform, or play local music. They also interpreted this as denial of their cultural heritage. A man who worked near the local radio Buktu described how three days after the Islamist rebels occupied Timbuktu, a Tunisian Islamist who'd been put in charge of the radio destroyed the station's library of local music:

The Tunisian ordered his boys to confiscate the radio's library. They took everything – all the cassettes they'd collected since 1994. The cassettes were full of local folkloric music as well as foreign music, interviews, benedictions....they stuffed all the cassettes in four big rice bags and carried them away. While doing this he said, 'We're the ones who decide what's aired on the radio.' Many of the musicians are now dead and these cassettes were the only record Malians have of their music. I know the local music reporter; he used to go from village to village to record their work – guitars, Koras, tam tams, clapping – of all the ethnic groups that live in and around Timbuktu. They may not be killing us, but they're destroying our history, my history, which is almost as bad.

International humanitarian law protects all civilian property from deliberate destruction. Protocol II to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, to which Mali is party, provides special protection to cultural objects and of places of worship: “[I]t is prohibited to commit any acts of hostility directed against historic monuments, works of art or places of worship which constitute the cultural or spiritual heritage of peoples.”

Destruction of such property is considered a war crime, including under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which prohibits, “[i]ntentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to “religion [and] historic monuments ... provided they are not military objectives.”

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights also protects everyone's right to “freely ... participate in the cultural life of the community.”

Source URL: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/09/25/mali-islamist-armed-groups-spread-fear-north>

Links:

[1] <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/09/25/mali-islamist-armed-groups-spread-fear-north>

[2] <http://www.hrw.org/africa/mali>

[3] <http://www.hrw.org/bios/corinne-dufka>

© Copyright 2012, Human Rights Watch