

# Mali's civilians face human rights abuses from both sides

Sunday 3 February 2013, by [WARD Olivia](#) (Date first published: 2 February 2013).

**Reports of abuses by Islamists in northern Mali were widespread. But two human rights groups say the army also committed executions and rights violations.**

More than a dozen civilians rounded up and executed. Bullet-riddled bodies dumped into a well. Reports of abuses by the violent Islamists who were driven out of northern Mali's major towns have been widely decried. But according to two prominent human rights groups, executions and other rights violations were also perpetrated by the Malian army, as civilians fell victim to violence by both sides. "People are very frightened and they don't feel safe," said Gaetan Mootoo, Amnesty International's researcher in Mali. "They are reluctant even to talk about what they've experienced and seen."

But the allegations of those who came forward were chilling — and potentially damning to Mali's divided and disorganized army. They were also an ominous reminder of ethnic tensions between the Arab-identified and Berber people of the north and "black" Africans from the government-controlled south. And the fault lines between religious conservatives and more secular northerners who opposed the Islamists' brutal interpretation of Sharia law.

"One man counted 12 bodies lying beside the well, including two of his family members," Mootoo said in a phone interview. "He was there when they were throwing the bodies in, but he was so scared he didn't dare to ask them why they had killed them, or why they were doing that." And he added, witnesses were told that the dead had been targeted "because the clothes they were wearing were associated with an Islamist group."

During interviews last month, witnesses told an Amnesty fact-finding mission that more than 20 civilians were arrested at a bus station in the town of Sevare, more than 600 kilometres north of the capital Bamako. [1] Then, one said, soldiers took bodies out of a military vehicle and threw them down a well.

"Once the bodies had been thrown and were in the well, (soldiers) fired two or three bursts of machine gunfire into the well," the witness said. Another witness told Amnesty that a couple from Niger were detained, shot and dropped in the well.

Human Rights Watch also reported accounts of the killings, and its senior West Africa researcher Corinne Dufka told the Associated Press that "given (Mali's) history and this high level of ethnic tension . . . incidents of reprisals could dramatically increase" as local people who fled the Islamists return to their villages. Both rights groups called for an immediate investigation of alleged abuses by the Malian authorities and urged that those responsible be held to account. So far they have had no response.

Witnesses told Human Rights Watch the soldiers had detained the civilians at the bus station after asking for ID and refusing to believe they were from the area, suspecting they might be Islamists.

Many of the captives “frantically” tried to get others to vouch for them, before they were driven away to a field and shot.

In another incident, a well-known religious leader from the village of Gnimi-Gnama was seized during prayers, and “five days later his bloated body was discovered a kilometre away.”

Amnesty said it had received calls for help from people in Gao, who claimed to be targeted because of suspected links with Tuareg or Islamist groups, “while government forces were reportedly at times standing by.”

The alleged killings by the army come after months of human rights abuses by Islamists, who used public beatings, stonings and amputations to enforce their rule, and destroyed priceless historic artifacts. On visits to the towns of Segou, Sevare, Niono, Konna and Diabaly, Amnesty investigators heard evidence that Islamists recruited child soldiers, including a boy “so small that his rifle was sometimes dragging on the ground.” A 16-year-old told of being injected with drugs and forced to eat rice mixed with “powder” that turned him into a killer.

**Olivia Ward**, *Toronto Star*, Feb. 2, 2013

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**P.S.**

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[http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/02/01/mali\\_islamists\\_say\\_theyve\\_been\\_tortured\\_by\\_military\\_in\\_custody.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/02/01/mali_islamists_say_theyve_been_tortured_by_military_in_custody.html)

and

<http://www.rogerannis.com/three-important-articles-describing-mali-and-the-foreign-intervention/>

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## Footnotes

[1] Wrong. The town of Sévaré is located app. 300 km east and north of Bamako, near the city of Mopti. Mali is app. 1000 km from its southern to northern borders. (Roger Annis.