

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Events of 2007

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2007 was a tumultuous year in Guinea, characterized by rising demands for political change, continued economic uncertainty, and brutal repression by security forces.

In January and February government security forces violently repressed a nationwide strike organized by Guinea's leading trade unions to protest widespread corruption, bad governance, and deteriorating economic conditions. The six-week crisis ended in late February when President Lansana Conté agreed to appoint Lansana Kouyaté as prime minister from among a list of candidates, as demanded by the trade unions, raising hopes of improvements in economic conditions and respect for human rights.

Amid the economic and political turmoil, state-sponsored violence has continued, including torture, assault, extortion, and theft by the very security forces responsible for protecting Guinean citizens. The government has so far failed to tackle the impunity that accompanies serious human rights abuses, particularly abuses committed by security forces.

Prime Minister Kouyaté's government has managed to mitigate Guinea's spiraling inflation and restore the confidence of international donors, but the economic prospects for most Guineans remain bleak. Despite the country's abundant mineral resources and agricultural potential, basic foodstuffs and other essential commodities are beyond the means of many Guineans. Electricity blackouts and water shortages, even in the capital Conakry, are chronic, and impatience with the pace and progress of reforms has led again to growing discontent.

Impatience among ordinary Guineans is paralleled by rising discontent and fractiousness in Guinea's military, an institution thought to be deeply divided along both generational and ethnic lines. In April soldiers rioted in the streets of Conakry demanding back pay. Up to a dozen civilians were killed by stray bullets. The soldiers returned to their barracks when President Conté promised them money and promotions, but these have yet to materialize.

Conté, age 73, is rumored to be gravely ill, and many observers suspect that if he dies before his current term ends in 2010 a military takeover is inevitable. Parliamentary elections, initially postponed from June to December 2007, appear unlikely before early 2008, mainly due to delays in setting up an Independent National Electoral Commission, a longtime demand of the opposition.

The January-February crackdown resulted in at least 137 dead and over 1,700 wounded. Security forces, particularly the presidential guard, were involved in murder, rape, assault, and theft. Members of security forces fired directly into crowds of unarmed demonstrators and gunned down demonstrators trying to flee to safety. In what appeared to be well organized operations, security forces ransacked the offices of one of the trade unions that organized the strike, as well as those of a private radio station. In the course of these raids, trade union leaders and journalists were robbed, arbitrarily arrested, beaten, and threatened with death. In addition, scores of people, including women, children, and elderly men who had not participated in the protests, were severely beaten and robbed at gunpoint by security forces, often in their own homes.

In May the National Assembly unanimously adopted a law creating an independent national commission of inquiry into abuses committed during the January-February strikes. While the list of commissioners was finally announced in late September, there were

concerns about the ability of the members to act independently given the politically sensitive nature of the crimes involved, and at this writing the commission has yet to become operational. The Guinean government has historically failed to adequately investigate abuses. For example, there have been no meaningful efforts to hold to account security forces responsible for murder, rape, assault, and robbery of unarmed demonstrators during a similar June 2006 strike.

The judicial system in Guinea is plagued with deficiencies, including lack of independence of the judicial branch from the executive branch, inadequate resources, corruption, inadequately trained magistrates and other personnel, and insufficient numbers of attorneys, especially those specializing in criminal law. Many people are denied justice because they cannot afford to bribe judges, magistrates, and other officials. In 2006 the global anti-corruption organization Transparency International ranked Guinea Africa's most corrupt country.

Torture and mistreatment of criminal suspects in police custody, including children, is routine. During interrogation suspects are frequently bound with cords, beaten, burned with cigarettes, and otherwise physically abused until they confess to the crime of which they are accused. Failure to prosecute perpetrators remains the biggest single obstacle to ending these abuses.

Prolonged pretrial detention remains a serious human rights issue, although in 2007 local human rights organizations were able to free some prisoners who had spent more time awaiting trial than the maximum sentence for the crime of which they were accused, and to secure a trial for others. Nevertheless, over 80 percent of those held in Guinea's largest prison in central Conakry are untried and many have been awaiting trial for two or more years.

Detention conditions throughout Guinea are grossly inadequate. In 2007 the largest prison housed close to 800 prisoners in a facility designed for up to 300. In violation of international standards, prison officials often fail to separate convicted and untried prisoners, or children from adults. Malnutrition and other health problems are rife, although fewer prisoners died from hunger in 2007 than in previous years because local and international civil society organizations are now providing food. Many prison guards, especially those serving on an unpaid "volunteer" basis, extort money from prisoners or sell them illegal drugs with impunity.

Domestic work is the largest employment category among children in Guinea, with tens of thousands of girls working as domestic laborers. Girls come from as far as Mali to work as maids, many of them victims of trafficking and forced labor. They are routinely denied education and health care and are forced to work up to 18 hours a day without pay. Beatings, sexual harassment, and rape at the hands of employers are frequent. Significant numbers of children are also employed in artisanal gold and diamond mines and granite quarries, where they perform backbreaking and dangerous work for little or no money. There is no functioning child protection system in Guinea. Although the government has created a special police unit to combat child prostitution, trafficking, and other abuses against children, perpetrators are rarely prosecuted.

The brutal repression of unarmed demonstrators in January-February 2007 was roundly condemned by the United Nations, the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union (EU), the United States, and France. ECOWAS played a leading role in helping to diffuse both the January-February crisis and tensions that arose in its aftermath. However, no country or organization was able or willing to convince Guinea to hold those responsible to account by, for example, getting the independent national commission of inquiry up and running, or addressing impunity for other more routine state-sponsored violence, such as torture.

In 2002 the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the African Development Bank suspended economic assistance to Guinea due to poor economic and political governance. In 2003 the EU invoked Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement to suspend all but humanitarian assistance to Guinea due to human rights concerns. Since his appointment in March, Prime Minister Kouyat has been lobbying extensively for more donor assistance. At a Paris donors' conference in July, the World Bank, the European Commission, and other donors committed US\$90 million in short-term emergency assistance. The European Commission and France have also announced programs to assist in reform of the judicial sector.

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