

ATROCITIES WATCH AFRICA

Atrocities Watch Africa Monitor

June 2023

Atrocities Watch Africa (AWA) is a non-partisan, civil society organisation that provides continental leadership in matters pertaining to the prevention of mass atrocities within Africa, our strategies and approaches are grounded in the realisation that atrocities can be prevented through various interventions, including, but not limited to, early warning mechanisms, diplomatic efforts, use of social media and new technologies, litigation, and advocacy campaigns.

This newsletter builds on our team's continuous monitoring of the region that allows us to identify deteriorating situations where atrocities may be committed as well as track ongoing situations of ongoing atrocities to detect increasing tendencies or opportunities for improvement.

This month newsletter covers:

- Cameroon
- Ethiopia
- Mali
- Nigeria
- Sudan

Cameroon:

In a rare attack suspected separatists targeted a military post in the village of Matouke, about 40km from Douala, killing at least six people-including one civilian-and injuring many others, according to Cameroonian authorities. This attack is the first time anglophone rebels have gotten so close to the city since the conflict broke out in 2017. The Cameroonian government responded by increasing the military presence on the border between the Littoral region and the English-speaking Southwest and asked civilians to denounce suspected fighters in their towns and villages.¹ Residents of Matouke were left feeling unnerved and insecure.² A group from the Ambazonia Liberation Council claimed responsibility for the attack they said in retaliation to the army having killed around seven separatists the previous week.³

Over 30 women were abducted by separatists in the northwestern region of the country and released days later in the country's English-speaking region, some said to have been severely tortured. According to local authorities, they had been protesting violence and taxes imposed

¹ VOA, "Cameroon Separatists Stage Attack Near French-Speaking City of Douala," 2 May 2023, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202305030060.html>

² ADF Magazine, "Anglophone Separatists Step Up Attacks In Cameroon," 16 May 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/05/anglophone-separatists-step-up-attacks-in-cameroon/>

³ Journal du Cameroun, "Cameroun-Moungo : quatre morts dans une attaque séparatiste » 2 May 2023, <https://journalducameroun.com/cameroun-moungo-quatre-morts-dans-une-attaque-separatiste/>

by separatists.⁴ Kidnappings have been on the rise for the last five years and mass kidnappings are now more common, analysts suggest this is a new fundraising method in a context in which the government has imposed tighter controls on money flows. Activists believe women are being deliberately targeted due to the crucial role they play in crisis resolution in traditional and tribal societies in Cameroon.⁵

Cameroon celebrated its National Day on 20 May, activists and religious and traditional rulers called for an end to the anglophone separatist conflict which has killed more than 6,000 people since it began. Traditional leaders strongly emphasised the need to put an end to the ongoing hate speech between English and French speakers ongoing among communities and on local radio and TV stations.⁶

Ethiopia:

The ethnic cleansing campaign against Tigrayans in Western Tigray is ongoing despite the November 2022 cessation of hostilities agreement. Local authorities and Amhara forces have continued to kill, torture, arbitrarily arrest, and expel Tigrayans in what may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, according to a recent Human Rights Watch investigation.⁷ A government task force was supposed to investigate the violations in the area by December 2022, however, so far there are no details of these investigations nor has anyone been held responsible.⁸

Tensions rose between Amhara regional forces and the government when the latter indicated they would disarm Amhara regional forces and integrate them into the federal army in April. The Amhara population saw this as an undermining their regional autonomy and self-administration. Prominent Amhara figures spoke out against this, considering it an advance of “militant Oromo nationalism that seeks to forcefully assimilate other groups.” Protests took place throughout the region, a curfew was imposed in the city of Gondar and clashes were reported. In Addis Ababa, some Amhara-linked journalists and community leaders were arrested.⁹ The situation worsened when Girma Yeshitila, the head of the Prosperity Party (PP) in Amhara, was killed and the federal government announced a law enforcement operation against “extremist forces”. Amhara forces have been organising against the federal government, a new FANO militia called the Gondar Brigade was formed in late May and sporadic clashes were recorded in the region.¹⁰

⁴ RFI, “Cameroon: Women Kidnapped by Separatists in Anglophone Cameroon Released,” 25 May 2023, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202305260007.html>

⁵ DW, “Cameroon: How Abductions Finance Separatists in Cameroon,” 25 May 2023, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202305260115.html>

⁶ VOA, “Cameroon Calls for Peace, Reconciliation Ahead of Country's National Day,” 18 May 2023, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202305190071.html>

⁷ Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: Ethnic Cleansing Persists Under Tigray Truce,” 1 June 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/01/ethiopia-ethnic-cleansing-persists-under-tigray-truce>

⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: Ethnic Cleansing Persists Under Tigray Truce,” 1 June 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/01/ethiopia-ethnic-cleansing-persists-under-tigray-truce>

⁹ BBC, “Ethiopia's Amhara region hit by protests over move to dissolve regional forces,” 10 April 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65194146>

¹⁰ Ethiopia Insight, “Amharas turning on Abiy are short of Ethiopian allies,” 7 June 2023, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2023/06/07/amharas-turning-on-abiy-are-short-of-ethiopian-allies/>

In addition, in the past months, the situation in Oromia has been particularly worrisome. An initial round of peace negotiations between the government and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) ended in early May. Regrettably, although the parties agreed to continue negotiations, no substantial agreements were reached.¹¹ However armed clashes between the OLA and the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and violence against civilians continued and there was a spike in political violent events following the first round of negotiations.¹²

Despite over 20 million Ethiopians relying on food aid, the assistance was temporarily suspended after reports of it being mismanaged. Both the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) and USAID halted their operations throughout the country on 9 June, after discovering a “widespread and coordinated campaign” orchestrated by federal and regional government entities that was diverting the food from Ethiopians in need. USAID had already suspended operations in Tigray, where over six million people are in need of assistance, a month prior, as food was not reaching intended recipients and was instead being sold in local markets.¹³ Witnesses said rebel Tigray authorities had regularly taken a proportion of beneficiaries’ aid rations during the war as tax.¹⁴ It is unknown when these operations are expected to resume, but women in southeastern Tigray are dying of hunger according to a local news source.¹⁵ The situation in Tigray continues to be a cause for concern, as the implementation of the peace agreement has been slow and the suspension of food supplies may undermine the faith in the ongoing process.

Mali:

In May 2023, the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) issued a comprehensive report on the Moura massacre in March 2022. The UN report is based on interviews with victims and witnesses as well as forensics and other information as the team was not allowed to access the village of Moura.¹⁶ They concluded that over 500 people were killed – at least 238 of which were summarily executed – by the Malian armed forces (FAMA) accompanied by foreign military personnel. It also reported that at least 58 women and girls were raped or subjected to other forms of sexual violence during the five day attacks and those detained were subjected to torture and other ill-treatment during questioning.¹⁷ The killings took place during a five day anti-terrorist military mission in the Mopti region of central Mali and were accompanied by

¹¹ Anadolu Agency, “Peace talks between Ethiopia, Oromo rebels conclude without deal,” 3 May 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/peace-talks-between-ethiopia-oromo-rebels-conclude-without-deal/2888352>

¹² Ethiopia Peace Observatory, EPO weekly: 29 April-19 May 2023, 24 May 2023, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/05/24/epo-weekly-29-april-19-may-2023/>

¹³ USAid, Pause of U.S. Food Aid in Tigray, Ethiopia, 3 May 2023, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/may-03-2023-pause-us-food-aid-tigray-ethiopia>

¹⁴ The Guardian, “Food aid suspended in Ethiopia after ‘widespread and coordinated’ thievery,” 9 June 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jun/09/food-aid-suspended-in-ethiopia-after-widespread-and-coordinated-thievery>

¹⁵ Tigrai TV, 29 April 2023, https://twitter.com/tigrai_tv/status/1652367797350006784?s=46&t=gPCV6UcsqZiGO_KhCPEn-Q

¹⁶ OHCHR, Malian troops, foreign military personnel killed over 500 people during military operation in Moura in March 2022 – UN human rights report, 12 May 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/05/malian-troops-foreign-military-personnel-killed-over-500-people-during#:~:text=Malian%20troops%2C%20foreign%20military%20personnel,UN%20human%20rights%20report%20%7C%20OHCHR>

¹⁷ OHCHR, Rapport sur les évènements de Moura du 27 au 31 mars 2022, May 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/mali/20230512-Moura-Report.pdf>

summary executions, rape and torture and could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. According to witnesses, a military helicopter flew over the village, opening fire on people while soldiers on the ground shot at those trying to escape. The following day, soldiers began going house to house searching for “presumed terrorists,” executing many. This was the most violent attack against civilians since the start of the conflict in 2012.

Military investigators opened an investigation on the instructions of the Defence Ministry and veterans in the aftermath of the attacks,¹⁸ however the outcome is pending. The Malian authorities denounced the report.¹⁹ However its release is building support for accountability. Amnesty International drew the attention of the International Criminal Court, which has an ongoing investigation into the Mali situation.²⁰

The vote for the referendum to accept or reject constitutional amendments, a major milestone on the road to elections scheduled for 2024 took place on 18 June and was marred by irregularities. A local observation mission reported that voter turnout was only 27%, some election officials were abducted and ballot boxes were removed in several localities.²¹ Among the most controversial changes, the amendment significantly strengthens the power of the president who will be able to appoint or remove the prime minister and other ministers and can also dissolve parliament.²² Armed groups who fought for independence in the country's north say the draft constitution doesn't comply with the provisions of the 2015 peace agreement.²³ The opposition and civil society organisations denounced the referendum, citing organisational problems and questioning the junta's legitimacy to call the poll. Some advocates fear that if approved this will concentrate all powers in hands of the president.²⁴ Although this is a step closer to holding elections there is still much to be done to meet the February 2024 deadline.

The International Crisis group listed Mali under its conflicts to watch in 2023, as last year was the deadliest ever recorded in the country. The organisation issued recommendations to the European Union (EU) in a context in of the country tilt away from France and Russia's growing presence. They recommend the EU focus on governance reforms, economic development,

¹⁸ RFI, “Mali opens investigation into alleged massacre in Moura village,” 7 April 2022, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20220407-mali-opens-investigation-into-alleged-massacre-in-moura-village>

¹⁹ VOA, “Mali Denounces UN Report on Army Killings,” 13 May 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/mali-denounces-un-report-on-army-killings-/7092473.html>

²⁰ Amnesty International, “Mali: The perpetrators of the Moura massacre must be prosecuted and tried by a competent court,” 17 May 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/mali-les-auteurs-des-tueries-a-moura-doivent-etre-poursuivis-et-juges-devant-un-tribunal-competent/>

²¹ Anadolu Agency, “Vote count in Mali's constitutional referendum marked by kidnappings, irregularities,” 20 June 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/vote-count-in-mali-s-constitutional-referendum-marked-by-kidnappings-irregularities/2926332>

²² Al Jazeera, “Mali gov't announces June 18 for referendum on new constitution,” 5 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/5/mali-announces-new-date-for-referendum-on-new-constitution>

²³ Associated Press, “Mali's junta releases timeline for constitutional referendum,” 5 May 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mali-constitution-referendum-june-0d335b0bed381c2601403873b28695ef>

²⁴ RFI, “Campaign kicks off for Mali's long-awaited referendum on a new constitution,” 3 June 2023, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20230603-campaign-kicks-off-for-mali-s-long-awaited-referendum-on-a-new-constitution>

civil society and an effective transition back to civilian rule. Above all the EU should insist on Mali exploring non-military solutions to the ongoing insecurity.²⁵

Nigeria:

Mass atrocities crimes continue to torment Nigeria. According to a report by Nigeria Mourns released in May, in the first quarter of 2023 at least 1,230 people were killed and over 658 abductions took place. The vast majority - over 75% - of killings took place in the northern part of the country, mostly caused by bandits followed by insurgent activity from Boko Haram or ISWAP. However, this is just one of the conflict dynamics in the country. The activities of herdsmen cause the most casualties in north-central Nigeria. In the south, killings were almost exclusively attributed to secessionist activities.²⁶ Nigeria Mourns highlighted a rise in extrajudicial killings, mostly perpetrated by security personnel, comprising about 10% of the reported deaths throughout the country over the same period. At least 56 people were in Doma, Nasarawa State and 30 in Kutunku village, Niger State as a result of Nigerian Airforce shelling of suspected bandits' location. At the same time, the continued loss of lives of security personnel by armed groups and criminal organisations constitutes a threat to the general security of Nigerians and there is a need for stronger security measures.²⁷

At least 80 people were killed when gunmen attacked at least 10 villages in Mangu district, Plateau State, in May, so far seven suspects were arrested. Locals believe the attacks were carried out by herdsmen after a resident complained that his banana plantation had been destroyed by their cattle. Unfortunately, security forces only managed to arrive a day after the attacks began, analysts blamed their ineffective early warning system and a lack of firepower and personnel to prevent such attacks.²⁸

Gubernatorial elections took place in March amidst ongoing voter intimidation and low turnout. Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) workers and offices were heavily targeted and attacks were especially high in Kano state where the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) candidate, Abba Kabir won the election and in Lagos, a key battleground for the Labour Party.²⁹ Political killings comprised over 7% of all killings between January and March 2023, most having occurred around the National Election.³⁰

Sudan:

Two months have passed since the fighting between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) began on 15 April 2023. Both parties to the war continued to use explosive weapons in urban areas, killing civilians, damaging property and critical

²⁵ International Crisis Group, Watch List 2023 – Spring Update, 12 May 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/watch-list-2023-spring-update>

²⁶ Nigeria Mourns, 2023 Mass Atrocities 1st Quarter Report, <https://www.nigeriamourns.org/2023-mass-atrocities-1st-quarter-report/>

²⁷ Nigeria Mourns, 2023 Mass Atrocities 1st Quarter Report, <https://www.nigeriamourns.org/2023-mass-atrocities-1st-quarter-report/>

²⁸ AP, "At least 80 people were killed in an attack in northern Nigeria. Police arrested 7 suspects," 18 May 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/nigeria-violence-killings-shooting-plateau-herdsmen-fulani-043596ecac029a7b5603cb3a0513732b>

²⁹ ACLED, Regional Overview Africa March 2023, 6 April 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/04/06/regional-overview-africa-march-2023/>

³⁰ Nigeria Mourns, 2023 Mass Atrocities 1st Quarter Report, <https://www.nigeriamourns.org/2023-mass-atrocities-1st-quarter-report/>

infrastructure and leaving millions of Sudanese without access to basic necessities showing reckless disregard for civilian lives and in clear violation of international humanitarian law.³¹ Widespread looting by warring parties - mostly RSF- as well as armed gangs or unidentified assailants, is also common.³² Currently 25 million Sudanese, more than half of the population, are in need of assistance.³³

There have been numerous cases of rape and other forms of sexual or gender-based violence, the governmental Combating Violence Against Women and Children Unit documented 49 cases in the first two weeks of the war,³⁴ this number is believed to be grossly underreported. Health facilities have been destroyed or forced to close down, and medical supplies have been looted,³⁵ by mid-May, only 16% of the capital's hospitals were still functioning.³⁶ Doctors and activists seeking to document the ongoing human rights violations are being targeted, with arrests and threats and 11 doctors had been killed as of 17 May. At least some threats are believed to come from people connected to former president al-Bashir seeking to put an end to the civilian resistance.³⁷

Fighting has been particularly intense in Al Geneina, which was subject to intense fighting also in the transitional period. Community leaders were targeted in Geneina and witnesses in Darfur said that the RSF is carrying out ethnic killings against the Masalit tribe, which fought the central government and the Janjaweed in the early 2000s.³⁸ Over 1,100 people have been killed in Geneina since the start of the fighting, doctors have compared the situation with the Rwandan genocide of 1994,³⁹ and it is estimated that over 273,000 people are displaced in West Darfur state.⁴⁰ Although internet and connectivity issues are making it difficult to fully report on the situation, there is increasing reason to believe that mass atrocity crimes are currently being committed. The head of UNITAMS, Mr. Volker Perthes, issued a statement recognising the "emerging pattern of large-scale targeted attacks against civilians based on

³¹ Human Rights Watch, "Sudan: Explosive Weapons Harming Civilians," 4 May 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/04/sudan-explosive-weapons-harming-civilians>

³² Human Rights Watch, "Interview: Stories of Abuse, Suffering From People Fleeing Fighting in Sudan," 2 June 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/02/interview-stories-abuse-suffering-people-fleeing-fighting-sudan>

³³ Washington Post, "Sudan's warring factions target doctors and activists," 17 May 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/17/sudan-rsf-doctors-military-bahri/>

³⁴ VOA, "'No Woman Feels Safe': Sexual Violence Rampant in Sudan War," 7 June 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/no-woman-feels-safe-sexual-violence-rampant-in-sudan-war-/7127981.html>

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Interview: Stories of Abuse, Suffering From People Fleeing Fighting in Sudan," 2 June 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/02/interview-stories-abuse-suffering-people-fleeing-fighting-sudan>

³⁶ Washington Post, "Sudan's warring factions target doctors and activists," 17 May 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/17/sudan-rsf-doctors-military-bahri/>

³⁷ Washington Post, "Sudan's warring factions target doctors and activists," 17 May 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/17/sudan-rsf-doctors-military-bahri/>

³⁸ Washington Post, "Sudan's warring factions target doctors and activists," 17 May 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/17/sudan-rsf-doctors-military-bahri/>

³⁹ Dabanga Sudan, "Sudan: More Than 1,100 Dead in Besieged El Geneina, West Darfur," 12 June 2023, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202306130016.html>

⁴⁰ US Department of State, "Condemning Atrocities in Darfur," 15 June 2023, <https://www.state.gov/condemning-atrocities-in-darfur/#:~:text=Local%20groups%20estimate%20that%20up,displaced%20in%20West%20Darfur%20state.>

their ethnic identities” in El Geneina, allegedly committed by Arab militias and men in RSF uniform, which if verified, could amount to crimes against humanity.⁴¹ He has since been declared persona non grata in Sudan.

The first round of the Jeddah talks, mediated by the US and Saudi Arabia took place in May and resulted in both parties committing to protect civilians and two ceasefire agreements that were repeatedly violated. The mediators later announced the suspension of negotiations citing the repeated violations to the ceasefire which impeded the delivery of humanitarian assistance and restoration of basic services, which were the purpose of the short-term ceasefires.⁴² Since the suspension of the Jeddah talks different approaches to a path forward are being analysed, including the possibility of them taking place in another fora.⁴³ There was no civilian participation in the Jeddah talks, making it essentially a closed negotiation between both warring parties.

International Response:

The African Union’s Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) met at the head of State level on May 27 condemning the fighting and recognising ongoing violations of international human rights law and humanitarian law.⁴⁴ They adopted the Roadmap for the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan toward silencing the guns in Sudan, consisting of six elements:

- the establishment of a coordination mechanism to ensure all efforts by the regional and global actors are harmonised and impactful;
- an immediate, permanent, inclusive and comprehensive cessation of hostilities;
- effective humanitarian response;
- protection of civilians and civil infrastructure;
- Strategic role of neighbouring states and the region; and
- resumption of a credible and inclusive political transition process, that takes into account the contributory role of all Sudanese political and social actors, as well as the signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement, towards a democratic civilian-led government.⁴⁵

⁴¹ UNITAMS, Statement by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sudan and head of UNITAMS, Mr. Volker Perthes, on the situation in Sudan, 13 June 2023, <https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/statement-special-representative-secretary-general-sudan-and-head-united-nations-integrated>

⁴² Dabanga Sudan, “Sudan: Jeddah Talks Suspended As Sudan Ceasefire Falter,” 1 June 2023, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202306020013.html>

⁴³ Agenzia Nova, “Sudan: Kenya leads African mediation after the failure of the Jeddah talks,” 13 June 2023, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/sudan-kenya-leads-african-mediation-after-failure-of-jeddah-talks/>

⁴⁴ AUPSC, Communique of the 1156th meeting of the PSC, held at the level of Heads of State and Government, on 27 May 2023, on the Situation in Sudan, 29 May 2023, <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-1156th-meeting-of-the-psc-held-at-the-level-of-heads-of-state-and-government-on-27-may-2023-on-the-situation-in-sudan>

⁴⁵ AUPSC, Communique of the 1156th meeting of the PSC, held at the level of Heads of State and Government, on 27 May 2023, on the Situation in Sudan, 29 May 2023, <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-1156th-meeting-of-the-psc-held-at-the-level-of-heads-of-state-and-government-on-27-may-2023-on-the-situation-in-sudan>