



HUMAN  
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WATCH

# “We Found Their Bodies Later that Day”

Atrocities by Armed Islamists and Security Forces  
in Burkina Faso’s Sahel Region

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Atrocities by Armed Islamists and Security Forces in  
Burkina Faso’s Sahel Region

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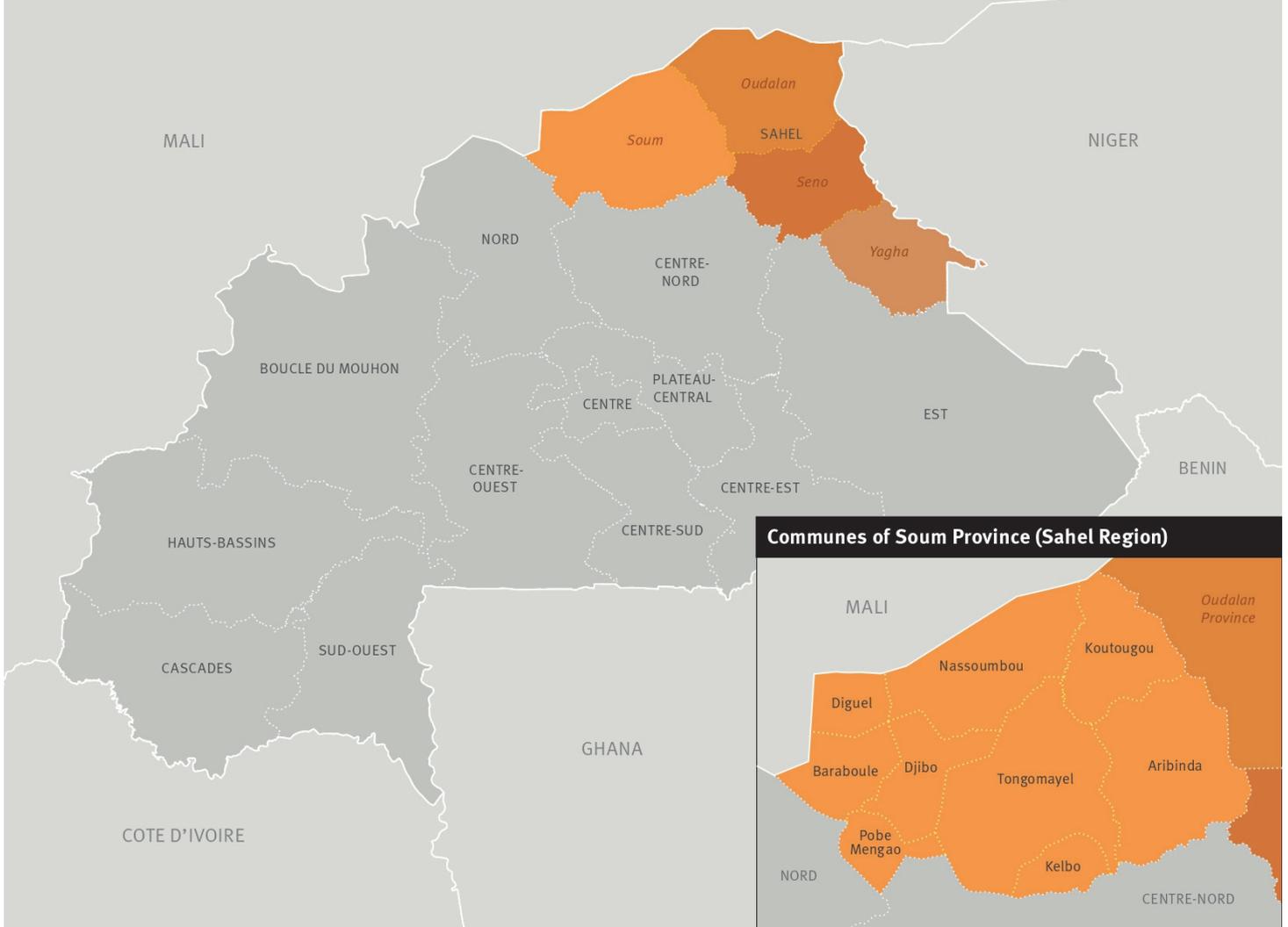
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# Map

## Burkina Faso Regions and Sahel Region Provinces





# Summary

Atrocities by armed Islamist groups active in Burkina Faso and by the Burkinabè security forces in the course of counterterrorism operations have significantly increased since mid-2018, according to recent studies and other sources, leaving scores dead, and forcing tens of thousands of villagers to flee their homes. While the violence and insecurity have spread throughout the country, the epicenter of abuse and insecurity remains the northern Sahel region, which borders Mali and Niger.

Burkina Faso has been grappling with armed Islamist insurgent groups since the emergence in 2016 of Ansaroul Islam, a homegrown group with roots in the country's Sahel region. Ansaroul Islam and a patchwork of groups linked to both Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have attacked army bases, police, and gendarme posts, and civilian targets including in the capital, Ouagadougou, leaving several hundred dead, including security force members and civilians.

This report documents alleged atrocities by both the armed Islamists and the security forces in the Sahel region, from mid-2018 until February 2019. The abuses were documented during a research trip to Ouagadougou in January 2019 and in phone interviews in February and March. Human Rights Watch interviewed 92 victims and witnesses to abuses as well as leaders from the ethnic Bella, Foulse, Mossi and Peuhl communities; justice and defense ministry officials; health workers; diplomats; and security analysts.

The abuses documented took place in 32 hamlets, villages and towns in the Sahel region, the vast majority within the Arbinda and Tongomayel administrative areas, or communes, of Soum Province. The findings build on Human Rights Watch research in Burkina Faso during 2018.

The report documents incidents during which armed Islamist groups allegedly killed at least 42 civilians, who they suspected of being government collaborators; abducted and intimidated local leaders; engaged in pillage, commandeered ambulances and stopped animal vaccination campaigns; destroyed schools, forbade women from socializing or

selling in the market and villagers from celebrating marriages and baptisms; and shot up local businesses.

The research found that all major ethnic groups present in the Sahel region of northern Burkina Faso were subjected to intimidation by armed Islamists who persistently warned them not to divulge their whereabouts to the authorities and obliged them to adhere to a strict interpretation of Islam. However, the majority of alleged killings and livestock pillage had targeted members of the Bella, Foulse and Mossi communities, for their perceived support of the government. At least three massacres of up to 20 civilians by armed Islamists appeared to target communities in the process of forming a self-defense militia.

In response to the growing presence of armed Islamists, the Burkinabè security forces allegedly executed at least 116 unarmed men accused of supporting or harboring the armed Islamists in incidents documented by Human Rights Watch. The victims were, with few exceptions, ethnic Peuhl. The executions and other abuses documented by Human Rights Watch occurred in 19 separate incidents. The witnesses and several sources with detailed knowledge of security force operations in the north, said all but a few of these incidents very likely implicated a detachment of some 100 gendarmes who, from late August, have been based in the town of Arbinda. All but two incidents happened within a 50-kilometer radius of Arbinda.

All of the victims were last seen in the custody of government security forces and had been shot in the head or chest hours after their detention, according to witnesses who spoke with Human Rights Watch. They described large operations involving dozens of security force members traveling on motorcycles and vehicles and, in several cases, operating small drones. Witnesses to the majority of incidents described individuals in civilian dress operating alongside the security force members, notably to ‘index’ or identify those to be detained and later executed.

For nearly all of the incidents documented by Human Rights Watch, witnesses provided lists of the victims and drew maps indicating where the bodies of the men were found and where they were buried.

Villagers consistently decried being caught between armed Islamists’ threats to execute those who collaborated with the government, and the security forces, who expected them

to provide intelligence about the presence of armed groups and meted out collective punishment when they did not. Community leaders representing different ethnic groups expressed concern that the security force abuses were serving to drive villagers into the hands of the armed Islamists.

The abuses by both sides have led to a dramatic and dangerous increase in ethnic tension between the Peuhl ethnic group who appear to be targeted by state security forces for their perceived support of armed Islamists, and the Mossi and Foulse groups who have disproportionately suffered from armed Islamist violence and are perceived to support the security forces.

On March 8, 2019, Human Rights Watch sent the Burkinabè government a letter detailing the major findings of this report and its recommendations, and on March 18, 2019, the Minister of Defense responded on behalf of the government, committing to investigate the alleged abuses detailed in the report.

The Burkinabè government should urgently open investigations into the alleged human rights violations by all sides documented in this report; place on administrative leave those in command positions, including those who were or are based in Arbinda, pending investigation of their alleged involvement in abuses; and take concrete measures to prevent further abuses by all security forces involved in counterterrorism operations. Armed Islamists should cease all extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, and other serious human rights abuses.

Burkina Faso's international partners should privately and publicly call upon the government to stop the abuses, conduct credible investigations into the allegations and hold to account those, including actors at the highest level, responsible for abuse.

## Methodology

The report is based on in-person interviews conducted during a research mission to Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in January 2019, as well as on several interviews in February and March 2019, which were conducted by telephone. A few in-person interviews conducted in Ouagadougou and Mali in 2018 are also referenced in the report.

Human Rights Watch conducted 92 interviews, 61 of which were with victims of and witnesses to abuses. The remaining 31 interviews were with justice and defense ministry officials, health workers, local government officials, diplomats, civil society activists and humanitarian workers, security analysts, and religious and community leaders.

The 61 victims and witnesses interviewed are residents of 32 hamlets, villages and towns in the Sahel region. Interviews were conducted in French, Mooré, and Fulfulde, spoken by members of the Peuhl ethnic group. Interviews in Mooré and Fulfulde were conducted with the assistance of interpreters. Many victims had witnessed or had knowledge of abuses by both the armed Islamists and government security forces.

To maintain security, for both interviewees as well as for the researcher, all in-person interviews were conducted in or around Ouagadougou. Most victims and witnesses travelled to Ouagadougou for the interviews while several, who had recently fled violence in the north, already lived there.

A few victims and witnesses interviewed could not remember the exact date of the incidents they described. The researcher sought to determine the approximate date by probing various reference points, such as if the abuse had happened before or after major holidays, seasonal events, or attacks.

Death tolls referred to in this report were derived from witness accounts narrated to Human Rights Watch. When multiple witnesses of the same attack provided differing death tolls, Human Rights Watch included the lowest figure provided.

Nearly all victims and witnesses to abuse by both the armed Islamist groups and the security forces expressed extreme anxiety about their identities being revealed. As a

result, we have, in several cases, withheld details, including the location, which might enable the identification of those who spoke with us.

The researcher informed all interviewees of the nature and purpose of the research, and of Human Rights Watch's intention to publish a report with the information gathered. The researcher obtained oral consent for each interview and gave each interviewee the opportunity to decline to answer questions. Interviewees did not receive material compensation for speaking with Human Rights Watch, however travel expenses incurred by interviewees were reimbursed.

# Background

## Brief Background on Armed Islamist Group Activity in Burkina Faso

Since 2015, armed Islamist groups have carried out hundreds of attacks across Burkina Faso. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies reported that attacks by armed Islamist groups active in Burkina Faso had grown from three 3 in 2015, to 12 in 2016, 29 in 2017, and 137 in 2018.<sup>1</sup> The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded nearly 200 suspected attacks by these groups in 2018 alone.<sup>2</sup>

The armed groups' attacks have been concentrated in the administrative Sahel Region bordering Mali and Niger, and in Ouagadougou, the capital city. From late 2017, and increasingly during 2018, attacks have spread into other administrative regions notably the Est, Boucle du Mouhoun and Nord Regions.<sup>3</sup>

A patchwork of groups with shifting and overlapping allegiances are involved in and have claimed responsibility for many of the attacks including Burkinabè armed Islamist group Ansaroul Islam, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as well as its affiliates, notably the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM).<sup>4</sup>

The growing presence of these groups in Burkina Faso is linked to insecurity in neighboring Mali, where northern regions fell to separatist Tuareg and Al-Qaeda-linked armed groups in 2012.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "The Complex and Growing Threat of Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel," February 15, 2019, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-complex-and-growing-threat-of-militant-islamist-groups-in-the-sahel/> (accessed March 6, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> ACLED security in Southwestern Burkina Faso in the Context of an Expanding Insurgency, ACLED, January 17, 2019. <https://www.acleddata.com/2019/01/17/insecurity-in-southwestern-burkina-faso-in-the-context-of-an-expanding-insurgency/> (assessed March 12, 2019.)

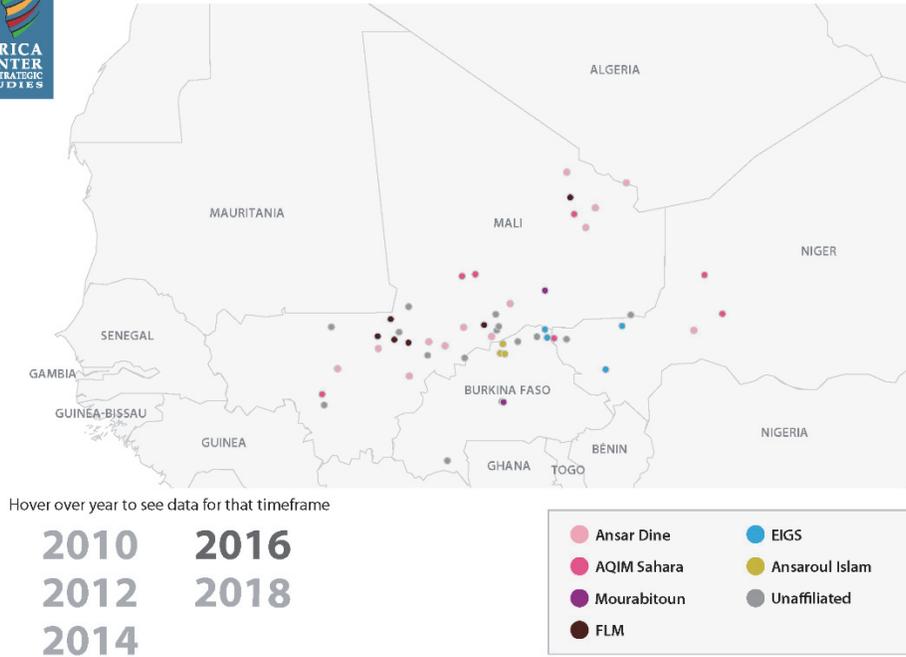
<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with security sources, Ouagadougou, January 21, 22, 24, 2019, and "In Burkina Faso the terrorism threat is spreading to the East," France 24, August 9, 2019, "<https://www.france24.com/en/20180908-burkina-faso-terrorism-threat-spreading-east-g5-sahel-mali-aqim-gsim-al-qaeda-jihad>, (assessed March 6, 2019.)

<sup>4</sup> "Analysis: Within a span of week, the jihadist group claimed seven attacks on Malian and Burkinabe military targets, as well as local militia groups," Long War Journal, January 30, 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/01/al-qaeda-group-claims-series-of-attacks-across-sahel.php> (accessed March 6, 2019), "Analysis: Jihadist attacks on the rise in northern Burkina Faso," Long War Journal, October 2, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/10/analysis-jihadist-attacks-on-the-rise-in-northern-burkina-faso.php> (accessed March 6, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with security analysts, Bamako, Sevare and Ouagadougou, 2016-2019.



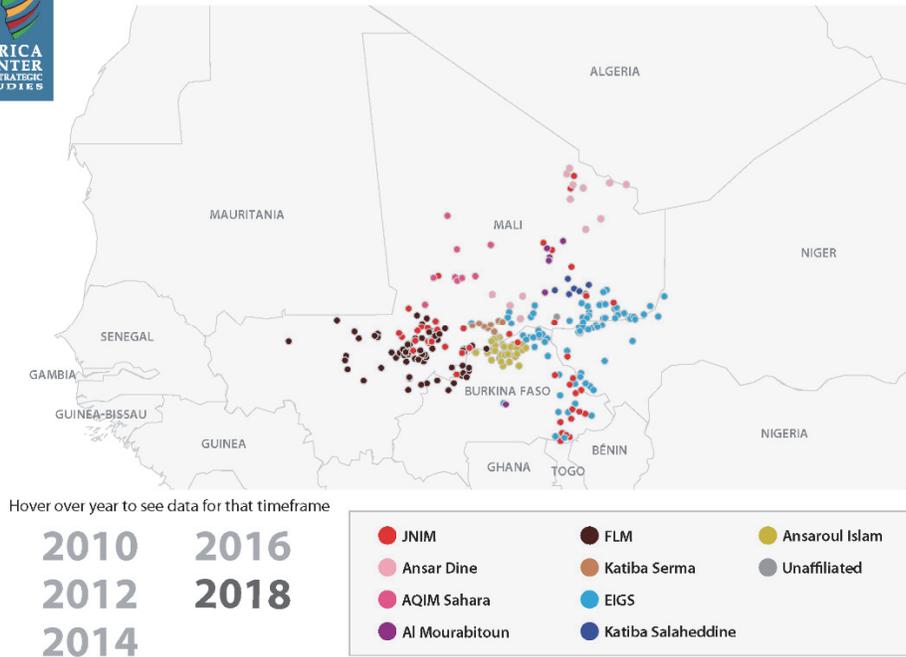
### VIOLENT EVENTS LINKED TO MILITANT ISLAMIST GROUPS IN THE SAHEL



Data Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)



### VIOLENT EVENTS LINKED TO MILITANT ISLAMIST GROUPS IN THE SAHEL



Data Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)

Violent events in the Sahel have increased dramatically between 2016 and 2018, due to increased activity and presence by armed Islamist groups. © 2019 Africa Center for Strategic Studies.



Members of Islamist Armed group in Mali in 2012. The growing presence of armed Islamist groups allied to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) is linked to insecurity in neighboring Mali, where northern regions fell to separatist Tuareg and Al-Qaeda-linked armed groups in 2012. © 2012 ROMARIC OLLO HIEN/AFP/Getty Images

From 2015, armed Islamist groups spread to central Mali, and from 2016, with the emergence of Ansarul Islam, into Burkina Faso.<sup>6</sup>

In both Mali and Burkina Faso, these groups have concentrated their recruitment efforts on the ethnic Peuhl, whose community's frustrations and grievances over poverty, government corruption, lack of justice for common crimes, and abusive conduct by the security forces, have been exploited to garner recruits.<sup>7</sup> Peuhl community leaders

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<sup>6</sup> For more information see Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Abuses Spread South - Armed Islamist Groups' Atrocities, Army Responses Generate Fear," <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/19/mali-abuses-spread-south> and International Crisis Group, "The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North," <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/254-social-roots-jihadist-violence-burkina-fasos-north> (accessed April 23, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Peuhl elders and community, religious, and political leaders, Bamako, Severe, and Ouagadougou, 2015-2019.

denounce what they perceive to be a demonization of their community, and claim that the security forces have meted out collective punishment against them.<sup>8</sup>

In response to a spike in security force casualties in late 2018, notably the December 26 killing by armed Islamists of 10 gendarmes, Burkinabè President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré on December 31, 2018, declared a state of emergency in 14 of Burkina Faso's 45 provinces.<sup>9</sup> On February 16, 2019, during a security conference in Germany, Foreign Minister Alpha Barry raised an alarm about the increasing number of attacks by armed Islamists in Burkina Faso, including along the borders with Benin, Ivory Coast and Ghana, noting, "This threat is gaining ground."<sup>10</sup>

The growing insecurity in the Sahel prompted the 2017 creation of a multinational counterterrorism force comprised of troops from Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.<sup>11</sup> The force, known as the G5 Sahel Joint Force (Force conjointe du G5 Sahel), coordinates its operations with the 4,500-strong French counterterrorism mission, Operation Barkhane, and with the 12,000-strong United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

As of February 2019, the violence, insecurity, and communal clashes in Burkina Faso had led to the internal displacement of over 100,000 people, according to the European Union.<sup>12</sup> In March 2019, the United Nations said over 70,000 had fled their homes since the beginning of the year.<sup>13</sup> Over 7,000 Burkinabè have sought refuge in neighboring Mali.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Peuhl elders and community, religious, and political leaders, Bamako, Sebare, and Ouagadougou, 2015-2019.

<sup>9</sup> "Etat d'urgence au Burkina Faso: Voici ce qui a été décidé pour les provinces concernées," NetAfrique, January 1, 2019, <http://netafrique.net/etat-durgence-au-burkina-faso-voici-ce-qui-a-ete-decide-pour-les-provinces-concernees/> (accessed March 6, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> "Sahel instability spreading to coastal West Africa: Burkina Faso," Reuters, February 19, 2019. [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-\(assessed-germany-security-sahel/sahel-instability-spreading-to-coastal-west-africa-burkina-faso-idUSKCN1Q50H1](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-(assessed-germany-security-sahel/sahel-instability-spreading-to-coastal-west-africa-burkina-faso-idUSKCN1Q50H1) (accessed February 22, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> "French and West African presidents launch Sahel force," Reuters, July 2, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-sahel/french-and-west-african-presidents-launch-sahel-force-idUSKBN19NoCS> (accessed March 6, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> "Burkina Faso – Forced Displacement (DG ECHO, UN OCHA, INGOs) (ECHO Daily Flash of 19 February 2019)" <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-forced-displacement-dg-echo-un-ocha-ingos-echo-daily-flash-19>, (accessed March 5, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> "Drastic deterioration in security across Burkina Faso as 70,000 flee their homes in past two months, UN warns," UN news, March 5, 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1034151>, (accessed March 6, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR "Country Operation Update, October 2018: Burkina Faso," <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/66272.pdf> (accessed March 6, 2019).

## **Abuses by Armed Islamist Groups in Burkina Faso's Sahel Region**

Dozens of villagers from different communities and ethnic groups in the Sahel region told Human Rights Watch the presence of, and abuses by, armed Islamists had steadily increased throughout 2018, notably in the Oudalan and Soum provinces of the Region. They said the abuses were particularly acute around the towns of Arbinda and Tongomayel, in Soum Province.

They described being extremely frightened by the growing presence of the armed Islamists. They said that members of these groups abducted and executed local leaders, pillaged livestock, commandeered ambulances, stopped animal vaccination campaigns, destroyed schools, forbade women from socializing or selling in the market, forbade villagers from celebrating marriages and baptisms, and destroyed local businesses.

### **Killings and Abductions by Armed Islamist Groups in Burkina Faso's Sahel Region**

Communities of all of the major ethnic groups in the Sahel Region, notably the Bella, Foulse, Mossi and Peuhl, have been subjected to intimidation by the Islamists who persistently warned them not to divulge their whereabouts to the state security services. However, the majority of alleged killings documented by Human Rights Watch targeted members of the Foulse, Bella and Mossi communities.

Human Rights Watch documented 42 alleged killings and several abductions by armed Islamist groups, which occurred between April 2018 and January 2019. At least 29 people, the majority Foulse, were killed during indiscriminate attacks on two local villages, Sikiré, and Gasseliki. An additional 13 people appeared to have been targeted for assassination for their or a family member's alleged collaboration with the Burkinabè security forces.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with 21 witnesses in Ouagadougou or in phone interviews, January 17-29, 2019.

## Incidents Involving Armed Islamist Groups and Administrative Centers



Armed Islamist groups rarely claim responsibility for these killings. However, witnesses, security sources and community leaders said they firmly believed that armed Islamists were responsible for the killings, notably because many of the victims were clearly identified as representatives of the state, against whom armed Islamists have waged armed attacks, and because several of the victims had previously received warnings from the armed Islamists. Furthermore, several of the attacks appeared to target communities which were in the process of forming a village self-defense force.<sup>16</sup>

Nine Foulse villagers, aged between 20 and around 40 years, were killed during a January 27, 2019 attack on Sikiré, 20 kilometers east of the provincial capital, Arbinda. Human Rights Watch spoke with one witness and one villager with knowledge of the attack, and

<sup>16</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with witnesses, security sources and community leaders, Ouagadougou, January 17-29, 2019.

received photographs of the dead, most of whom appeared to have been shot in the head.<sup>17</sup> The victims included two brothers and two cousins. A witness explained:

At around 3 p.m. they arrived on ten motorcycles, two on each, dressed in boubous and turbans so only their eyes were showing. People were frantic; they fired in the air. The Jihadists cornered a group of nine men who were drinking tea around a motorcycle repair shop, and opened fire – all of them were killed point blank. Their bodies were together where they'd been chatting. One was with the local defense force, but he didn't even have time to respond. The others were just villagers. Two were brothers. They burned a boutique and a motorcycle and returned a few days later to steal all of the village's animals. Like 100 heads of beef.<sup>18</sup>

Armed Islamists killed 20 mostly Foulse villagers in two attacks on Gasseliki village, 30 kilometers south of Arbinda. On January 10, 2019, 12 people were gunned down in the market or in their homes, and on January 15, an attack on people gathered around a small watering hole left eight dead. The armed Islamists also burned shops and looted during the attacks. Human Rights Watch interviewed three witnesses to the attacks.<sup>19</sup> An elderly man who survived the January 10 attack said:

Around 30 Jihadists burst into town around noon, some wearing boubous, others dressed partly in camouflage. We crouched down in the house hoping to survive. They ordered one of us out saying, “we need you, open up now!” There was firing all around, we were terrified, so no-one moved. They kicked the door in, went room to room and found us hiding. I heard one saying, “we've come to clean up.” Then they opened fire in a hail of bullets killing three men including Seidu, 60-years-old, and his son and wounding two, including a woman.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interviews with witness and villager, Soum Province, January 27, 2019 and March 11, 2019. Photographs on record with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, March 11, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with three witnesses, Ouagadougou, January 26, 27, 28, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 28, 2019.



Members of Burkinabe Islamist group Ansarul Islam during a gathering in 2017. Members of Ansarul Islam and other armed Islamist groups present in Burkina Faso are implicated in numerous atrocities against civilians including extrajudicial executions. © 2017 Héni Nsaibia/ MENASTREAM.

Another villager, who survived both attacks, speculated on the motive:

The first time, the Jihadists came two-by-two on 19 motorcycles firing madly at people in the market. We fled anywhere, everywhere for cover. They stayed for 45 minutes, killing, stealing, and burning shops. I think they were warning us not to organize a self-defense militia. We'd previously been protected by about a dozen militiamen who'd come from two nearby villages, but they only stayed a few weeks. It was like the Jihadists were waiting for them to leave so it was easier to kill us. During the second attack, they killed eight people gathered around a nearby waterpoint. All of the dead were unarmed.<sup>21</sup>

Human Rights Watch documented 13 killings targeting village councilors, village chiefs, marabouts, government representatives, or members of their families. Most of the victims

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<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witnesses, Soum Province, January 28, 2019

were ethnic Bella, Foulse, or Mossi. Community leaders from these communities said the men had been targeted both for their perceived support of the Burkina Faso government or of a self-defense group, and to force the flight of civilians from these communities.<sup>22</sup>

Several witnesses described a similar method used in which several men armed with semi-automatic weapons, notably AK-47s, on motorcycles would ride into a village to abduct or directly shoot at the victim. After the assault, they would quickly leave.<sup>23</sup>

A witness to the November 3, 2018, killing of Moussa Douna, the 45-year-old village councilor of Belhouro village, 25 kilometers northwest of Arbinda, said, “Just after 7 p.m., six of them surrounded Moussa’s house, asking after him. Moussa was at that moment parking his motorcycle. He tried to run, but they were waiting. After that, we all fled the village. These people have really exasperated us, the Foulse.”<sup>24</sup> An elder who had spoken with several people with direct knowledge of the mid November 2018 killing of Bossey village councilor, Ayuba Koura, said he had been gunned down between the mosque and his home after early evening prayer.<sup>25</sup>

Two villagers described the December 20, 2018 killing of four men from Manssifigui village, in Tin-Akoff Commune, close to the border with Niger.<sup>26</sup> The victims, all of Bella ethnicity, were local municipal councilor Ismael Ag Ahmid, 65-years-old; his son Zenodin Ag Ismael, 20 years-old; president of the village development council, Bilal Ag Ilatene, 40 years-old, and another man. A witness said:

The armed Islamists went to Ismael’s house, ordering him out, but he was elsewhere in the village. His family called to warn him, saying ‘you must hide now!’ but the Islamists caught him, with his phone in hand. His son, grabbed on to his father, saying, ‘forgive him!’ and begged for the life of his dad, but an Islamist shot the son in the leg, then took his father to the local school where he was executed. When the jihadists were out of sight, the

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<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Bella, Foulse and Mossi community leaders. Ouagadougou, January 17, 27 and 29, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch in-person and phone interviews with witnesses, Ouagadougou and Soum Province, January 17-29, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, by telephone to Arbinda Commune, January 28, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 29, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with witnesses, Ouagadougou, January 18 and January 27, 2019.

wounded son tried to call the authorities, but they caught him and shot him in the chest. Another group shot and killed the other two men. I spoke with a villager who described how two jihadists were arguing over whether to warn or kill the councilor, but the Jihadist who seemed to be in charge said, “no, it is our mission to kill the old man.”<sup>27</sup>

On April 24, 2018 armed Islamists allegedly killed 65-year-old Adama Maiga, the village chief of Niafo village, and his nephew. They also killed a member of a local civil defense group. A witness said:

At around 8 p.m. I saw seven men on Alobas (motorcycles) with Kalashnikovs surround the chief’s house, saying “we need you, come out. We will kill all who collaborate with the army, including village chiefs if God wants it.” They had come to kill him, and they wasted no time. First, they shot the chief, point blank, then his nephew Salam Tao Maiga, and a third man, in a self-defense militia. But this was no battle; they also stole dozens of cows and a few motorcycles.<sup>28</sup>

In October, 2018, two men, a municipal councilor and a village chief from Filio, were executed in the nearby village of Tiembolo (adjacent to Inata) as they were leaving the mosque.<sup>29</sup> Also documented by Human Rights Watch was the December 2018 killing of a local government official in Tongomayel Commune. In late December 2018 or early January 2019, armed Islamists executed a man they allegedly thought was the son of a local chief in Arbinda commune.<sup>30</sup> “They went to his house, firing at his door; his two wives said he wasn’t there. Some days later, they returned and went straight to the place in the market where (name withheld) usually sits, finding there someone else who looks like him, and gunned him down as he tried to run into a shop. It was not the person they were looking for.”<sup>31</sup> After a similar case elsewhere in the Sahel region, a villager told Human Rights

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<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with villager, Ouagadougou, January 27, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, April 30, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, March 15, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews, Ouagadougou, January 27 and 29, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, Ouagadougou, January 29, 2019.



Villagers walk past a Mosque in the Sahel Region, in 2010. Tens of thousands of civilians have been forced to flee their homes as a result of the growing violence in northern Burkina Faso.

© 2010 Adam Jones/Wikimedia

Watch the Islamists returned to the village to ask for forgiveness for having executed “the wrong person.”<sup>32</sup>

Human Rights Watch had previously reported the April 8, 2018 killing of the mayor of the commune of Koutougou, for which the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara took responsibility.<sup>33</sup> A witness said, “During the 6 p.m. prayer, two men armed with Kalashnikovs, dressed in camouflage, came into the village on a motorcycle, and went directly to the Mayor’s compound.

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<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, Ouagadougou, January 17, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Human Rights Watch, *By Day We Fear the Army, By Night the Jihadists* (New York; Human Rights Watch, 2018) [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/burkinafaso0518\\_web2.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/burkinafaso0518_web2.pdf), and “Jihadists abduct Burkina teacher ‘for speaking French’,” *Expatica*, April 17, 2018, [https://www.expatica.com/fr/news/country-news/Burkina-attack-kidnapping\\_1815096.html](https://www.expatica.com/fr/news/country-news/Burkina-attack-kidnapping_1815096.html) (accessed May 2, 2018.)

One stopped in front, while the other went directly into his house. They were speaking in Fulfulde. It happened quickly. He'd been shot three times – on the left shoulder, then twice in the chest.”<sup>34</sup>

Several people described abductions by the armed Islamists which had targeted local Bella, Foulse and Peuhl community leaders for their alleged collaboration with government security forces. Two such leaders were later freed, while the family members of three others said their loved ones had either never returned or were believed to have been assassinated. A farmer from the Sahel region described an attack in late December during which armed Islamists abducted a marabout.

Six of the assailants had come for an elderly marabout but he was ill and partially paralyzed, so they took his son instead. They came at around 7 p.m., firing in the air, ordering us all to lay down. They said, “we know you, you are the ones giving information to the army.” They searched the house, stole motorcycles, and destroyed his koranic books, threatening to kill anyone working against them. Then, as the father was so old, they took his son, who is also a marabout. The next morning, we followed the tracks for 30 kilometers, but we couldn't find him. He is still with them. We fear for his life.<sup>35</sup>

A village elder from the Sahel Region described being abducted by armed Islamists in mid-2018:

I was away from home, looking for my cows, when my family called saying, “Papa, we woke up to find boot prints near the house. You must not come back to the village!” A week later I returned, thinking the threat had passed, but on my way, three of them appeared from the bush, firing once in the air. They tied my hands, bound my eyes and kept me in their camp for several days. They said, “you are working as a guide for the military,” but I said, “you are wrong. I don't even speak the language the soldiers use!” They argued among themselves; one said, “No, if you kill him, you've killed an

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<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Koutougou, April 16, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Sahel Region, January 27, 2019.

innocent man.” After this, they blindfolded me, and took me back, close to my village, but with a stern warning: “Don’t ever work with the army or we will kill you.”<sup>36</sup>

A relative of a Peuhl elder allegedly executed in June 2018 said, “my uncle, didn’t come home after being out with his cows. We learned later through people who know the Jihadists that he had been abducted from a village near Baraboulé. They took him north and, we were told by people who are close to them that he had been killed a week or so later.”<sup>37</sup>

In December 2018, Canadian Edith Blais and Italian Luca Tacchetto went missing while travelling through Burkina Faso.<sup>38</sup> While no armed Islamist group has taken responsibility for their abduction, they are believed to have been kidnapped and later taken to Mali.<sup>39</sup> On January 15, 2019, Canadian geologist, Kirk Woodman, was abducted, allegedly by armed Islamists, from a mining site in north-east Burkina Faso; his body was found two days later over 100 kilometers further north.<sup>40</sup>

## Threats, Looting and Intimidation by Armed Islamist Groups

Community leaders representing the different ethnic groups who reside in the Sahel Region described being deeply fearful of armed Islamists, who were increasingly present in their villages. A local government official told Human Rights Watch the violence had, since April 2018, created panic and forced some 5,000 people, the vast majority from the Foulse and Mossi ethnicities, to seek refuge in the town of Arbinda. “People are terrified because of the jihadists riding around with heavy guns. After they started assassinating chiefs, elected officials, village councilors, people started to flee.”<sup>41</sup>

A village elder from the Bella Community said, “They are all over Oudalan Province now; they patrol like a regular force; we see them all the time. They have killed; they forbid

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<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 24, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Peuhl villager, Ouagadougou, January 23, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> “Quebec Woman and Italian Friend Missing in Burkina Faso.” CTVNews, Jan 6 Jan, 2019, [www.ctvnews.ca/canada/quebec-woman-and-italian-friend-missing-in-burkina-faso-1.4241773](http://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/quebec-woman-and-italian-friend-missing-in-burkina-faso-1.4241773), (assessed March 11, 2019.)

<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Malian security sources, January 13, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> “Canadian Found Dead in Burkina Faso after Kidnapping.” Reuters, January 17, 2019, [www.reuters.com/article/us-burkina-kidnapping/canadian-found-dead-in-burkina-faso-after-kidnapping-idUSKCN1PB1FM](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-burkina-kidnapping/canadian-found-dead-in-burkina-faso-after-kidnapping-idUSKCN1PB1FM); (assessed March 11, 2019.)

<sup>41</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with local government official from Soum Province, January 27, 2019.

music, celebrations and have closed our schools.”<sup>42</sup> A Bella farmer noted, “People are dominated by fear. No man over 18 [years] dares sleep in his house anymore for fear of being kidnapped or worse.”<sup>43</sup> A Foulse village elder said:

Since April [2018] these bizarre men (Islamists) have created total panic. There are more and more of them and they are making it impossible to live. Our community makes a living through gold mining and animal herding but now we’re afraid to leave our villages. They have killed our leaders and stolen our animals. This is why thousands of villagers are fleeing.<sup>44</sup>

More than 30 villagers from different ethnic communities complained about being forced to adhere to a stricter form of Islam. “These people own the villages. We can’t celebrate as we used to, or play football, or smoke. They forbid anything which is a distraction from Islam,” said a Peuhl villager from Tongomayel Commune.”<sup>45</sup> A Peuhl market woman from Baraboulé commune said:

For the last six months, these people have made our lives hell. They force us to cover our heads and stay inside our homes. Once, in October, they even threatened to kill me if I didn’t cover. Everything is forbidden. We’re angry at them for confining us, the women, to our houses. We don’t even have the right to sell in the market, to chat with our friends, and can’t send our children to school. They don’t come every day, but they come a lot on market days and leave their spies to inform on us. <sup>46</sup>

A 75-year-old Peuhl elder from Soum Province said that since around June, “They’re always praying in our mosques, and accusing us of being infidels, most recently a few days ago. When they started again, I said, ‘We are not the infidels. It is you people who should fear God, not us.’ I wanted to lecture them about true Islam, but people told me to calm down, lest they kill me.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with village elder, Ouagadougou, January 27, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Foulse village elder, Ouagadougou, January 23, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Peuhl villager, Ouagadougou, January 29, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Peuhl woman, Ouagadougou, January 26, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Peuhl elder, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019.

Another Peuhl victim said, “we know, we must not speak ill of them. They come to our hamlet in groups of four, seven, even up to 20 and threaten us not to denounce them. They try to brainwash us. They preach and say they want our children to go with them but we, the elders, have decided no one will join them.”<sup>48</sup>

Another witness described the destruction, in mid-2018, of a school in Soum Province, “They fired at the lock, broke the windows and burned all the papers. I saw them come into town, heard the firing and later went there. The children were just looking at the destroyed school. No one goes to school now. It is haram.”<sup>49</sup>

Witnesses from over 10 villages described how armed Islamists looted livestock, motorcycles and food stocks, and burned or destroyed shops and other business. The majority of looting documented by Human Rights Watch had targeted villagers of Foulse and Bella ethnicity.

Five village leaders described largescale looting of livestock which, they said, had undermined the livelihoods of entire hamlets and villages. A Bella elder from Tin Akoff commune said, “In mid-2018, they stole 500 cows. One day you are fine and the next, you are poor. These cows were sustaining 35 families. This loss of our cows has forced us to flee and has left our children hungry.”<sup>50</sup>

A Foulse herder from a village in Arbinda Commune described how his village was attacked twice in the same week. During the first attack, they abducted the marabout, and “three days later they returned and drove away all the animals in our village – about 100 cows.”<sup>51</sup>

A Foulse community leader described how in July 2018, “nine of them [armed Islamists] came on motorcycles, five got down to drive my entire herd of 80 cows away. They said the cows are for them and threatened the shepherd saying if he wanted to live he would not

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<sup>48</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Peuhl victim, Ouagadougou, January 18, 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Bella elder, Ouagadougou, January 27, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with Foulse herder, Soum Province, January 27, 2019.

divulge their presence. Now my extended family has nothing to live on. We have no future without our cows.”<sup>52</sup>

Witnesses from a few villages and towns described the destruction of local bars and cafes, notably those where alcohol was served. Two people described the January 18, 2019 attack on the local bar, *le Séno Ambiance*, in Gorom-Gorom, the capital of Oudalan Province, during which one man was killed, apparently by a stray bullet. “This was the first time they entered Gorom-Gorom town. Jihadists on motorcycles dispersed through town, and one group entered the bar at around 9 p.m., searching for people celebrating and dancing. They fired into the air and in the process, Aruna Maiga, a driver for *Essakane* gold mine, was killed.”<sup>53</sup>

## Attacks on Ambulances and Animal Vaccination Campaigns

Health sector workers told Human Rights Watch that armed Islamists had commandeered at least six ambulances between October 2018 and January 2019, of which four were stolen or destroyed. The attacks took place near the towns of Diguel, Deou, Tin-Akoff, Oursi, Djibo and Silgadji. They speculated that they had been targeted because they represented the Burkinabè state.

A nurse from Oudalan Commune said, “In November, about 10 Jihadists forced an ambulance to halt not far from Oursi. They took the sick man down, then forced the driver 150 kilometers north, at which point it ran out of gas. They didn’t hurt the driver, thank God, but they burned the ambulance.”<sup>54</sup>

Two local officials described armed Islamists’ attacks on animal vaccination campaigns. In December 2018, armed Islamists stole the vehicle of a driver bringing ice to several teams vaccinating sheep and goats in Oudalan Province. “They fired in the air, ordered the driver to get out, then left the vehicle 10 kilometers away with a bomb either in or near it. I think they were trying to bait the army to respond, so as to cause them harm.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Foulse community leader, Ouagadougou, January 27, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness from Gorom-Gorom, Ouagadougou, January 27, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with nurse from Oudalan Province, Ouagadougou, January 17, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with local official, Ouagadougou, January 24, 2019.

A veterinary worker described how armed Islamists stopped a team trying to vaccinate cows in another area of Soum Province. “They rode into the village with their guns saying, ‘you will stop this, now!’ I guess they see the teams as government representatives. But everyone needs animals to live; in whose interest is it to undermine animal health?” he questioned.<sup>56</sup>

On February 14, a doctor in the Burkinabè army was killed by an explosive device which had allegedly been placed in a corpse by armed Islamists. The corpse, dressed in military uniform, was lying on a road near the town of Djibo. A defense department official said, “The bomb was detonated by an attempt to turn the body over, directly killing the army doctor and wounding two other team members.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with veterinary worker, Ouagadougou, January 17, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Bomb hidden in corpse kills Burkina Faso Army Doctor, Agence France Press, February 15, 2019, <https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/bomb-hidden-in-corpse-kills-burkina-faso-army-doctor-20190215> (assessed February 24, 2019.)

## Burkina Faso Security Force Violations

Human Rights Watch documented 19 incidents during which a total of 116 men and adolescents were allegedly detained and executed by members of the Burkinabè security forces. These incidents took place between September 2018 and February 2019. All but two occurred in Arbinda, Tongomayel or Koutougou communes, within a 50-kilometer radius of Arbinda town. Nearly all the victims were ethnic Peuhl and none of them, according to witnesses, were armed at the time they were detained.

For all of these 19 incidents, Human Rights Watch spoke to at least one or, in the majority of cases, several witnesses who had seen security force members detain people who were later found dead. Human Rights Watch also obtained lists of the dead, and their ages, and maps of where the bodies had been found and where they were buried.<sup>58</sup> Very few of the witnesses were present when the victims were executed, however the witnesses to each incident said the victims were last seen being detained by security force personnel and being driven away in vehicles or on motorcycles driven by security forces members, and were found dead hours later.

In all but one case, the security force members alleged to have committed the abuses were dressed in dark yellow and brown camouflage which, according to several Burkinabè and international security sources interviewed by Human Rights Watch, is worn by members of both the army and gendarmerie.<sup>59</sup>

The witnesses described the alleged perpetrators as “soldiers,” “gendarmes,” “members of the security forces,” or “the FDS” (Forces of Defense and Security). Human Rights Watch’s conclusions about the identities of the alleged perpetrators are discussed later in the report.

Witnesses and community leaders believed the victims who were detained and later executed had been targeted for their perceived support of armed Islamists groups, largely on the basis of their ethnicity as Peuhls. They said they believed the evidentiary basis for

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<sup>58</sup> Lists of the dead and maps are on record with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>59</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Burkinabe and international security sources, Ouagadougou, January 22, 28 and 29, and phone interview to Ouagadougou, March 6, 2019.

## Incidents Involving Security Forces and Administrative Centers



the majority of the detentions was weak and may have been based on false intelligence provided by people to settle personal scores.

Some said local villagers feel pressured to sell supplies, including milk, gas, sugar, cooking oil, meat, or phone credit to or, in a few cases, have a relative who supports an armed Islamist group and that this may have been the reason for their detention. Many others said those executed had absolutely no connection to the armed Islamists whatsoever.<sup>60</sup> Human Rights Watch is not in a position to determine whether or not any of the men detained and allegedly executed was a member of, or supportive of, armed Islamist groups.

<sup>60</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with witnesses and community leaders, Ouagadougou, January 17-29, 2019.

## **Alleged Executions Following Market Raids**

Human Rights Watch documented nine incidents that followed a similar modus operandi: dozens of security force members, travelling on both motorcycles and vehicles, mounted large operations on local market days. After surrounding scores of people who were conducting business at the market, the security force members detained up to 14 men and allegedly executed them, according to witnesses who found their bodies hours later, usually along the side of a road.

Witnesses to these incidents described members of the security forces being accompanied by a few men in civilian dress whose faces were completely covered and who ‘indexed’ or identified, the men who were detained and later allegedly executed.

The operations described by the witnesses occurred in the administrative communes of Arbinda, Tongomayel, Koutougou and, in one case, Baraboulé, and were: the alleged execution of 10 men in Petagoli on September 24; of 12 men in N’gaika Ngota in October; of 14 men in Taouremba on October 16; of 15 men and an adolescent in two incidents in Demtou in November and December; of four men in Béléhédé on November 13; of 12 men in Gasseliki on November 16; of 12 men in Souma on February 9, 2019; and of 9 men in Belharo (also known as Belhouro) on February 13, 2019.



I approached the market to buy grain for my animals when suddenly a man ran towards me saying, “don’t go to the market; it’s surrounded by the military!” I saw they were detaining people. Men in uniform and a few in civilian attire, their faces totally covered, started coming towards me, but first they stopped another trader, ordering him to walk to the market. I thought they would run after me but fortunately, for me, they were distracted by the other man. I hid, in great fear, in a nearby house until they left. In the convoy were many motorcycles and three big military trucks.<sup>64</sup>

Human Rights Watch obtained photographs of graves where the nine victims were allegedly buried.<sup>65</sup> The victims, aged 24 to 72 years-old, included several men from the same extended family. A witness who helped find and later buried the dead said:

We found Hamadoun Boyi Dicko, 72-years-old, separated from the others, under a tree with both knees and his forehead on the ground; it seemed like he’d asked to pray before being shot. Four others were a few meters away, lying face down, and two of them were clinging to each other; the hand of one clutching the shirt of his brother. Others were in a ditch 50 meters away. We buried the old man separately, and the eight others in two common graves.<sup>66</sup>

Two witnesses described an operation in Souma village, some 40 kilometers north of Arbinda, on February 9, during which 12 men detained on market day were, a few hours later, found dead some 10 kilometers away. One witness described the detentions and the

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<sup>64</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, March 5, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Photographs of burial of victims received by WhatsApp on February 20, 2019, on record with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>66</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, February 18, 2019.



Peuhl herders buy and sell livestock in a weekly market in Djibo in Burkina Faso's Sahel Region in 2010. Violence in the Sahel Region has claimed scores of lives and forced tens of thousands to flee. © 2010 Irene Abdou/Alamy

second helped bury the bodies. A witness said:

I took my animals from the well, and as I entered the village—it was a market day—saw a large group of soldiers surrounding a dozen men seated on the ground. I hid, fearful I too would be taken and from there saw how they ordered all the men to bow their heads, yelling at them not to look the soldiers in the face. They started beating the men with batons and minutes later, ordered them onto a truck. The convoy was of three vehicles and about 10 motorbikes.<sup>67</sup>

A family member who helped search for and bury the bodies, found some nine kilometers away, said:

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<sup>67</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, February 14, 2019.

The next morning, we searched for them, following the tire tracks, south, then north. We found our family nine kilometers away, near Tiallel hamlet. Their bodies were in two groups – the first five were lying side by side; they’d been shot in the chest; the other seven bodies were on top of each other, two-by-two; they’d been shot in the head or back. We were forced to bury them in two common graves.<sup>68</sup>

Three witnesses described an operation in Taouremba village on October 16, 2018 during which 14 men were detained and later found executed. They said 13 men were put into security forces vehicles after being “indexed” by men in civilian dress while a fourteenth victim, who suffered from a mental disability, was shot and killed on the spot after he was, apparently, perceived to be uncooperative.<sup>69</sup> Two of the witnesses participated in the burials. One of the witnesses, a trader, said:

Around 10 a.m. the soldiers descended on the market area, in three pickups, a larger vehicle, and some 20 motorcycles. The operation lasted several hours. They were in dark yellow camouflage; a few were in civilian dress with only their eyes and mouth showing. They encircled the market, searched houses and shops, but I didn’t see them confiscating any weapons. They detained over 100 of us; they ordered us to walk – 20-by-20 – past the men in civilian dress, who decided who would live and who would die. Among those indexed was Moussa T, a former village councilor who I later found executed. I was in the third wave. My heart raced. A drone, making a zzzz sound, circled above. I heard one of them saying, “we will kill you, Peuhls.” We heard gunfire minutes after they left. All those I saw when we went in search of the bodies later that day had been shot in the head. I could only recognize them by their clothing.<sup>70</sup>

A second witness said:

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<sup>68</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, February 26, 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with witnesses, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019 (2 witnesses) and January 23, 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with trader, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019.

After taking our identification cards, they ordered us, group-by-group, to walk by the men in civilian dress who didn't talk except to point and say, 'you, out' in Mooré. Before the judgement, one man was overcome by panic. He kept standing up, then sitting down, again and again. Seeing this one of the soldiers threatened to shoot him right there. Another intervened but in the end, that man was among those indexed and killed. While the drone circled slowly above, a soldier ordered us to "look up and say a prayer." They took away five from my group, ripping their turbans to bind their eyes and hands and ordering them into the truck. The men were so frightened, the soldiers had to lift, indeed throw, them in. They mocked us, "uh huh you thought you were going to the market today." Minutes after they left we heard gunfire and we said, "Oh God, our people are dead."<sup>71</sup>

A witness who helped bury the dead said: "Some minutes later we heard heavy gunfire; I shook at the intensity of it. Later that day, we found their bodies riddled with bullets. Four were killed near the animal market, three killed a kilometer down the road, six killed 10 kilometers away in Winde Jomri."<sup>72</sup> Villagers speculated the bodies were executed by group as a strategy to extract information from those that were still alive, but Human Rights Watch is not in a position to confirm this observation. Another trader said, "They came from and returned to Arbinda...we know this because our family members called to tell us they'd seen a convoy coming down the road from Arbinda, and again called to say it had returned to their base there."<sup>73</sup>

Three witnesses, all traders, described a very similar operation during which the security forces allegedly executed at least 12 men who had hours earlier been detained in or near the Gasseliki village market on November 16, 2018.<sup>74</sup> One witness said:

First came the men in boubous on a few motorcycles, then a few minutes later the soldiers on motorcycles, and then the pickups. Four men in civilian attire were doing the indexing while the soldiers stood guard. I was one of

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<sup>71</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witnesses, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019.

<sup>72</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 23, 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 23, 2019.

<sup>74</sup> Two of the three witnesses said there were 14 men killed in this incident, however Human Rights Watch has used the lower death toll, as given by the third witness.

80 detainees made to walk past them as they stood behind a concrete wall near the water pump. They picked out seven from my group. The soldiers tore their shirts off. I remember their shirts lying on the ground...all the while a drone circled overhead.”<sup>75</sup>

A second witness described seeing the bodies in a hamlet not far from Gasseliki. <sup>76</sup> A shopkeeper said, “I know all of them. Some were from Gasseliki, others who had come to market. I counted them from my shop, 12 of them, as the soldiers ordered them onto the truck. The next day I spoke with the men who had found and buried them in a nearby village called Aladjou.”<sup>77</sup>

Twelve men detained on market day in N'gaika Ngota village in mid-October, were found dead the next day. A witness said:

I'd taken my goods out to sell, the market had just started when, suddenly, the soldiers showed up in several pickups and a dozen motorcycles. A drone flew over us. They gathered us just west of the market. Once assembled, they organized us in groups to pass in front of four men in civilian dress, whose faces were masked. They pointed their finger without speaking and like this separated 12 people whom they immediately undressed, tied their hands behind their backs and threw into a military vehicle. The soldiers spoke in French and in Mooré, and fired in the air as they left, taking the little plane [drone] with them. Their bodies – all 12 – were found at the crossroads of Taouremba near Lahorde on the Dori-Djibo axis. For me they are not terrorists. They didn't find them with weapons.<sup>78</sup>

Human Rights Watch spoke with two witnesses to two incidents in Demtou village. They described how in late November or early December, a total of 15 Peuhl were allegedly detained and later executed, including one adolescent and two men over 70 years-old. <sup>79</sup> A witness said:

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<sup>75</sup> Human Rights watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019.

<sup>76</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, November 22, 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, January 29, 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with witnesses, Ouagadougou, January 26, 2019.

The problem is that Jihadists come all the time, preach of their project, and then the army detentions and kills us, like it's our fault. The first time the soldiers killed us was in late November, on a Friday. They detained eight people, early morning, as they were eating or going to work. I saw the men being taken away in a convoy of four pick-ups, with the soldiers seated back-to-back, and about 12 motorcycles. At around 9 a.m. we were called by villagers who live near Pogol-Diame, a few kilometers away, saying their bodies were there. I know all of those killed – they were from 17 to 32-years-old. A week later, they came again, on a Thursday, same style. This time they took seven including Mousa and Boureima, both in their 70's. We found their bodies later that day, separated by 100 meters, shot in the head. Some dug their graves while I was put in charge of putting fabric over their heads so that we could give them a proper burial.<sup>80</sup>

Four witnesses described the detentions and killings of seven men in two villages on November 13, 2018. They believed the same group of security force members were responsible for both incidents. Four men who had been detained on market day in Béléhédé at 10 a.m. were found dead a few kilometers away shortly thereafter. At around the same time, three more men including a father and son were killed in the nearby village of Guesse-Gorgadje.<sup>81</sup>

One witness said, “At around 10 a.m. I saw a convoy passing by our village from the direction of Béléhédé; a minute later a friend called from Béléhédé, screaming “they’ve just detained Amadou, Abdulaoui, Adama, and Issa! Tell our people to get off the road!” Just a few minutes later, I heard the sound of gunfire. Afraid the security services were still around, we stayed hidden for several hours but later found the bodies a kilometer away, on the side of the road. I saw clearly they’d been shot in the head and the chest.”<sup>82</sup>

A witness to the killing of the three men in Guesse-Gorgadje at around 11 a.m., including Abdousalam Saidu Dicko, and his elderly father Boucom Dicko, said:

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<sup>80</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 26, 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with witnesses, Ouagadougou, January 17 and 20, 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 20, 2019.

I saw three vehicles and many motorcycles go straight to Abdousalam's house, dragging him out, then to his father's house, dragging him out as well. Another man was coming from the fields, making three. They went into their houses, but didn't find any guns, and were asking questions in Mooré which they [victims] didn't understand. Abdousalam said, "I will not go with you! If you are going to kill me, then kill me in my village." That's when they fired at all three of them behind the houses. The women were wailing, his wife tried to intervene, but they threatened to kill her. They didn't ask for their ID's. Is it normal for the security forces to kill people like this? <sup>83</sup>

On September 24, the security forces allegedly killed 10 men in and around the town of Petagoli, in Baraboulé Commune. This is one of two operations documented by Human Rights Watch that occurred outside the 50-kilometer radius of Arbinda town. Three witnesses described the operation which involved dozens of security force members on motorcycles and in vehicles, and a few in civilian attire. Of the victims, three were reportedly Malians, of Dogon ethnicity, who had come for market day and whose bodies were repatriated by their family members. A witness who observed parts of the operation from his shop and later helped bury the victims said:

It was an odd operation: first, a motorcycle with men in turbans and boubous drove into market; we thought they were jihadists; then two minutes later, a second one dressed the same way. Then minutes later several vehicles and many motorcycles of soldiers flooded the market area, firing in the air, blocking exits. The first to be killed were Djibril and two Dogon men from Mali near where the women sell tea and beignets. Then they shot people near the animal market and two on the road between Petagoli and Baraboulé. I didn't see any weapons confiscated. It seems so unfair to kill people like that without even saying why. The dead were from around 30 to 69-years-old, that was Al Haj Saidu, killed next to the cattle market. One was a man with mental disabilities, who tried to run, another was a man who sold phone credit. I helped bury seven. Nearly all had been

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<sup>83</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, Ouagadougou, January 20, 2019.

shot in the head and the other three bodies were taken home to Mali by their people.<sup>84</sup>

A woman who witnessed the killing of three men detained during the operation said:

A group of soldiers surrounded the cafe, asking for the ID cards of the men drinking tea. One soldier had a list. After studying the names, they picked out three of them; a Peuhl, a Dogon and another one. A soldier ordered them to sit down, then another one yelled, “no we’re taking you, get up!” They walked away with them and just minutes later, I saw them shooting one, then the second, and then, beat and twisted the neck of the third one, like the soldier was a commando. As they left, this group of soldiers turned to us, the women, then waved, and said in English, “bye, bye” as if to mock us. I saw a small plane flying overhead, but before leaving, they called the small plane down, and left.<sup>85</sup>

## Other Alleged Executions

In the other incidents documented by Human Rights Watch, up to nine men were shot on the spot or found dead hours after being detained at artisanal gold mining sites, in their homes and villages, during celebrations, ceremonies, at watering holes, or at checkpoints. In some of these operations, the men were detained after their homes or villages had been searched.

Two witnesses who had attended a ceremony in Palal Sambo for two men who had just returned from pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia described the detention of the pilgrims and three others in mid-September. The bodies of the men, three of whom were brothers and all of whom were over 50 years old, were found the next day. One witness said:

Around 11 a.m. we had a benediction for the pilgrims, as is our custom. Around 1 p.m. the soldiers came on six motorcycles. We think it was gendarmes because months before, they had detained a neighbor over a land conflict, and he told me he recognized one of them. They fired in the

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<sup>84</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness (interviewed twice), Ouagadougou, January 23 and 25, 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with market woman, Soum Province, January 26, 2019.

air, ordering us to sit down. The soldiers called their names, ordering them to come out.” “Moussa Dicko, Abaye Dicko.” They searched the homes of the Al Hadjis; they didn’t find weapons but took several phones, and weirdly, didn’t ask them any questions. Then they called the village chief, Michael Dicko, then Oumerou Dicko, then Issa Dicko and ordered them onto the back of the motorcycles at gunpoint. They hardly spoke, except one of them who said, “We have enough bullets to kill all of you, but Ouagadougou said we should only come for five of you.”<sup>86</sup>

The second witness helped bury the men. “The next day, I got a phone call saying their bodies had been found about 25 kilometers away, between the villages of Taouremba and Lahorde, south of the crossroads. We followed the tire tracks a short distance off the road; we found our brothers, riddled with bullets. I saw scores of bullet casings.”<sup>87</sup>

At least nine men were allegedly killed by security forces within a few kilometers of the Inata gold mine on January 1, 2019. Five witnesses described the operation during which five artisanal gold miners were gunned down near the Kousoumbaka artisanal site and another four men near a well in Inata village.<sup>88</sup> One of the witnesses with knowledge of the operation said after perpetrating the killings, some of the security force members passed by and spent several hours in a small gendarme post near the town of Inata.<sup>89</sup> Witnesses who buried the victims, aged 20-50 years-old, said several men appeared to have been shot through the mouth. A 28-year-old artisanal gold miner said:

I’d just started digging when seven motorcycles approached. Without asking a question, they jumped off and started shooting. We dove into the pits. The gunfire was deafening. It lasted for 15 minutes—tat, tat, tat—muffled, like they were firing into the pits. After the motorcycles left, I stuck my head out and saw five men lying dead and dying. On their sides and back, some hit on their eyes, and chests. One was shot through his hand

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<sup>86</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 26, 2019.

<sup>87</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 26, 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witnesses, Ouagadougou, January 16, 18, 25, 2019.

<sup>89</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, Ouagadougou, February 17, 2019.

like he was trying to protect himself. We were only working. Why did they do this?<sup>90</sup>

Another witness described seeing men in uniform shoot four men near the Inata well, “People started taking out their ID’s, but the soldiers shot them anyway. I ran to hide, later seeing a few had been shot through the mouth.”<sup>91</sup> Another witness said, “my boss, Boura, was on his back, a bullet hole took off the entire side of his face. I cried seeing this.”<sup>92</sup>

Three witnesses described the detention of six men by security forces in late October 2018: four from Sana village and two from Béléhédé, and the discovery, a day later, of their bodies. Five of the men died. A witness from Sana said:

I saw three vehicles and around nine motorcycles. They went directly to Hamidou Dicko’s home, he’s an old man and was sick with malaria. His 20-year-old son tried to explain that they didn’t speak Mooré, but the soldiers put both of them in their truck. Then they went 500 meters and detained Hassan Boucoum, a 55-year-old marabout, and then Boureima Boucoum who was working in front of his house. The soldiers tore their boubous to bind their hands and eyes and threw them in the same pick up. Two more were detained in Béléhédé but I didn’t see it. Around 3 p.m. we got the call saying their bodies had been found.<sup>93</sup>

Of the six men, four died there, one died a day later and the other’s whereabouts are unknown. A witness who found their bodies on October 27, 2018 and buried them the next day said:

Their bodies were found in a hut three meters from the main road and just outside Lahorde village, some kilometers away from Sana. They were lying one on top of the other. I’d seen a convoy of soldiers passing by the area the day before around 10 a.m. Around, 4 p.m., I heard gunfire. I was frightened so only crept out the next morning to bury them. Their bodies

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<sup>90</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with gold miner, Ouagadougou, January 18, 2019.

<sup>91</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with gold miner, Ouagadougou, January 26, 2019.

<sup>92</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with gold miner, Ouagadougou, January 18, 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 17, 2019.

were lying one on top of the other....and had several bullets – in the chest mostly.<sup>94</sup>

Three people with knowledge of the killing on October 21, 2018 of a 78-year-old local chief from Gaskinde village, 30 kilometers north of Arbinda, said they believed he had been killed by policemen based in Arbinda Commune after being stopped on his way to attend a local government meeting in Dori. Human Rights Watch did not speak with a first-hand witness to the detention, however a witness to the man’s burial said, “I was called soon after he had been detained by a friend who said “your [relationship withheld], was detained at a checkpoint near Arbinda by policemen. At 11 a.m. I received a call saying he and a few other men had been found dead seven kilometers south of Gaskinde. He had been shot twice in the head and multiple times in his stomach; his right arm had been torn apart. There, I saw two other bodies, but I don’t know who they were.”<sup>95</sup>

Two witnesses described the January 11, 2019 detention of 70-year-old, Issa Amadou Dicko, from Palal Sambo.<sup>96</sup> His body was found the next day. One said, “Two trucks and motorcycles of uniformed soldiers came at 11 a.m. They searched the village, took four phones and ordered 20 of us to sit down. There were two elderly men, including Issa. A man dressed in boubou, his face covered, was working with the soldiers. He said, “that’s the one,” pointing at Issa. Then they ordered the rest of us into a house and left. A few hours later we got the call; Issa was found dead, near Birga Toiga, 10 kilometers away.”<sup>97</sup> A witness from Arbinda said, “Last September, gendarmes took a good friend, a businessman, at night and we found his body behind Arbinda town the next day. His family and other families have told me they recognize the men doing this as gendarmes based in Arbinda.”<sup>98</sup> Another witness described a conversation with the family of an artisanal gold digger who, they said, was questioned by gendarmes in Arbinda for several hours. “I found his body three kilometers away the next day,” he said.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 21, 2019.

<sup>95</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 20, 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with witnesses, Ouagadougou and by phone to Soum Province, January 26 and 27, 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, January 17, 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 22, 2019.

<sup>99</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 23, 2019.

Three victims described how a man with a mental disability was shot and killed and scores of other men were severely beaten during a large operation on October 18, in Bouro village, Nassoumbou commune. The incident occurred hours before an armed Islamist attack on the Gendarmerie in Djibo, 40 kilometers away. This is the other operation documented by Human Rights Watch that occurred outside the 50-kilometer radius of Arbinda town.

The victims said the security forces detained and took some 100 men to the Djibo army base, the vast majority of whom were liberated the following day. One victim, said, “They hit us like they were beating a snake to death. A few men were bleeding from their heads or noses; I heard the wrist of another cracking; a few lost consciousness.”<sup>100</sup> Another victim, aged 76 years, said:

I never thought, given my age, that I would feel a beating like this. The army arrived at 1 p.m., firing madly. A crazy man who didn’t understand what was going on started running and a soldier picked him off – paf—just like that. They started beating us with belts, tire rubber, batons, and cords attached to their wrists. I was beaten in my ribs; another took a baton, lifted it above his head and whacked me. Later, we were taken to Djibo camp. They counted us, we were 102. They kept us in a small house – it was sweltering hot; some men fainted from the heat. The next morning the army took us out...calling us one by one and as we left the door, a tall soldier, kicked us, making us fall down, then others started hitting us, saying, “uh huh, the Peuhl are crying now.”<sup>101</sup>

## Identity of Alleged Perpetrators

Local and national government representatives and security sources told Human Rights Watch that several branches of the Burkina Faso Defense and Security Forces (FDS) are engaged in addressing the security risks posed by the presence of armed Islamists, including the National Army, National Gendarmerie, and some units of the National Police.<sup>102</sup> They said in some areas the corps operate together and in other areas separately.

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<sup>100</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019.

<sup>101</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019.

<sup>102</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with local and national government representatives and security sources, Ouagadougou, January 20, 24, 27 and 28, 2019.

However, they said in general the army concentrates its efforts on securing Burkina Faso's borders while the police and gendarmes ensure national security in the country's interior, noting that operations and deployments are overseen and ordered by both the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Security.<sup>103</sup>

Witnesses to all but one of the incidents described above said the alleged perpetrators were dressed in dark yellow and brown camouflage uniforms which, as noted, is worn by members of both the gendarmerie and army. "It can be confusing; the gendarmerie and the army use the same uniform in some theaters of operation," one security force officer noted.<sup>104</sup>

However, on the basis of interviews with the witnesses, security sources, and community leaders representing the major ethnic groups present in Soum Province, Human Rights Watch believes the majority of incidents described above were perpetrated by a detachment of gendarmes who, in August 2018, had been deployed to the town of Arbinda to respond to the growing number of armed Islamist attacks, including many of those which targeted civilians and are described above.<sup>105</sup>

Two members of the Burkinabè security services and three security sources independently told Human Rights Watch that, at time of writing, the army was not present in the area around the town of Arbinda.<sup>106</sup> "There is no army presence based in Arbinda; it's not their area of operation at present" said a security force officer with knowledge of both gendarme and army operations in the north.<sup>107</sup> They all said that in August 2018, the local gendarme brigade, which previously numbered approximately 20, was reinforced by about 100 men. Two security sources put this number at 96, (four platoons of 24 men each) and said the members and gendarme commander of the reinforcement changed every three months.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with security force officer, Ouagadougou, March 6, 2019.

<sup>105</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with witnesses, security sources, and community leaders, Ouagadougou, January 16-29, 2019.

<sup>106</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with two security force officers in Ouagadougou on January 24 and 29, 2019, and three security sources in Ouagadougou, on January 22, 24, 26, 28 and 29, 2019.

<sup>107</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Security Force Officer, Ouagadougou, January 29, 2019.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with two security sources, Ouagadougou, January 26 and 29, 2019.



Gendarmes patrol a town in Burkina Faso. In response to growing activity by armed Islamist groups in Burkina Faso, security forces have conducted counterterrorism operations that have allegedly resulted in grave abuses and rights violations. ©2018 Issouf Sanogo/ Getty Images.

Community leaders, and numerous witnesses and villagers, told Human Rights Watch they believed the gendarmes were involved because of the precipitous increase in extrajudicial executions after the August 2018 reinforcement arrived in Arbinda; because in some cases, villagers had recognized individual gendarmes in the operations; and because in some cases, villagers had seen convoys leaving the gendarme base in Arbinda around the same time the alleged executions took place.

A Peuhl leader said, “We dated the killings from when the unit showed up in Arbinda. We don’t understand who they are killing and why. If people are suspected of being jihadists, they should be detained and sent to Ouagadougou for trial not killed and left in the bush.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Peuhl leader, Ouagadougou, January 16, 2019.

A community leader said, “I speak with people all over Arbinda commune. The gendarmes have killed dozens of people, without proof, without arms. I know some of those who’ve wound up dead. I never suspected them. They say, ‘you are an accomplice, and you get a bullet in the head.’”<sup>110</sup> One witness said, “We deeply fear the security forces will kill us; now, each time we hear the sound of vehicles we flee like birds.”<sup>111</sup>

Human Rights Watch was unable to ascertain the identities of the men who witnesses had observed identifying the men who were detained and later allegedly executed. Many of those interviewed believed the masked men were either undercover intelligence officers, former residents who had fled their village under threat by the armed Islamists or members of local militias.

Members of civil society groups who monitor the prisons said they believed the number of those being detained, questioned and sent to the high security prison in Ouagadougou had dropped since mid-2018.<sup>112</sup> “They used to charge people with terrorism and send them to prison in Djibo or Ouagadougou, but now they’re just killing them,” a member of a local human rights organization said.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, in sharp contrast to research conducted in early 2018, very few people interviewed described the detention of their family members during the present research.

## Consequences of and Justice for Security Force Violations

Several thousands of Peuhl villagers have fled their villages as a result of the insecurity and security force violations, many to neighboring Mali. A Malian village chief who lives near the border with Burkina Faso said, “From June 2018, but especially since September 2018, hundreds of Burkinabè have crossed the border, the majority women, children and elderly. We heard their husbands were killed or are in jails. Once, we counted 40 women with no men. They’re living in deplorable conditions.”<sup>114</sup> A community leader showed Human Rights Watch a list of hundreds of people who had fled Arbinda commune and who,

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<sup>110</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with a community leader, Soum Province, February 22, 2019.

<sup>111</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 25, 2019.

<sup>112</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with civil society leaders, Ouagadougou, January 18, 19, and 21, 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with member of human rights group, Ouagadougou, January 20, 2019.

<sup>114</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with Mali village chief, January 23, 2019.

he said, were in need of humanitarian aid given the squalid conditions in which they were living outside of Ouagadougou.<sup>115</sup>

Many Peuhl witnesses described abuses by both the armed Islamists and security services and said they felt their community was between a rock and a hard place. The victims or victims' families expressed profound mistrust with the authorities.

None of the victims or their families had filed complaints with the local police or judiciary and had no hope that the local judiciary or the military justice system, responsible for investigating allegations against members of the armed forces, would deliver justice. One man noted, "If it is the security forces killing us, how are we possibly to file a complaint with the very people killing us? Only God can stop the killings."<sup>116</sup>

Several witnesses, Peuhl and Foulse community leaders, and members of civil society expressed concern that security force abuses, many of which had targeted men up to 70 years-old, were driving younger Peuhl men into the ranks of the jihadists. One community leader from Soum Province said, "honestly, people are joining the men in the bush to avenge the killings."<sup>117</sup>

An officer in the security forces similarly noted, "When you unjustly kill people, especially community elders, you create 20 new terrorists; the fight against terrorism is creating more problems than terrorism itself."<sup>118</sup>

A civil society leader noted, "Abuses are being committed by both sides, but the state signed international conventions about human rights. How can the soldiers or gendarmes sleep at night knowing what they did? They should be better, more moral than the jihadists. The killing is driving people straight into the arms of the jihadists and guaranteeing that this problem will go on for many years to come."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with community leader, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019.

<sup>116</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 23, 2019.

<sup>117</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Peuhl community leader, Ouagadougou, January 21, 2019.

<sup>118</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with security force officer, Ouagadougou, January 24, 2019.

<sup>119</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with civil society leader, Ouagadougou, January 19, 2019.

## Response from Burkinabè Government

On March 8, 2019, Human Rights Watch sent the Burkinabè government a letter detailing the major findings of this report and its recommendations, and on March 18, 2019, the government responded with a letter from Moumina Sheriff Sy, the Minister of Defense and Veterans Affairs, who became minister on January 25, 2019 (see Appendix I and II).

Mr. Sy said that the Burkina Faso government “takes note of the allegations contained in the summary of the HRW report and notes that investigations will be carried out into the abuses allegedly committed by certain members of the FDS in the Sahel region.”

Mr. Sy added that the government has previously investigated, disciplined and sanctioned some members of the armed forces for their implication in human rights abuses, most recently, on February 15, when the Director of Military Justice was directed to open investigations into allegations of human rights abuses committed during counterterrorism operations on February 3 and 4, 2019, in the communes of Kain, Gomboro and Banh.

The minister said that all security forces personnel are regularly trained in international humanitarian law, and that the government is committed to respecting national and international human rights norms. He noted that the government is committed to the security forces, “protecting and not being a threat to the population,” and that the fight against terrorism “cannot be won by disregarding human dignity.”

The letter further stated that all security force operations are guided by the principle of “progressive use of force, which are successively, control, questioning, arrest, and, if need be, neutralization.” He noted, as an example, the 716 terrorism suspects currently detained in the high security prison.

Human Rights Watch welcomes these commitments and urges the government to faithfully follow through on its commitment to respect human rights in the context of counterterrorism operations and to investigate the over 115 alleged executions documented in this report.

# Recommendations

## To the Government of Burkina Faso

- Investigate and prosecute, in accordance with international fair trial standards, members of the security forces responsible for the serious human rights violations documented in this report, regardless of position or rank.
  - Focus, in particular, on investigating whether the detachment of gendarmes deployed to Arbinda in August 2018 carried out extrajudicial killings.
  - Consider seeking international assistance to the extent necessary to meet this goal.
- Send on administrative leave pending investigations security force personnel credibly implicated in the abuses documented in this report.
- Ensure that everyone detained or taken into custody by government security forces is treated humanely, is brought before a judicial authority to ensure the legality of their detention and is able to contact their families.
- Ensure the security forces impartially protect all civilians impartially, regardless of their ethnicity or religion.
- Adequately resource and support the Burkinabè judges and judicial personnel mandated to investigate suspected armed Islamists and abuses by security force personnel, notably the anti-terrorism cell and the military prosecutor's office.

## To Armed Islamist Groups Operating in Burkina Faso

- Cease all extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, abductions, looting, and other serious human rights abuses, as well as threats of violence against community members.
- Refrain from any attacks and threats against the education and health sector.
- Desist from the practice of placing explosive devices inside deceased persons.
- Ensure that no captured security force personnel are killed, tortured or subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

## **To the National Human Rights Commission of Burkina Faso**

- Conduct impartial, public investigations into alleged human rights abuses by security force personnel and armed Islamist groups.
- Defend the right of Burkinabè human rights organizations and journalists to freely report on matters related to the conflict and to the conduct of counter-terrorism operations.

## **To Burkina Faso's International Partners**

- Publicly and privately pressure the Burkina Faso government to identify and prosecute those responsible for the serious abuses documented in this report.
- Support human rights training for Burkina Faso security forces involved in counterterrorism operations.
- Assist the judiciary and military justice system including by supporting their efforts at case management, witness protection and forensic capability.
- Refrain from funding Burkina Faso Security Forces units that are credibly found to abuse human rights and make resumption of funding to such units contingent on steps to hold those responsible to account, prevent further abuses, and provide remedies to victims.
- Support a presence of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Burkina Faso.

## **To the Government of the United States**

- Fully implement the Leahy Law, which prohibits the provision of military assistance to any foreign security force unit if there is credible evidence that such a unit has committed gross human rights violations and suspend assistance to the security force units implicated in abuse until the Burkinabè government takes steps to remediate, address the abuses, and hold those responsible to account.

## **To the United Nations**

- The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) should establish a presence in Burkina Faso with a mandate to monitor allegations and

- provide technical cooperation to the government to help them respond to serious allegations of human rights abuses by all sides and deter any future violations committed within the context of counterterrorism operations. Such a presence could help inform the UN Security Council to decide further actions as relevant.
- The UN Special Rapporteurs on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism and on Extrajudicial Executions should consider conducting missions to Burkina Faso.
  - The UN Office for West Africa should press the government to investigate the violations in this report.

## Acknowledgments

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## Appendix I: Letter to the Burkina Faso Ambassador to the United States of America



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March 8, 2019

Ambassador Seydou Kaboré  
Embassy of Burkina Faso in the United States  
2340 Massachusetts Avenue NW  
Washington DC, 20008

### RE: Human Rights Watch Report on Serious Allegations of Abuses in Burkina Faso.

Dear Ambassador Kaboré,

I hope this letter finds you well. I write with respect to Human Rights Watch's forthcoming report on serious allegations of abuse committed by both armed Islamist groups and some members of the security forces in the Sahel Region, to be released in March 2019.

I present below a summary of our findings and our recommendations. We would welcome a response from the government to our findings and questions, to the allegations our research has uncovered and to the draft recommendations we put forward below.

We would be happy to include the response in both the report and the communiqué to accompany the report's launch. If you wish to do so, we kindly ask that you respond to this letter **by March 18, 2019.**

**With respect to methodology, we note:**

- This report documents **alleged atrocities by both the armed Islamists and the security forces in the Sahel region**, from mid-2018 until February 2019. The abuses were documented during a research trip to Ouagadougou in January 2019 and in phone interviews in February and March.
- In the course of the research, Human Rights Watch **conducted 92 interviews, 61 of which were with victims of and eye witnesses to abuses**. The other 31 were with justice and defense ministry officials; health workers and local government officials; diplomats, security analysts; and Bella, Foulse, Mossi and Peuhl community leaders.
- The 61 victims and witnesses interviewed are **residents of 32 hamlets, villages and towns in the Sahel region**, the vast majority within Arbinda and Tongomayel administrative areas.
- Many victims had witnessed or had knowledge of **abuses by both the armed Islamists and government security forces**.
- We are aware of **many other serious allegations** of abuses by armed Islamists and the security forces in other regions of Burkina Faso, including in and around the towns of Yirgou, Kain, Pama, Fada N’Gourma, Kopenga and in Yatenga Province, which will be the subject of a subsequent report.

**Summary of Findings: Alleged Abuses by Armed Islamist Groups**

- All major ethnic groups present in the Sahel Region, notably the Bella, Foulse, Mossi and Peuhl, were **subject to and complained bitterly about the growing presence of and intimidation by the Islamists**.
- **Serious violations documented** included the abduction and execution of local leaders; pillage including of livestock; commandeering of ambulances; destruction of schools; restrictions placed on women and villagers celebrating marriages and baptisms; and destruction of businesses.
- The **majority of alleged killings by armed Islamists** had targeted members of the Foulse, Bella and Mossi communities. Documented were **42 alleged killings by these groups and several abductions** which occurred between April 2018 and January 2019. Most of the victims were Foulse. Of these:
  - At least **29 people were killed during indiscriminate attacks** on Sikiré and Gasseliki.

- Another **13 people appeared to have been targeted for assassination** for their or a family member's alleged collaboration with the Burkinabè security forces.
- Witnesses from over 10 villages described how armed Islamists **looted livestock, motorcycles and food stocks**, and burned or destroyed shops and other business.
- The majority of looting documented by Human Rights Watch had targeted villagers of Foulse and Bella ethnicity and had **undermined livelihoods and forced thousands of civilians from their homes**.

### Summary of Findings: Alleged Abuses by Burkinabe Security Forces

- Human Rights Watch documented **19 incidents during which over 115 men and adolescents** were allegedly detained and executed by members of the Burkinabè security forces.
- The incidents documented took place between **September 2018 and February 2019**; all but a few occurred in Arbinda, Tongomayel or Koutougou communes within a 50-kilometer radius of Arbinda town.
- The majority of the victims were **ethnic Peuhl** and none of them, according to the witnesses, were armed at the time of their detention.
- Very few of the witnesses were present when the victims were executed, however the witnesses to each incident said the victims were **last seen being detained and driven away in security forces vehicles** or on motorcycles driven by security forces members and found dead hours later.
- Human Rights Watch spoke to **multiple witnesses from most of the 19 incidents** and obtained **lists of the dead, and their ages, and maps** of where the bodies had been found and where they were buried.
- The witnesses **described the alleged perpetrators** as “soldiers,” “gendarmes,” “members of the security forces,” or “the FDS” (Forces of Defense and Security) and in all but one case, the security force members were **dressed in dark yellow and brown camouflage** which, according to those interviewed is worn by members of both the army and gendarmerie.
- Nine of the incidents documented followed a **similar modus operandi**: dozens of security force members travelling on motorcycles and vehicles mounted large operations on local market days.

- After surrounding scores of men engaged in conducting business at the market, **security force** members, in most cases **assisted by a few men in civilian dress** whose faces were completely covered, indexed and detained **up to 14 men, who were hours later or the next day found dead**; nearly all had been shot in the head or chest.
- In most of these operations, witnesses described seeing **small drones flying overhead** during the time the security force members were present in the market.
- The incidents occurred **in the villages** of N’gaika Ngota, Demtou (two incidents), Gasseliki, Souma, Taoremba, Belhoure, Belehede, and Petagoli.
- In several incidents, witnesses **overheard security force members saying the men were to be killed** or heard gunshots minutes after the men had been arrested.
- On the basis of interviews with the witnesses, security sources, and community leaders representing the major ethnic groups present in Soum Province, we believe **a detachment of some 100 gendarmes who, in August 2018, deployed to the town of Arbinda** were implicated in these incidents. The gendarme reinforcement was sent to respond to the growing number of armed Islamist attacks, including many of those which targeted civilians described above.
- The witnesses believed **the gendarmes were involved** because of the precipitous increase in extrajudicial executions after the August 2018 reinforcement arrived in Arbinda; because in some cases villagers had recognized individual gendarmes in the operations; and because in some cases, villagers had seen convoys leaving the gendarme base in Arbinda around the same time the alleged executions took place.
- We were **unable to ascertain the identifies of the men in civilian dress who witnesses had observed indexing those detained** and later allegedly executed. Those interviewed believed they were either undercover intelligence officers, former residents who had fled their village under threat by the armed Islamists or members of local militias.
- None of the victims or their families **had filed complaints** with the local police or judiciary.
- Several witnesses, Peuhl and Foulse community leaders, and members of civil society expressed concern that security force abuses, many of which had targeted men up to 70 years-old, were **driving younger Peuhl men into the ranks of the jihadists**.

### **Request for Response to Questions:**

- Which security force unit or branch was responsible for conducting security operations in Arbinda and Tongomayel communes from September 2018 through February 2019?
- Which security force unit or branch was responsible for conducting security operations in Petagoli (Baraboule commune) in September 2018?
- Which ministry is responsible for operations in and around Arbinda and Tongomayel communes?
- Is the government aware of or currently investigating any allegations of abuse against detainees or suspects who were detained in and around Arbinda and Tongomayel commune or the town of Petagoli between September 2018 and February 2019?

### **Summary of Draft Recommendations**

To the Government of Burkina Faso to:

- **Investigate and prosecute**, in accordance with international fair trial standards, members of the security forces responsible for serious human rights violations documented in this report, regardless of position or rank.
- Consider **seeking international assistance** to the extent necessary to meet this goal.
- **Send on administrative leave pending investigations** security force personnel credibly implicated in the abuses documented in this report.
- Ensure that **everyone arrested or taken into custody by government security forces is treated humanely**, is promptly brought before a judicial authority to ensure the legality of their detention and is able to contact their families.
- **Adequately resource and support** the Burkinabè judges and judicial personnel mandated to investigate suspected armed Islamists and abuses by security force personnel.

To Armed Islamist Groups Operating in **Burkina Faso**:

- Cease all **extrajudicial killings, kidnappings**, looting, and other serious human rights abuses, as well as threats of violence against community members.
- Desist from planting explosives in or near the bodies of deceased civilians or security force members.

To the National Human Rights Commission of Burkina Faso:

- **Conduct impartial, public investigations** into alleged human rights abuses by security force personnel and armed Islamist groups.
- **Defend the right of Burkinabè human rights organizations and journalists** to freely report on matters related to the conflict and to the conduct of counter-terrorism operations.
- 

To Burkina Faso's International Partners:

- **Pressure publicly and privately the Burkina Faso government** to hold to account abusive commanders and others involved in the serious abuses documented.
- **Assist the judiciary and military justice system** including by supporting their efforts at case management, witness protection and forensic capability.
- **Refrain from funding Burkina Faso Security Forces units that are credibly found to abuse human rights** and make resumption of funding to such units contingent on steps to remediate, address the abuses, and hold those responsible to account.

We welcome you to share this letter with the relevant officials in the Ministries of Justice, Defense, and Security. As noted, we would be happy to include a response from you or the relevant Ministries in the report, provided you respond to us (at [dufkac@hrw.org](mailto:dufkac@hrw.org)) by March 18, 2019.

I thank you very much for your collaboration with Human Rights Watch. Please accept, Mr. Ambassador, the expression of my most respectful salutations.

Sincerely,



Corinne Dufka  
Sahel Director, Africa Division  
Human Rights Watch

## Appendix II: Letter from the Government of Burkina Faso

MINISTRE DE LA DEFENSE NATIONALE  
ET DES ANCIENS COMBATTANTS  
SECRETARIAT GENERAL



BURKINA FASO  
Unité - Progrès - Justice

Ouagadougou, le... 18 MARS 2019

N°2019 - 03 3 7 /MDNAC/SG/DAJC

**CONFIDENTIEL**

*Le Ministre d'Etat*

A

Madame Corinne Dufka Directrice adjointe,  
Division Afrique Human Rights Watch

-New York-

**Objet:** Observations du Gouvernement du Burkina Faso sur les conclusions, questions et allégations contenues dans le projet de rapport de l'ONG Human Rights Watch.

Par lettre n°2019-0135/ABF/WASH du 11 mars 2019, son Excellence Monsieur Seydou KABORE, Ambassadeur du Burkina Faso aux Etats-Unis d'Amérique, Washington D.C., portait à la connaissance du Gouvernement du Burkina Faso un courriel reçu de l'ONG Human Rights Watch (HRW). En rappel, ce courriel qui est un résumé du projet de rapport de votre ONG, fait état de « sérieuses » allégations d'abus au Burkina Faso commis tant par des groupes islamistes armés que par certains membres des forces de sécurité dans la région du Sahel.

Par la présente, j'ai l'honneur de vous faire parvenir, les réponses du Gouvernement du Burkina Faso aux conclusions, questions et allégations contenues dans le projet de rapport.

1. Le Gouvernement du Burkina Faso tient à remercier HRW pour l'intérêt qu'elle accorde à la situation des droits humains en général sur son territoire, et en particulier à la sécurité de ses populations. Il demeure soucieux du respect de ses engagements internationaux et profondément attaché aux valeurs universelles des droits de l'homme. Il y a lieu de souligner, à ce propos, que la situation des droits de l'homme au Burkina Faso est globalement appréciée par la communauté internationale, ce qui lui a valu d'être élu membre du Conseil des droits de l'homme

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de l'ONU en 2018. En cette qualité, il est davantage conscient des engagements et de la responsabilité que cela implique. Aussi, le Gouvernement veille-t-il au respect scrupuleux des libertés individuelles et collectives.

2. Le Gouvernement voudrait rappeler à HRW que la mission des forces de défense et de sécurité (FDS) est de protéger les populations, les personnes et les biens et de défendre l'intégrité du territoire. Il est particulièrement attaché au respect du droit à la vie, du droit à l'intégrité physique des personnes et du droit à un procès équitable tels que garantis par les instruments juridiques de protection des droits de l'homme auxquels il est partie. De ce fait, il a toujours œuvré à doter les éléments des FDS de connaissances pour les habiliter au respect de ces droits humains fondamentaux. A ce propos, des modules sur le droit international humanitaire (DIH), les droits de l'homme et les libertés fondamentales sont enseignés dans tous les centres de formation militaire au Burkina Faso. Par ailleurs, des actions de sensibilisation sont régulièrement menées au profit du personnel des FDS. Toutes choses qui leur permettent de conduire les opérations de sécurisation du territoire avec professionnalisme. Les FDS sont fort conscientes qu'elles doivent constituer une protection et non une menace pour les populations ; elles ont la pleine conviction qu'aucun combat, y compris celui contre le terrorisme, ne peut se gagner au mépris de la dignité humaine. Aussi, dans le cadre de la lutte contre le terrorisme, elles travaillent à gagner en légitimité, condition essentielle pour un réel succès de la mission. Au demeurant, le système des Nations Unies est engagé auprès du Burkina Faso pour la mise en place d'un cadre réglementaire de contrôle du respect des droits humains et du DIH par les FDS notamment dans la lutte contre le terrorisme.

3. Le Gouvernement du Burkina Faso prend acte des allégations contenues dans le résumé du projet de rapport de HRW et informe celui-ci que des investigations seront menées sur les supposés abus commis par certains membres des FDS dans la région du Sahel. Du reste, le 15 février 2019, sans attendre une quelconque interpellation, nous avons, suite à des allégations de violations graves de droits humains mettant en cause des éléments des Forces Armées Nationales du Burkina Faso dans les communes de Kain, de Gomboro et de Banh du 3 au 4 février 2019, instruit le Directeur de la justice militaire de prendre toutes les dispositions utiles au niveau de ses services compétents afin que les investigations nécessaires à la vérification des faits soient menées.

4. Sur les questions soulevées, autant le Gouvernement du Burkina Faso ne vous demandera pas la liste de vos témoins par respect du principe de confidentialité, autant vous comprendrez que nous ne puissions répondre à vos questions 1, 2 et 3 pour des raisons de secret défense.

5. Le Gouvernement du Burkina Faso tient à souligner que toutes les opérations de sécurisation du territoire sont menées en respectant le principe de la gradation de la force que sont successivement, le simple contrôle, l'interpellation, l'arrestation et la neutralisation en cas de nécessité. A titre d'exemple, il y a à ce jour environ 716 présumés terroristes détenus à la prison de haute sécurité.

6. Il tient également à rappeler que courant 2018, des allégations similaires ont donné lieu à des sanctions disciplinaires par l'autorité militaire ainsi qu'à des poursuites pénales devant le tribunal militaire. En effet, un officier responsable d'opérations dans le secteur de Banh a fait l'objet d'une sanction disciplinaire. Il a ensuite été inculpé avec d'autres militaires par le tribunal militaire (Cf. lettre N°2018-0487/MDNAC/CAB du 15 mai 2018 de Monsieur le Ministre de la Défense nationale et des anciens combattants à Madame Corinne Dufka, Directrice adjointe, Division Afrique Human Rights Watch). Une enquête est également ouverte par le parquet militaire pour faire la lumière sur les mêmes allégations. Ladite enquête en cours est conduite par la police judiciaire militaire sous la direction du procureur militaire.

7. En tout état de cause, les procédures engagées seront menées dans le strict respect du principe de la séparation des pouvoirs judiciaire et exécutif garanti par la Constitution du Burkina Faso.

8. Le Gouvernement du Burkina Faso réaffirme sa ferme volonté à collaborer avec HRW et tous ses autres partenaires dans le cadre de la promotion, de la protection et de la défense des droits humains, en particulier par les FDS.

9. Veuillez agréer, chère Madame, l'expression de ma parfaite considération.



**Moumina Sheriff SY**  
Grand-Croix de l'Ordre de L'Etalon



## “We Found Their Bodies Later that Day”

### Atrocities by Armed Islamists and Security Forces in Burkina Faso’s Sahel Region

Since 2016, armed groups linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have dramatically increased their presence in Burkina Faso, attacking army bases, police and gendarme posts, and purely civilian targets. While the violence and insecurity has progressively spread across the country, the epicenter of abuse and insecurity remains the northern Sahel region, where scores of civilians and suspects have been killed and tens of thousands have been driven from their homes. This report, “*We Found Their Bodies Later That Day*,” documents over 40 alleged killings and other abuses by armed Islamists and over 115 alleged executions of suspects by security forces in the Sahel region, from mid-2018 until February 2019. It recommends that the armed Islamists cease all atrocities, and that the government open investigations into the alleged human rights violations by all sides and take steps to prevent further abuse. It urges Burkina Faso’s international partners to call upon the Burkinabe government to put a halt to abuses and to conduct credible investigations and hold the perpetrators accountable.

*(above) Members of Burkinabe Islamist group Ansaroul Islam during a gathering in 2017. Members of Ansaroul Islam and other armed Islamist groups present in Burkina Faso are implicated in numerous atrocities against civilians including extrajudicial executions.*

*(Source: MENASTREAM, Burkina Faso, 2017, from Ansaroul Islam’s first video.)*

*(front cover) Burkina Faso Soldiers take part in a training exercise in 2017, in Burkina Faso. (U.S. Army Photo by Sgt Benjamin Northcutt 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) Public Affairs Sergeant/released) (2017).*

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