

350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor
New York, NY 10118-3299
Tel: +1-212-290-4700
Fax: +1-212-736-1300; 917-591-3452

June 26, 2023

His Excellency Col. Sadio CAMARA
Minister of Defense and Veterans

His Excellency Mamoudou KASSOGUÉ
Minister of Justice and Human Rights, Attorney General

CC:
His Excellency Ambassador Sékou BERTHE
Embassy of Mali in the US
2130 R St NW
Washington, DC 20008
United States

Dear Honorable Ministers,

I am writing to you on behalf of Human Rights Watch to share the preliminary findings of our research into alleged human rights violations committed by members of the Malian armed forces and associated foreign soldiers between December 2022 and March 2023 in central Mali and request your response to specific questions outlined below.

These human rights violations include the unlawful killings of at least 35 civilians, including 2 children and 5 women; the arbitrary arrest of at least 9 men; the enforced disappearance of 50 men – the bodies of 8 of whom were later recovered - as well as the torture of a dozen people arbitrarily detained in an army camp; and looting and destruction of civilian property.

These violations are of an extremely serious nature, and we are writing to request information regarding what action your government has taken or will be taking to address them. This information will be reflected in upcoming Human Rights Watch reporting on our research findings.

As you are aware, Human Rights Watch is an international nongovernmental organization that conducts research and advocacy on human rights in over 90 countries. Human Rights Watch has for many years documented and reported on human rights abuses in Mali by both state armed forces and non-state armed groups.

Between March 1 and May 9, Human Rights Watch interviewed by telephone 36 people with knowledge of the incidents in which members of the Malian armed forces and associated foreign soldiers, widely believed to be members of the Wagner group – a Russian private military security company – allegedly committed serious abuses. Interviewees

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included 20 witnesses of abuses, three family members of victims, two community leaders, two members of Malian civil society organizations, seven representatives of international organizations, and two Sahel political analysts. Human Rights Watch also reviewed one video showing evidence of the abuses by Malian soldiers and associated foreign forces.

Human Rights Watch is separately investigating alleged serious abuses by Islamist armed groups in central and northern Mali since late 2022, including the killing of civilians, destruction and looting of civilian property, and intimidation and threats leading to the forced displacement of thousands of people.

We sought to address the limitations of telephone interviews by corroborating our findings through other sources, including media reports, reports by Malian and international human rights groups and organizations, and by collecting and examining photographs and videos.

Before we finalize our research report, we are keen to integrate your government's perspectives on the above-mentioned human rights violations and details of any actions your government has taken or will be taking to address them.

You will find further details of our preliminary findings in Appendix I and a list of questions for your ministry in Appendix II.

We would appreciate it if you could provide us with a detailed reply by July 10. We would also be grateful for the opportunity to meet and have a conversation with you or any of your representatives to further discuss this matter.

If you have any questions, or if you wish to arrange a time to discuss the content of this letter, please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED] or on [REDACTED].

Sincerely,



Carine Kaneza Nantulya
Deputy Africa Director
Human Rights Watch

Appendix I: Summary of Human Rights Watch's Findings

According to our research, members of the Malian armed forces committed grave abuses during military operations in response to the presence of Islamist armed groups in the villages of Ouenkoro, Seguela, Sossobe, and Thioffol, in Mali's Mopti and Segou regions between December 2022 and March 2023.

During all these operations, except in Thioffol, witnesses reported the presence of foreign, non-French-speaking armed men whom they described as "white" or "Russians" or "Wagner."

Ouenkoro, Mopti region, March 23-24, 2023

According to our research, members of the Malian armed forces and associated "white" foreign soldiers, accompanied by pro-government militia, carried out an abusive operation in Ouenkoro village on March 23, searching for Islamist fighters.

Soldiers killed at least 20 civilians, including 6-year-old boys, a woman, and an 84-year-old man whose body was found charred. Our findings show that soldiers fired from the ground and from at least two helicopters.

Soldiers went door-to-door, searched and looted homes, pulled men out, and rounded up scores of them in front of the village mosque, beating them with various objects and accusing them of collaborating with Islamist fighters.

Soldiers arrested at least 12 men, took them to an army camp in the town of Sofara, Mopti region, and used torture and other ill-treatment to force the detainees to confess their affiliation or complicity with Islamist armed groups.

Sossobe, Mopti region, March 6, 2023

According to our research, members of the Malian armed forces associated with "white" foreign soldiers carried out an abusive operation in Sossobe village, on March 6, searching for Islamist fighters. Our findings show that soldiers cordoned the village, searched and looted homes, and rounded up over 200 men in front of the village mosque, beating at least two of them.

Witnesses said that when the soldiers left, they and other Sossobe residents found the remains of five men whom, they said, the soldiers had killed during the operation. Witnesses provided identifying details of the five men, four of whom were ethnic Fulani and one who was an ethnic Bozo.

Soldiers also arrested 21 ethnic Fulani men whom they suspected of being members of or collaborators to the Islamist armed groups. Soldiers took these men away on their helicopters to an unknown destination. Their whereabouts remain unknown.

Seguela, Segou region, February 3, 2023

According to our research, scores of foreign “white” soldiers with at least one Malian army soldier carried out an abusive operation in Seguela village on February 3, searching for Islamist fighters. During the operation, they went door-to-door, rounded up over 100 men in front of the village mosque, and beat them. They looted homes and shops. They also arrested 17 men – all ethnic Fulani and one ethnic Bambara, between 27 and 82 years-old – the bodies of eight of them were later found kilometers away from Seguela. The eight victims appeared to have been bound and shot, and four had throats that had also been slit. The whereabouts of the remaining nine men arrested remain unknown.

Thioffol, Mopti region, December 18, 2022

According to our research, members of the Malian armed forces killed nine people, including three women, one older man and one girl, and one Islamist fighter, and injured at least two other women, in and around the Fulani settlement of Thioffol, on December 18, 2022. Two of the victims, a 46-year-old woman and a 7-year-old girl, appeared to have been shot in the head. They also looted homes and destroyed civilian property. Our findings show that the military operation was in retaliation against villagers accused of collaborating with Islamist armed groups and therefore a form of collective punishment.

Sossobe, Mopti region, December 30, 2022

According to our research, members of the Malian armed forces and associated “white” foreign soldiers carried out an airborne operation in Sossobe village on December 30, 2022, searching for Islamist fighters. They killed two civilians, including one man with a mental health condition. The soldiers also arrested nine men. According to credible information collected by Human Rights Watch, six of the nine men arrested were released in March. The whereabouts of the three others remain unknown.

Appendix II: Request for Information

We would be grateful if you could provide us with responses to the questions below by July 11 so your answers can be reflected in our reporting.

- 1) We would appreciate your providing a general response to our preliminary findings above. Please describe which of these cases you are learning about for the first time.
- 2) Have there been any investigations into allegations of human rights violations by members of the Malian armed forces in Mopti and Segou regions between December 2022 and June 2023, including those detailed above?
- 3) Kindly provide details and documentation of instances where such investigations have taken place.
- 4) Have there been any disciplinary actions, prosecutions or convictions against military personnel or officials involved in human rights violations in Mali’s central regions since 2022, including those described above? If so, kindly provide

detailed information about the number of cases, the nature of the crimes, and the actions taken.

- 5) Have any actions been taken to provide reparations to victims of human rights violations or their families committed in the context of the conflict in Mali since 2022? If so, kindly provide detailed information about such actions.
- 6) Please detail what measures are in place to ensure that counterinsurgency operations do not result in serious human rights abuses.
- 7) Kindly tell us whether provost marshals are present during military operations.
- 8) Please provide information on the alleged “white” foreign soldiers operating alongside Malian armed forces during counterinsurgency operations.
- 9) Please tell us the legal basis for detaining people at military bases.