

Rights activists urge France to conduct probe into possible war crimes in Mali

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The area around Mali's village of Bounti, where a French airstrike took place on January 3, 2021, in an image taken by UN investigators in January.

United Nations, April 2 (RHC)-- Human rights activists have called on France to open an investigation into a January 3 airstrike on central Mali after a United Nations probe confirmed that the aerial attack had resulted in at least 19 civilians deaths.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (Minusma) said in a report that the strike, conducted by Reaper drones, hit a wedding party in the village of Bounti attended by more than 100 guests, disputing claims by French officials that the target of the raid was an "armed terrorist group".

Hours before the report was released, France refused to accept the probe's findings, sparking outrage among human rights activists who have intensified calls for accountability. "It is not a luxury to launch an investigation into an incident where there are massive civilian casualties," Jonathan Pedneault, a conflict and crisis researcher at Human Rights Watch, told Middle East Eye on Thursday.

"This new UN report simply highlights the very important need for France to open a judicial investigation into this incident; interview all the people who were in the chain of command and have a proper understanding of what was known at the time of attack in terms of the nature of the gathering in terms of the presence of legal targets, ie: members of the Katiba, and evaluate whether the necessary precautions were taken before the strike was called," he said.

"The only way to do that is launch an actual investigation to determine a) if there was indeed war crimes and b) to then establish the responsibilities and hold those people accountable."

Ousmane Diallo, a researcher with Amnesty International in West and Central Africa, said France's version of accounts was "not holding water" given its failure to present any evidence. "The French position that there were no wedding, no civilian casualties and no collateral damage, is clearly unfounded," Diallo told MEE.

"And it is clear they did not use the principle of precaution, necessity and proportionality when assessing if the gathering was a military objective."

The UN report came just days after local officials said a French air raid had claimed the lives of six civilians in northern Mali, including teenagers who were hunting. The French military immediately rejected those claims, too.

Diallo said that the immediate rejection of the UN report was "emblematic of the French military response to all allegations against them, regarding their impact on their activities on civilians." "This is not the first allegation," Diallo said.

A few days after the airstrike, an advocacy group for Fulani herders, known as Jeunesse Tabital Pulaaku, released a list of 19 people it said were killed by the French airstrike. One of the fatalities was the father of the groom, as well as seven others who it said were injured in the attack while attending the wedding ceremony.

France, a former colonizer of the region, intervened in Mali in 2013 purportedly to beat back increasing militant activity. The country maintains a military force of more than 5,100 in Mali and other former colonies in West Africa in purported efforts to counter militants it claims are linked to the al-Qaeda and Daesh terrorist groups.

Several French soldiers have been killed in Mali over the past months, and Malian citizens have protested France's military presence in the streets as well as on social media platforms. Violence, however, has steadily worsened in the region, with militant groups using northern Mali to launch attacks on neighboring countries.

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