

Summary

In January and February 2007, Guinean citizens weathered one of the most violent storms in their post-independence history when government security forces brutally repressed a nationwide strike organized by Guinea's most prominent trade unions to protest corruption, bad governance, and deteriorating economic conditions. According to the government's own figures, the brutal crackdown resulted in at least 129 dead and over 1700 wounded, hundreds of them by gunshot. Although the strike ended with the appointment of a new consensus prime minister in late February, ending the immediate crisis, Guinea's political stability is tenuous and the possibility of renewed unrest and repression remains very real. To stabilize the situation and to prevent further bouts of violent repression, it is critical that those responsible for the human rights abuses perpetrated during the strike be brought to account.

The third nationwide strike in less than a year, the trade unions' call to strike in mid-January resulted in immediate nationwide paralysis as economic activity in Conakry and all major towns and sectors, including the mining operations that provide a large portion of state revenue, ground to a halt. For the first time since Guinea's independence in 1958, tens of thousands of people—men and women, old and young, including members of all of Guinea's major ethnic groups—took to the streets to demand better government, clogging roads as they rallied, marched, and, at times, clashed with security forces. The protestors' most frequently chanted slogan was a single word: *changement*, or change.

Change, in the form of a new consensus prime minister with the power to name his own government, would come, but at a heavy cost. Throughout the strike, security forces in Guinea engaged in widespread violations of some of the most basic civil and political rights of their fellow citizens, including the right to life, security and liberty of person as well as the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 115 victims of and witnesses to the violence that took place during the six-week crisis period, and collected detailed accounts alleging involvement by members of the army, the police, and the gendarmerie in murder, rape, assault, and theft. Eyewitnesses to dozens of killings told Human Rights Watch

that security forces fired directly into crowds of unarmed demonstrators, frequently before they had exhausted non-lethal means of crowd control, and gunned down demonstrators trying to flee to safety. Scores of Guineans, many of them mere bystanders to the demonstrations, were severely beaten and robbed at gunpoint by security forces, often in their own homes.

In what appeared to be well-organized operations, union and other civil society leaders, as well as journalists, were threatened with death, attacked, robbed, arbitrarily arrested, and sometimes beaten by Guinean security forces. Security forces ransacked the workplaces of one of the trade unions organizing the strike, along with one of Guinea's private radio stations. Attempts to silence the trade unions appear to have come from the highest levels of government, including President Conté and his son Ousmane Conté.

The crackdown of January-February 2007, the largest in recent years, was the latest in a series of incidents in which Guinean security forces have used excessive and at times lethal force on demonstrators protesting worsening economic conditions.¹ The Guinean government has failed to hold the perpetrators of these earlier abuses to account. In many instances, the government appears to turn a blind eye to ongoing abuses by security forces.

Putting an end to the brutality and repression must include addressing the impunity that too often allows abuses to continue undeterred. Although the former Guinean Minister of Justice announced the creation of a national commission of inquiry to investigate strike-related human rights abuses, many of those interviewed by Human Rights Watch, from diplomats, to civil society leaders, to victims of human rights violations in Conakry's suburbs, note that such commissions have a poor track record in Guinea. They note that a previous commission established by the Ministry of Justice to investigate abuses following a previous violent crackdown in June 2006

¹ For an account of violations perpetrated by Guinean security forces during the June 2006 and other strikes, see Human Rights Watch, *The Perverse Side of Things, Torture, Inadequate Detention Conditions, and Excessive Use of Force by Guinean Security Forces*, vol. 18, no. 7(A), August 2006, <http://hrw.org/reports/2006/guinea0806>. See also, Amnesty International, "Guinea: Maintaining Order With Contempt for the Right to Life," AI Index: AFR 29/001/2002, May 2002, [http://web.amnesty.org/library/pdf/AFR290012002ENGLISH/\\$File/AFR2900102.pdf](http://web.amnesty.org/library/pdf/AFR290012002ENGLISH/$File/AFR2900102.pdf) (accessed April 3, 2007).

has not resulted in the publication of a report with findings, much less prosecutions of any perpetrators.²

To allow for an investigation in which Guineans may have confidence, and which will act fairly, independently, expeditiously, and transparently, Human Rights Watch believes that it is critical that an independent body charged with investigating the crimes committed by state security forces during the January-February nationwide strike, as well as previous strikes such as June 2006 in which similar abuses were committed, be created.³ Such a body should draw upon the experience and expertise of the international community through the involvement of members of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

For its part, the international community has a key role to play in ensuring accountability for strike-related abuses. International donors such as the United States and the European Union, as well as international bodies such as the African Union (AU) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), must press the Guinean government for a prompt and independent investigation that draws upon the experience and expertise of the international community. Such an investigation must be followed by the application of appropriate criminal sanctions against the individuals responsible.

This report is based on Human Rights Watch interviews in Guinea in January, February, and March 2007 with officials from the Guinean Ministry of Justice; the Guinean Ministry of Security; the Guinean military; diplomats; journalists; representatives from the United Nations (UN), international nongovernmental organizations, trade unions, and local civil society organizations; as well as victims of and eyewitnesses to human rights violations in Guinea. The names of victims and other witnesses have been omitted to protect their identity and to ensure their privacy.

² Human Rights Watch interviews with diplomats, members of Guinean civil society, and victims of strike-related human rights abuses, Conakry and Labé, January, February, and March 2007.

³ Human Rights Watch, *The Perverse Side of Things*.

Recommendations

To the Government of Guinea

- Publicly acknowledge and condemn excessive use of force on the part of state security forces, including the police, the gendarmerie, and the military, during recent demonstrations, including the June 2006 nationwide strike.
- Create an independent body with full authority to investigate and prosecute abuses that occurred during the January-February strike, as well as similar abuses that occurred during the June 2006 strike. The mandate should include the assessment of all state conduct in accordance with the rights set out in the Constitution and in the international human rights treaties to which Guinea is a party. Such a body should have subpoena power as well as the power to protect witnesses. In particular, the independent structure created should draw upon the expertise of the international community through the involvement of members of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- Immediately investigate via the independent body put in place, and then prosecute in accordance with international standards, crimes committed by state security forces during the both the January-February 2007 and June 2006 nationwide strikes, including murder, rape, assault, and theft. Civilians involved in committing serious abuses—such as the lynching of security forces—should be similarly investigated and punished.
- Thoroughly review—and as necessary revise—the training curriculum for police and other security forces to ensure comprehensive training on human rights issues including legal and appropriate interrogation techniques, crowd control, and appropriate use of force. Provide comprehensive training for police officers on the conduct of investigations. All training must be consistent with international human rights standards, such as the United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials.
- Compensate victims of strike-related abuses adequately and speedily.
- Provide training to security forces and members of the National Communication Council regarding freedom of the press; Convene a seminar

for dialogue between officers of the police, military, and gendarmerie and local journalists.

- In the event of a declared curfew, take all steps necessary to ensure that the population is aware of the hours of the curfew and that those found in breach of the curfew are treated in accordance with the law.

To the United States, France, the European Union and other International Donors

- Call publicly and privately on the Guinean government to create an independent structure charged with investigating the abuses described in this report. In particular, the structure created should draw upon the expertise of the international community through the involvement of members of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- Maintain pressure on the Guinean government to investigate, and where applicable punish in accordance with international standards, those responsible for crimes during the January-February 2007 and June 2006 nationwide strikes, including, murder, rape, assault, and theft.
- Provide financial and other support to local nongovernmental organizations to improve the monitoring and documenting of abuses committed by security forces and to undertake advocacy at a national level.

To the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

- Continue to provide technical and financial assistance to Guinean civil society organizations currently trying to document strike-related abuses.
- Provide staff, technical assistance, or other resources to ensure the proper functioning of an independent commission or special court put in place by the Government of Guinea to investigate and prosecute strike-related abuses.