

Washington, April 9, 2021

Ministers Dr. Boubakar Hassan and Alkassoum Indattou,  
Niamey, Republic of Niger

**Re: Alleged abuses in Tillabéri and Tahoua regions**

Dear Ministers Hassan and Indattou:

I write on behalf of Human Rights Watch, a nongovernmental human rights organization that documents and reports on abuses by states and non-state armed groups in over 100 countries. Congratulations on your recent appointments as Ministers of Justice and National Defense.

As you take up the work of your respective ministries, we wish to share the serious allegations of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances by armed Islamists and the government security forces in the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions that we have gathered since October 2019 and urge you to establish an independent and impartial investigations into these apparent crimes.

We fully recognize the challenges facing Niger and the serious security threat faced both by members of the security forces and civilians due to the conflict with armed Islamist groups. However, these challenges and harms suffered are best overcome through a demonstrated commitment to the rule-of-law, rights-respecting counterterrorism operations, and accountability when abuses are committed. You now have an opportunity to put justice on the agenda and provide answers to Tillabéri and Tahoua's grieving families.

To Human Rights Watch's knowledge, despite credible allegations of unlawful killings and enforced disappearances, to date there have been no credible and impartial investigations of crimes against civilians committed by the security forces and the Nigerien government has conducted only a few investigations into the killings of civilians by armed Islamist groups.

With respect to abuses allegedly committed by armed Islamist groups in Tillabéri and Tahoua regions, we urge you to investigate a) the March 21 attacks on Tillia; b) the March 15 attacks on merchants near Bani Bangou; c) the February 21, 2021 attacks on the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI); d) the January 2021 killing of over 100 civilians, including at least 17 children – some of whom were reportedly burned alive – in two villages of Tondikiwindi commune; and e) the August 9, 2020 killing of eight people, including six French aid workers, their driver, and a leading conservationist, south of Niamey.

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With respect to allegations of abuses by the security forces, Human Rights Watch remotely interviewed 12 people from Tillabéri who provided information about 12 incidents in which security forces allegedly arrested, tortured, and summarily executed civilians and suspects. Eleven of these incidents were also included in a report produced by local Fulani civil society activists. In total, Human Rights Watch collected the names of 178 individuals who were allegedly unlawfully killed or forcibly disappeared by Nigerien security forces between October 2019 and May 2020.

We are aware of one investigation into alleged security force abuses that was ordered by the previous Minister of Defense following allegations in 2020 of 102 enforced disappearances in Inatès commune in Tillabéri. The investigation, publicly tasked by the minister with “wash[ing] away all suspicions” against security forces, was conducted by the Army’s Inspectorate General. Unsurprisingly given the minister’s comments, it found no credible evidence of security force involvement in the disappearances. The investigation provided no reasonable explanation for the 102 disappearances, beyond claiming that they may have been the work of armed Islamist groups dressed in stolen military fatigues.

As you know, Niger’s National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) investigated some of these allegations from May to July 2020 and found six mass graves containing 71 bodies in Inatès commune. All of the remains unearthed and examined by forensics experts showed apparent signs of violence, including trauma to the skull consistent with bullet entry points, and most had their wrists tied to their neck in a similar fashion. The CNDH, which interviewed 65 witnesses, victims of arbitrary arrests, and relatives of people disappeared, concluded that members of Niger’s Defense and Security Forces were responsible for killing the individuals who were found in the mass graves.

Seven of the 12 individuals interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported having been informed of six mass graves in Inatès and Banibangou communes that are said by local community members to contain an estimated 34 bodies in total.

The accounts obtained by Human Rights Watch described men in uniform arriving in military vehicles, who arbitrarily arrested, detained, and then in some cases tortured or executed the captives. These accounts, consistent with those gathered by the CNDH, suggest that security forces committed these abuses against scores of Fulani and Touareg community members.

In the attached annex, you will find a summary of 18 incidents involving alleged unlawful killings and enforced disappearances implicating the armed Islamists and Nigerien security forces.

Twelve of these alleged incidents implicate security forces as committing abuses, including disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture, and were reported to Human Rights Watch by at least two separate sources. Each allegation is corroborated by at least one of 12 community members who were told of or witnessed the abuses themselves and were interviewed remotely by Human Rights Watch, and at least one of the three civil society reports. In one case, information reported by a local civil society group is only corroborated by a report by the UN Stabilization Mission to Mali. In the annex, you will

also find the case of a Jordanian national who disappeared in Niger in August 2019, as documented by Human Rights Watch.

We believe these allegations are serious enough to warrant the establishment of criminal investigations that meet international standards regarding transparency, impartiality, and independence. Investigations into crimes committed by members of the security forces against civilians should seek to establish the line of command, assess responsibilities and lead to appropriate prosecutions of perpetrators. Given the failure of past military investigations into serious abuses by security forces against civilians and persons in custody, these investigations whenever possible should be led by civilian investigators and adjudicated in civilian courts. In all cases the protection of witnesses should be a priority.

We urge you to take the necessary steps, during your first months in office, to provide answers to the Tillabéri and Tahoua families of those killed and disappeared and to work towards accountability for crimes committed both by security force personnel and members of armed Islamist groups.

We would also like to have the opportunity to travel to Niger to meet with relevant members of your government, judicial administration, and security forces, and to learn about the steps you take to ensure justice for past crimes and prevent their reoccurrence. You can contact my colleague Jonathan Pedneault, researcher with our Conflict and Crisis Division, at [pedneaj@hrw.org](mailto:pedneaj@hrw.org) or +47 907 16 245 to provide an official response. We will be publishing the results of our research in the next few days and would welcome the opportunity to reflect the perspective of the new Nigerien authorities. We stand ready to assist you in your efforts to strengthen accountability and provide answers to the grieving families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CD', is positioned above the typed name and title.

Corinne Dufka,  
Sahel Director,  
Africa Division,  
Human Rights Watch

## ANNEX

### **Alleged Abuses by Armed Islamist Groups**

#### ***Intazayane, Bakorat, and Wirsnat, Tillia Department, March 21, 2021***

According to media reports and government sources, armed men attacked several villages and hamlets in the Tillia area of the Tahoua region, killing 137 people, according to official reports. Media sources reported that many of the victims were watering their livestock at wells at the time of the attack.

#### ***Bani Bangou commune, March 15, 2021***

According to media reports, armed Islamist fighters ambushed four vehicles carrying merchants returning from the Bani Bangou market en route to Chinegodar and Darey-Daye. They killed many of the passengers before committing further abuses in surrounding villages, killing at least 58 people.

#### ***Dargol commune, Tillabéri and Garin-Dogo, Diffa, February 21, 2021***

According to media reports, two separate incidents resulted in the killing of eight members of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) and the wounding of several others around midday on February 21. Near Dargol, in Tillabéri, a CENI vehicle ran over a landmine, which exploded, killing the seven passengers. Near Garin-Dogo in the evening, a CENI vehicle came under attack from gunmen believed to be Boko Haram fighters, who killed one and left many others injured.

#### ***Tchombangou and Zaroumadareye, Tondikwindi commune, January 2, 2021***

According to media reports and humanitarian agencies, two columns of armed Islamist fighters on motorcycles simultaneously attacked the neighboring villages of Tchombangou and Zaroumadareye, killing over 100 people, including women and at least 17 children. Some of the victims were reportedly burned alive. Fighters allegedly attacked the villages in retaliation for the earlier killing of two members of their group by villagers who refused to pay a “tax” levied by the group.

#### ***Kouré commune, August 9, 2020***

According to media reports, eight people, including two Nigerien nationals and six French humanitarian workers, were killed in an ambush in the Kouré Giraffe reserve in an attack later claimed by the Islamic State’s Nigeria affiliate, ISWAP. French authorities opened an investigation into the killing.

### **Alleged Abuses by Nigerien Security Forces**

#### ***Boundou Manssobe, Bani Bangou commune, May 24, 2020***

According to three local sources, security forces arrested five herders by the Boundou Manssobe well, near Bissao, and severely beat and tortured them. Security force members burned their testicles and forced them against the burning exhaust tubes of their vehicles prior to releasing them. One of the victims, a 57-year-old man whose son was

reportedly executed by security forces in February (see Bissao, February 25 above), later died from his injuries.

***Sara Koyre and Zigui, Anzourou commune, April 12, 2020***

According to a local source and a civil society report, security forces from Anzorou commune arrested nine men in the villages of Sara Koyre and Zigui. According to the source, three of the men arrested in Zigui were executed.

***Bani Bangou and Garbey, Bani Bangou commune, April 5-10, 2020***

According to three local sources, security forces retaliated against local residents over a five-day period that followed a deadly attack by armed Islamists that killed two security force members and injured nine others at the gendarmerie outpost at Bani Bangou. A civil society report and two local sources said that security forces tortured at least one older woman to death in detention. Security forces forcibly disappeared 23 men who were arrested in Bani Bangou and at the Garbey market. The sources said that a man from the Konkon Kora village, five kilometers from Bani Bangou, reported finding three mass graves shortly after, in which the bodies of the 23 men were allegedly found.

***Inates commune, March 27-April 2, 2020***

According to four sources, as well as a civil society report and a list provided by officials of the Inates commune, security forces arrested 102 men, most of them Touareg, in various locations across the Inates and Ayourou communes from March 27 to April 2. On March 27, 28, and 29, a total of 48 were arrested as they went to and from the market at Ayourou. And on April 2, 54 more men were arrested in their camps or by water points. Officials and elders of the Touareg community in Inates drafted a comprehensive list with the names of those arrested and asked the authorities for their whereabouts, to no avail.

In a witness statements collected and reported by the CNDH, a survivor of one of the killings said he was arrested with his brother and cousin by the military, and had his hands tied being his back and was blindfolded prior to being placed aboard an armored vehicle. While he managed to escape, his relatives did not. One man whose name was on the list was found to be alive in his village by the CNDH.

***Adabdabe, Bani Bangou commune, March 25, 2020***

According to a witness and two other sources and a civil society report, Nigerien security forces arrested an older man at the Adabdabe market prior to entering the Djalgodji Fulani camp of Bourria, some seven kilometers away. There, they took into custody 12 more men who did not flee upon seeing the security forces arriving. The 13 were brought outside the camp and executed by security forces.

***Boundou Gardigne well, Bani Bangou, March 15, 2020***

According to two sources and a civil society report, Nigerien security forces aboard military vehicles and speaking Zarma and Hausa reportedly arrested three men who had brought their cattle to the Boundou Gardigne well. Security forces beat the three men

prior to releasing two of them, taking the third, who was in a critical state following the beating, away with them.

***Bani Bangou, Bani Bangou commune, March 2, 2020***

According to two sources and a civil society report, uniformed security forces aboard vehicles arrested a father of seven while he was on his way from the Bani Bangou market back to Hintadey village. His body was found the following day, two kilometers south of Bani Bangou.

***Bissaou, Bani Bangou commune, February 25, 2020***

According to two sources and a civil society report, five men were reportedly captured and executed by security forces. Sources who spoke to villagers reported that security forces speaking Zarma and Hausa arrived in the village aboard several dozen vehicles. The security forces apprehended the five men and shot them at point-blank range outside the village and buried them in a mass grave.

***Tinekart, Bani Bangou commune, February 23-24, 2020***

According to a report by the Touareg Idaksahak community and a MINUSMA report, 12 Malian citizens from the Idaksahak community were reportedly arrested and executed by Nigerien security forces as they attended the marketplace in Tinekart village, a few kilometers north of Banibangou, along a common trade route to Mali. Witnesses who spoke to the leaders of the Idaksahak community said they recognized Nigerien forces.

***Tilwa checkpoint, Bani Bangou commune, February 20, 2020***

According to two sources and a civil society report, security forces reportedly arrested five Fulani men at the Tilwa checkpoint, near In Tirzawane by the border with Mali. One man was freed after he presented his identity card. The remaining four, ages 29 to 55, were forcibly disappeared. Families, who looked for them in vain, believe they were executed.

***Tarzakoli, Inates commune, February 1, 2020***

According to four sources and a civil society report, two men from the same family were found dead after having been detained by security forces who had come to Tarzakoli village in a convoy of some 20 trucks. The two men were the son and nephew of the village's "great marabout" – both an imam and a customary chief – who had been kidnapped and killed by armed Islamists the previous day. After security forces found his nephew at his mother's house, they proceeded to a nearby water well to arrest the marabout's son. Security forces then allegedly executed them both outside the village and buried them.

***Chinagodrar, Banibangou commune, October 19, 2019***

According to two sources and a civil society report, security forces arrested five Fulani herders at the Chinagodrar market and transported them to the nearby military camp, where they were allegedly tortured, leading to the death of one of them. Security forces transported the remaining four men some 10 kilometers outside of the camp and executed

them. Nearby villagers reportedly discovered their bodies days later because of the smell that emanated from the shallow grave.

***Enforced Disappearance of Omar Marawan Mousa Allan, August 2019***

According to family members, Omar Marawan Mousa Allan travelled to Niger on vacation in August 2019 and subsequently disappeared. His relatives said that Allan arrived in Niamey on August 22, 2019 from Dubai and was scheduled to return on September 20. After his arrival he told family members he intended to return to Dubai sooner than planned, on August 29. The members said he stopped responding to their messages on August 25 and exited the family WhatsApp chat group on December 26, 2019. Family members said they confirmed with the airline that Allan never boarded a return flight to Dubai from Niamey. Family members said that sources on the ground in Niamey who attempted to locate him said that they believe Allan is being detained by the security forces in Niger.