



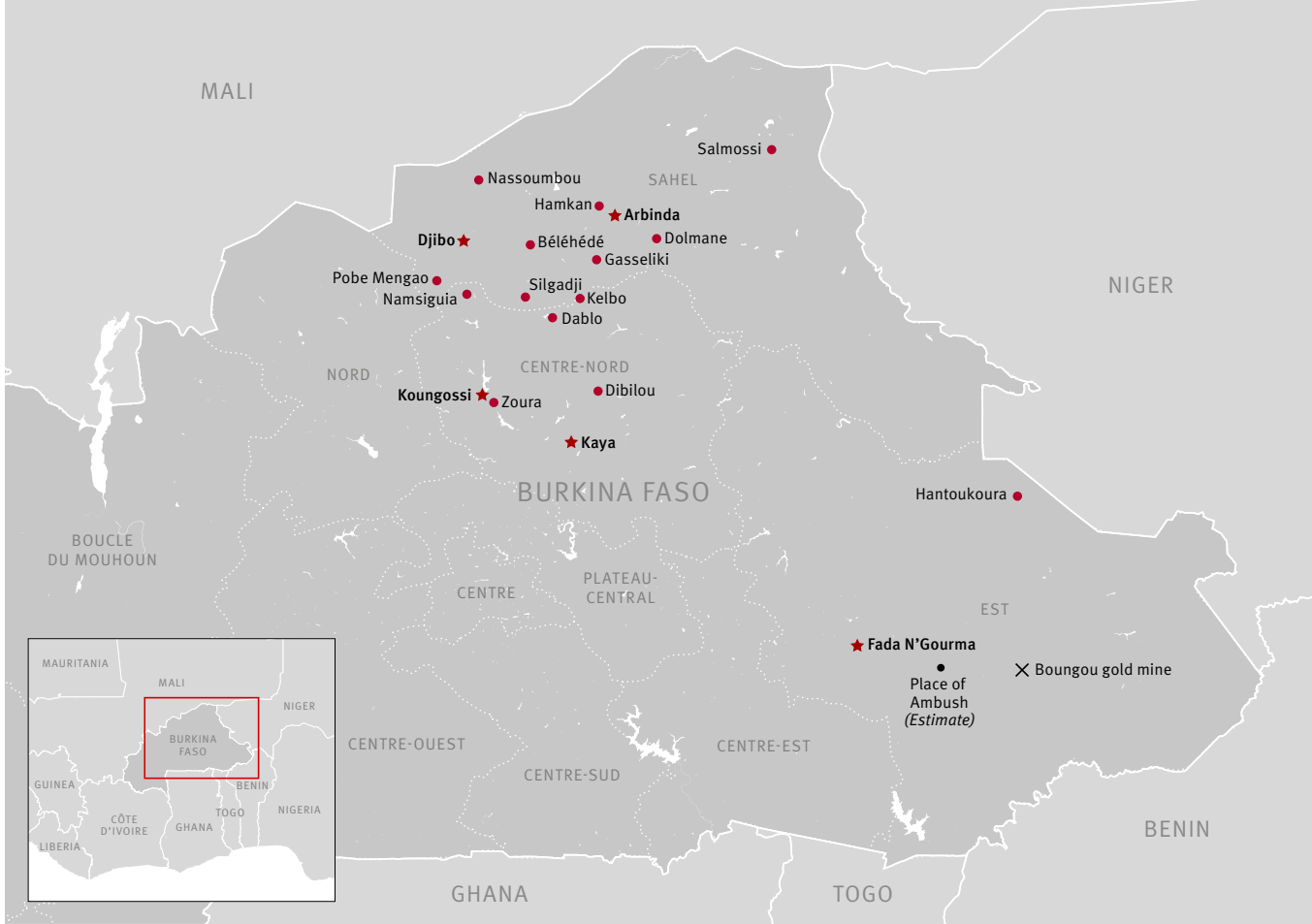
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BURKINA FASO

# ARMED ISLAMIST ATROCITIES SURGE

Targeted Attacks, Executions Kill Over 250 Civilians in 2019

Map of Attacks by Armed Islamists in Burkina Faso from April–December 2019



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INTRODUCTION

**Armed Islamist groups in Burkina Faso have committed targeted attacks and summary executions that have killed over 250 civilians since April 2019, Human Rights Watch said today. Witnesses said that assailants sought to justify killings by linking victims to the government, the West, or Christian beliefs. A surge in attacks in recent months have caused hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee their homes.**

The armed Islamist groups responsible for the attacks began operating in neighboring Mali and from 2016 spread into Burkina Faso. Initially concentrated in Burkina Faso’s northern Sahel region, the attacks have steadily spread to the Nord, Centre-Nord, Boucle du Mouhoun, and Est regions. The groups have concentrated recruitment efforts on the nomadic Peuhl, or Fulani, by exploiting community grievances over poverty and public sector corruption. This has inflamed tensions with other largely agrarian communities, notably the Foulse, Mossi, Songhai, and Gourmantche, who have been the victims of most attacks.

“Armed Islamist groups in Burkina Faso have attacked civilians with unmitigated cruelty and utter disregard for human life,” said Corinne Dufka, West Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “Deliberately targeting farmers, worshippers, mine workers, displaced people and traders are war crimes.”

Human Rights Watch interviewed 54 victims and witnesses of abuses in Burkina Faso’s capital, Ouagadougou, in November and by telephone in December 2019. The attacks documented took place between April and December 2019. Human Rights Watch previously conducted research into abuses by armed Islamist groups and government security forces in Burkina Faso.

Human Rights Watch documented 256 killings of civilians in 20 attacks since April 2019 by groups allied with Al-Qaeda, including the local armed group Ansaroul Islam, and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS). Witnesses said that victims were gunned down in marketplaces and villages, as they worshipped in churches and mosques, and as they transported aid to displacement camps. Many others were killed during ambushes, including 39 mine workers in November 2019. Armed Islamist groups have rarely claimed responsibility for attacks.

The fighting between the Burkina Faso government and armed groups amounts to a non-international armed conflict under the laws of war. Applicable law includes Common Article 3 to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and other treaty and customary laws of war, which apply to non-state armed groups as well as national armed forces. The laws of war prohibit attacks on civilians and summary executions, torture and other ill-treatment, sexual violence, and looting. Serious violations of the laws of war committed by individuals with criminal intent are war crimes.

“The Islamist armed groups need to immediately end their attacks on civilians,” Dufka said. “At the same time, the Burkina Faso government should take stronger steps to protect vulnerable communities from harm and impartially investigate and appropriately prosecute those implicated in war crimes.”





Attacks on Mine Workers, Est Region

On November 6, 2019, an apparent armed Islamist group ambushed a five-bus convoy carrying 241 workers in a mine owned by Canada’s West Africa Mining Exploration Corporation (SEMAFO). The attack killed 39 people and wounded another 60. The convoy was about 40 kilometers from the Boungou gold mine in Est region and had a Burkinabè military escort. Human Rights Watch interviewed seven survivors of the attack.

The witnesses said the military escort included several soldiers on motorcycles and two armored cars, which were at least 50 meters in front of the buses and several company vehicles. One vehicle, a pickup truck, belonged to a private security company, Techno-Security, and carried at least one armed man. Each bus had one unarmed Techno-Security officer with a walkie-talkie.

The witnesses described dozens of attackers dressed in a combination of military camouflage and traditional robes known as boubous. They wore ammunition vests and were armed with AK- 47 assault weapons, PKM 12 machine guns, pistols, and knives. Witnesses heard them speaking in French, Fulfulde, Gourmanchéma, Mooré, and Zerma (a language largely spoken in Niger).

On November 7, 2019, Defense Minister Cherif Sy and his delegation examine a few of the buses ambushed by armed Islamists the day before.  
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The attack occurred in a forested area with no cellphone coverage. At about 9:15 a.m., the first armored vehicle hit a powerful explosive device, immobilizing it, which was followed by rapid gunfire which lasted approximately one hour.

Two of the buses and a few company vehicles maneuvered through the ambush to safety. The remaining three buses and vehicles were forced to stop because the drivers had been killed or fled, or the vehicles had been immobilized by gunfire. Gunmen killed and wounded numerous passengers, then retreated. One mine worker said:

We’d left the mine at 7:30 a.m. and picked up the army escort at 8:05 a.m. I’d put my seat back and was looking at my phone when at 9:17 a.m. I heard an explosion, thinking a tire exploded, then gunfire. Just then, a window exploded ... My seatmate had been hit in the chest and was bleeding profusely ... He fell down on me and died soon after.

Thinking the attack was over, some mine workers left the buses seeking a cell phone signal and bringing out the dead and wounded in anticipation of a medical evacuation. However, 15 to 30 minutes later, the attackers reemerged from the forest and began executing numerous people, including several wounded people, near or inside the buses. The witnesses said they no longer heard the army firing back. “It was us against them,” one said. Another witness said:

I was on the third bus. Our driver had been killed and I’d been grazed on my head. After heavy fire we thought it was over and were evacuating a colleague who’d been shot twice. Two of us propped him up against a tree. He said he was thirsty and asked that we bring his backpack, which had a bottle of water. Heading back to the bus to retrieve it, I saw the jihadists emerging from the bush, firing as they advanced. I had no choice but to run... Later, I learned my wounded colleague had been executed.

Another wounded man said:

We were on our phones or watching TV when suddenly...Pa! Pa! Pa! Bullets flew. I touched my back, there was blood. We hit the floor until it was over. But they came back. I opened a window and jumped down, still bleeding, dragging myself 20 meters to a ditch where I remained for 10 minutes ... I saw them surrounding the bus. I put my head down, listening to footsteps [about] five meters away. When I heard one say, “Kill them and burn this bus,” I got up and ran...bullets whizzing by.

The witnesses said the armed men boarded at least one bus, killing numerous people, including women and the wounded, at close range. They said of some 35 people on this bus, only about five were unscathed. One man said:

We lay quiet, between the seats. I heard the attackers say they’d burn the bus and smelled gasoline as they removed it from the tank. Minutes later, two attackers got on the bus, stealing phones and bags and then executed several people point blank before spraying us with bullets. One of the attackers said, “We told you we’re against the whites, and not to work for them.” They walked around, kicking us to see who was still alive. They kicked me two times...and tapped me with their gun, but I was under a few dead colleagues... This is how I survived.

Another survivor on the fifth bus said:

Before they boarded, I heard voices of my colleagues saying, “Please, forgive us,” and then gunfire. After boarding the bus, I heard them [the attackers] say to a wounded man, “Ah, you are still suffering?” And then pam, pam, and “Allahu Akbar” – God is most great. Then they shot three women huddled together, one died, and another was wounded, then a man who works in drilling, then a large man who wasn’t well and couldn’t manage to lie down, was shot in the head.

“When the attack was over, we just wept,” one man said. “Even the soldiers who came to help us.” “Few women work at the mine...and we are close,” said a female colleague. “I was joking with my friend that morning ... My heart aches that she is no longer.” “I keep seeing the faces of my colleagues,” another said. “When I see a bus, or hear a loud noise, I relive the attack again and again. I feel the world has no value if this kind of thing can happen.”



Attacks on Churches, Centre-Nord, Sahel and Est regions

On May 12, 2019, about 30 armed Islamists carried out an attack on the Catholic Church in Dablo, Centre-Nord region. Six witnesses described the attack, which left six men dead including Father Simeon Yampa.

One witness said:

The mass started at 8:30 a.m. Around 8:45 a.m., we heard the motorcycles...then saw them through the windows. The church was so full that dozens of worshippers had to celebrate outside. One group of jihadists surrounded those outside then another entered the church, creating panic...Those who could scrambled out. But then they blocked the doors.

A worshipper who was hiding meters from the church said:

Father Yampa fled outside through his dressing chamber. He ran about three meters, but a jihadist pointed his gun at him saying, “You will not escape.” The priest turned around, raised his hands, clutching the Bible, and sunk to his knees. And the jihadist shot him in the chest, saying, “Allahu Akbar.”

Another worshipper described what happened inside the church:

Dozens of us were trapped, including many from the choir. We were ordered to exit the church one-by-one after giving the jihadists our ID cards and phones. They ordered about 20 men to lie down outside, a few meters from the church, all face down in a row. Then they started killing. I couldn’t look. ...I just prayed... Then one of them received a phone call – and the killing stopped.

Charred church robes, documents, and other materials burned by armed Islamists during the May 12, 2019 attack on the Dablo Catholic Church.

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A woman said that, “the Islamists ordered us to abandon Christianity and said if they returned to find us [the women] unveiled, they’d kill us.” Another said that after the executions, “they burned robes used by the catechists, tam tams [drums], church documents, Bibles, cloth used to cover the altar, and, before leaving, stole motorcycles, looted goods, and burned two cars and part of the market.”

One man said that the church attack “signaled the beginning of a severe deterioration of security in our area, which is largely Christian.” Another said, “Since May, there are more and more jihadists. Dozens of people have been killed on their farms, in village attacks and in ambushes.” Community leaders said tens of thousands of villagers have fled this area since May 2019.

On May 13, the day after the Dablo attack, armed Islamists attacked a procession of Catholic worshippers carrying a statue of the Virgin Mary from village to village in Bam province, in Centre-Nord region, as part of the Marian devotions. The attacker executed four men and burned the statue. A witness said:

We were around 70 people accompanying the Virgin from village to village, when suddenly, I saw seven motorcycles with two heavily armed men on each come racing towards us. The Virgin was in a motorized tricycle with about 10 people and the rest of us were walking. All who could, including me, scattered, but those in the tricycle didn’t have time. Some minutes later, I heard gunfire. ...Pam! Pam! Around 4 p.m., we returned and found the bodies of our four brothers, face down, about 40 meters from the path. The attackers had freed the children and a young woman. The tricycle, with the Virgin, was burned a few meters away.

Earlier, on April 28, armed Islamists executed six congregants of the Assemblies of God Protestant church, including the pastor, in Silgadji village, Sahel region. The victims, all men, appeared to have been targeted for their real or perceived support of a local defense group. One witness, hiding about 20 meters from the church, said:

As the service ended, I saw around 20 armed men surrounding the church as the women prepared lunch. Twenty others blocked the paths out of the village. One jihadist took out a list of people they said were working with the Kogloweago [a local defense group], calling out the names, which included the elderly Pastor Pierre Ouédraogo and his son. They ordered them to lie face down, then a jihadist shot them ... two times each in the head. People were horrified... The victims were all [ethnic] Mossi. Then they took the food that had been

prepared, put it in the tricycle belonging to one of the men executed, and left.

On December 1, 2019, alleged armed Islamists executed 14 congregants of the Protestant church in Hantoukoura, Est region. All of the dead were ethnic Gourmantché, and they included the pastor, Woba Noé, and a boy of around 12 years old. A man who survived by hiding meters from the church said:

Service finished around 12:45. As I left church, I saw six jihadists standing some distance away. I knew something bad was coming, so I ran, turning around only once to see them herding people together. They wore turbans; most had big rifles with bullet clips in their vests. Minutes later, I heard gunfire. When I knew the jihadists were gone, I rushed back, finding 14 of our people, face down, about five meters from the church, each shot in the head. Before the killing started, I was told they’d ordered the women to move away, and that they’d blamed us for supporting the Kogloweago, but they’d deserted our village two months earlier. The women wailed in grief. My cousin was among the dead...the jihadists took the men’s CNIB (identify cards) and, from my cousin, they also took his bible.



Killing of at Least 35 civilians in December in Arbinda, Sahel Region

At around 4 a.m. on December 24, an armed Islamist group carried out simultaneous attacks against a gendarme base and an informal internally displaced persons camp in Arbinda, the capital of Arbinda department. The attack killed 7 security force personnel and at least 35 civilians, mostly women. The camp was approximately one kilometer from the gendarme base.

On December 27, the Islamic State took responsibility for the attack on the security force base but failed to mention the killing of civilians. One witness said she saw 37 dead including 30 women, 5 men, and 2 small children. She said:

When the shooting started, I hit the ground, and crawled to a mud hut where I hid until it was over. I saw them shooting at everything that moved and setting tents on fire. Nearly all of the dead were displaced people. Five of the dead were women who’d left early that morning to fetch water in the nearby village of Ourondou. We think the assailants killed them as they retreated.

Motorcycles abandoned by armed Islamists after their December 24, 2019 attack on Arbinda.  
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Another witness said:

I heard the sound of scores of motorcycles...some went to the gendarmerie, others opened fire on us in the refugee neighborhood. I saw 22 of my neighbors dead, including two infants. I survived by hiding behind a clay stove. Two terrorists opened my door but didn’t see me. Then they entered my neighbor’s hut, killing her ... They argued about whether to kill her baby...but eventually shot him. The firing only stopped when a plane flew overhead, which sent them running.





**Killing of 19 people transporting food aid, Centre-Nord region**

On September 8, 2019, an alleged armed Islamist group attacked a convoy of motorized tricycles bringing food aid from Dablo to Kelbo, 15 kilometers away. Kelbo hosts tens of thousands of civilians displaced by the rising insecurity. A government communique said 14 men were killed but a witness said he saw 19 bodies at or near the scene:

The jihadists have stopped us from farming and this convoy was bringing corn and millet provided by the government to feed about 20 villages. I went to the scene: the attack was a few kilometers from Dablo... Most of the drivers were from there but some of the victims were displaced youth from our communities. I saw 12 men – drivers and their helpers – face down near the road in a line, all shot dead. Several others had apparently tried to flee ... We found seven more bodies in the bush. They stole three tricycles of aid – 20 large sacks in each – and burned several others.

Displaced people await aid at a village in Dablo area, March 1, 2019.  
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**Killing of 23 outside artisanal gold mine, Sahel region**

On October 4, 2019, at about 4 p.m., alleged armed Islamists executed at least 23 men in a market adjacent to an artisanal gold mine in Dolmane, near Gorgadji village, Sahel region. One witness described seeing a group of some 25 men he described as “jihadists” gathered just outside the market shortly before the attack began. Another described the killing of seven men near the local butchery:

Around 4 p.m., dozens of jihadists swarmed the market. Turbans covered their faces. They had guns the white man uses. From where I hid, I saw four of them come to the butcher shop, stopping seven men who were chatting there. They stole their phones and money, ordered them to lie down, then one jihadist ordered the group to open fire. They all spoke the Pulaar [language] used in our region. I hid until they left ... The seven dead were all gold miners.

A gold miner who helped bury the dead said:

The next morning, I went searching for two nephews who hadn’t returned home, but they were among the dead. There were 23 bodies around the market – Bella, Mossi, Peuhl, and Foulse – people of all ethnicities do artisanal mining. Seven bodies were near the butchers; six by the mill; six at a gold shop, four near a boutique. All were lying face down, shot in the head and chest. They’d pillaged the boutiques and stolen money, a car and motorcycles. They’re buried in seven common graves.

**Killing of 13 in Pobe Mengao village, Sahel region**

On October 26, 2019, armed Islamists executed 11 men in Pobe Mengao village, Sahel region. The attackers accused the villagers of collaborating with government security forces, who witnesses said had recently conducted an operation near their village. Two more men were later found dead in the surrounding area. A witness said:

They came from the west on motorbikes and motorized tricycles, blocking all paths out. They went house to house, ordering the men out. A military plane flew overhead, and they rushed us into a house. After it left, one jihadist said, in Fulfulde, “You dogs, we told you not to work with the enemies of Allah, the FDS [Defense and Security Forces] and you refused. Will they protect you now? We have no mercy for collaborators.” Then they picked 11 men – they knew whom they wanted – ordered them to lie down. They told the rest of us to get out. ... As I fled, the shooting started.

A villager who participated in the burial said:

I saw 11 dead...executed in a line – in the middle of the village, many shot in the head. The dead were between 40 to 75 years old. We later found two others in the bush. The 13 were buried in three common graves. We used to see the jihadists frequently. In recent months they burned a bar, kidnapped construction workers building a health center, and executed a few people. But after this massacre, we all fled.

A farmer said that, “They were turbaned and armed with AK-47s. I’d escaped and hoped my cousin had as well but when I called him to make sure he was ok, a jihadist answered his phone, saying, “Your cousin is no longer.”

**Killing of 22 in Dibilou village, Centre-Nord region**

On July 25, 2019, alleged armed Islamists killed 22 civilians during an attack on Dibilou village, Centre-Nord region. A farmer, who survived by hiding in a shower, said:

It was 4:45 p.m. I was in the market. They came into town on about 25 motorcycles, two on each, armed with military weapons, and long belts of bullets. I ran into the nearest house, hid and prayed for two hours. There was shooting, the smell of fire, and the sound of people screaming... “In God’s name, please don’t kill me,” followed by Arabic words, then pam, pam and silence. We weren’t armed – we had no self-defense force – they’d fled in January – and no gendarmes to protect us. They burned the market, including motorcycles, looted, and killed people at random.

A witness who helped bury the dead described finding the bodies in the market, on the roads, and up to four kilometers away:

We buried 19 in town: four people were in the market, a few in their shops; one man was hidden under a prayer rug in the mosque, others on the road, some in their houses. A few days later, we went in search of people who were unaccounted for, and found three more in their farms, shot in the head. There were 22 souls, all men, ages from 70 to 25, and all Mossi.

**Killing of 18 in Béléhédé village, Sahel region**

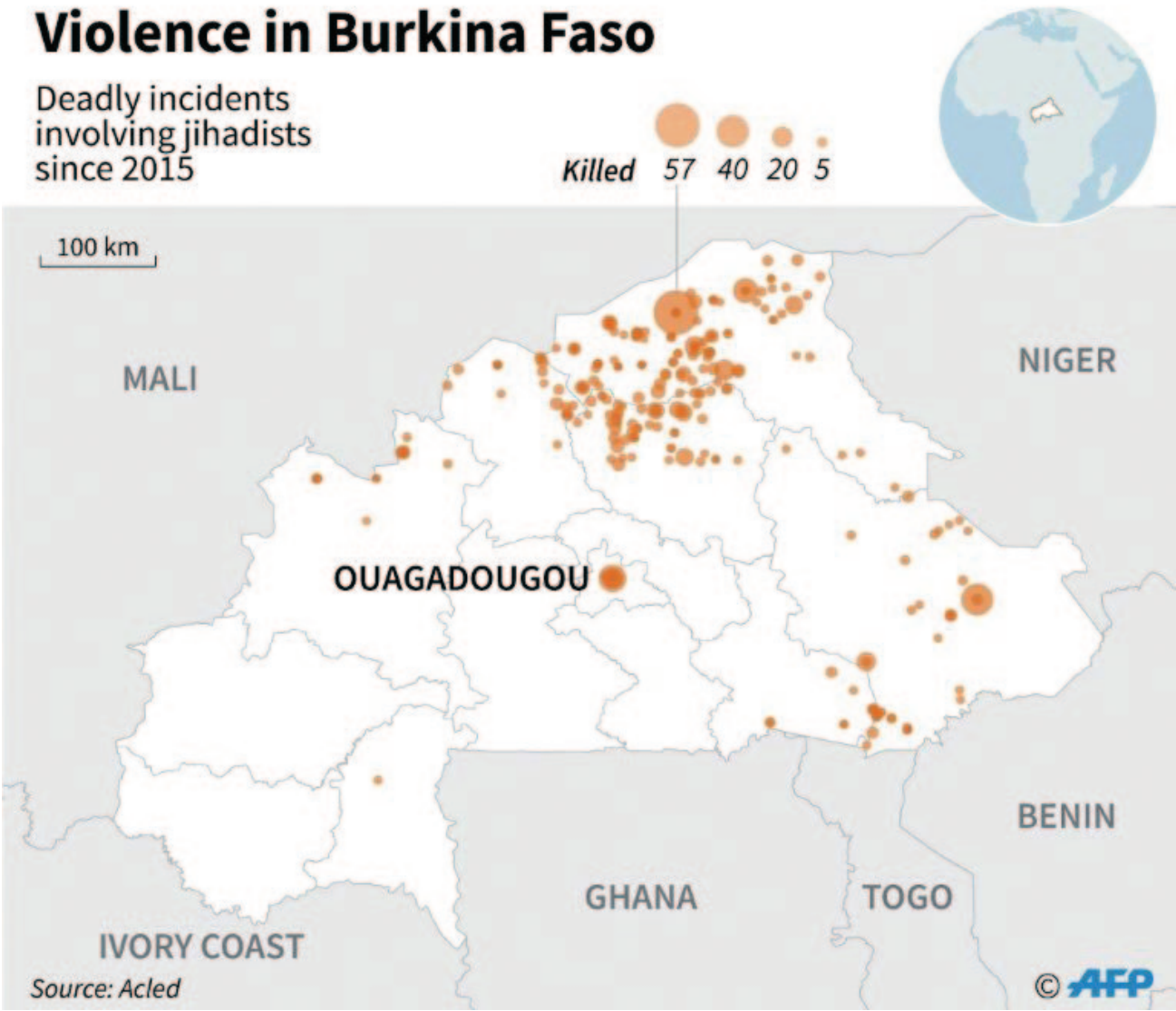
An alleged armed Islamist attack on Béléhédé village, Sahel region, on June 18, 2019, killed 18 men. Witnesses said that armed Islamists repeatedly accused the villagers of collaborating with a major military operation being carried out at the time. An elderly woman said: “Suddenly there was gunfire and bullets and screaming and fires all around. After they left, I found my husband, a tailor, dead a few meters away from home. He had nothing to do with this war.” Another witness said:

Around 3 p.m., I saw dozens of jihadists ride in on motorcycles.... Some broke into houses and killed, others stole our animals and pillaged from stores. I hunkered down to save myself and my family. Two hours later, it was over. I participated in the retrieval of our dead: 18 people, all Foulse and Mossi, including four adolescents. Ten were in their houses – a few were shot hiding under their



# Violence in Burkina Faso

Deadly incidents involving jihadists since 2015



mattresses; some were dragged out of their house and murdered; others were found dead on paths as if fleeing. I heard them saying they would exterminate us: “You’re providing information...all that is happening is because of you.”

Another witness said that during “Operation Doofu,” the army set up in Béléhédé’s school for about a week and launched their patrols in the area: “The jihadists blamed us for supporting the FDS, massacring us just a few weeks later ...The army also engaged in excesses in our zone ... The jihadists blamed us for their bad behavior.”



## Killing of 9 in Zoura village, Centre-Nord region

On October 20, 2019, alleged armed Islamists killed nine civilians during an attack on Zoura village, in Bam province, Centre-Nord region. A villager said, “Eight motorcycles – two [people] on each – screamed into the village, firing randomly. Some wore boubous, others camouflage, all had turbans. They jumped off their bikes and went into the market and people’s houses. Nearly the entire village has fled.” Another villager said:

We buried nine civilians, including an elderly man and his brother, both killed near the market, two others near the maternity clinic, one in front of his boutique, three in the family compound of a tailor named Benjamin, and another, found dead near his motorcycle a few meters from his home.

## Killing of 14 in Salmossi village, Sahel region

On October 11, 2019, alleged armed Islamists executed at least 14 men, the majority ethnic Songhai, most as they left the village mosque after evening prayer in Salmossi village, Sahel region. Three witnesses said they believed the killings were in retaliation for the killing of two youth by a local village defense force, a few days before. One witness said: “The assailants had threatened the chief, looted and stolen our livestock. We organized a vigilance group to

Members of armed Islamist group present in Burkina Faso in 2018. Image released on March 22, 2019.

Courtesy of Defense Post.

protect ourselves and some days before the attack had caught two suspects who were killed in their custody.”

## Killing of 19 in Arbinda, Sahel region

On June 9, 2019, an attack by alleged armed Islamists on Arbinda, Sahel region, left 19 civilians dead. The population of Arbinda has swelled with displaced civilians and has a considerable presence of security forces. Two witnesses said the armed men infiltrated the town undetected during a wind and sandstorm. A witness said:

The jihadists feared the security forces would catch them so didn’t even get off their motorcycles. Instead they sped through town in a cloud of dust shooting at anything that moved. It started around 4 p.m. and was over quickly. Over a dozen civilians were wounded and 19 people killed, including the son of the traditional chief of Arbinda. The market area was hardest hit; lots of traders were among the dead.





Execution of Government Officials and Others, Sahel region

On November 3, 2019, armed Islamists executed Oumarou Dicko, the Djibo city mayor and parliament member for Djibo province, and two other men after ambushing their car on the road from Djibo to Ouagadougou. A fourth man, the driver, was also shot but survived. A passenger in a bus who was a witness to the killings said:

Around the village of Namsiguia, we came upon what we thought was a traffic accident: a car overturned on the side of the road. The bus driver stopped but as we scrambled down to help the occupants, four armed assailants with walkie-talkies emerged from the forest pointing their rifles at us. They ordered all male passengers down, then told us to turn over the vehicle. I recognized the mayor, and saw he had a forehead injury, but it wasn’t serious. He told me their vehicle had been ambushed.

After he got out, an assailant asked, “Mr. Mayor, is that you?” The mayor didn’t answer and moved toward the bus passengers. But the assailant said, “Don’t move.” The mayor said, “No, these are my people and I will join them.” The assailant grabbed his arm and forcefully pulled him aside. Meanwhile, another assailant was on the walkie talkie. The person on the other side asked, “Are you

Slain mayor of Djibo city and parliament member for Djibo Province, Oumarou Dicko.

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sure it is the mayor?” to which he said, “Yes, we have him.” They ordered us back on the bus and as we moved, they executed the mayor, and then heard more shots as they executed the mayor’s companions.

Human Rights Watch also documented the killing, in early April 2019, of a prominent religious sheikh, Youssouf Wérèm, and three others in Hamkan village, near Arbinda; the April 11 killing of the village chief of Gasseliki and village councilor of Aladjou village; and the September 12 killing of two men in Nassoumbou, all in the Sahel region. Alleged armed Islamists were implicated in each of these cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Burkina Faso

- Step up efforts to protect vulnerable communities from harm.
- Ensure the security forces impartially protect all civilians, regardless of their ethnicity or religion.
- Ensure that everyone detained or taken into custody by government security forces is treated humanely, is brought promptly before a judicial authority to ensure the legality of their detention and is able to contact their families and counsel.
- Provide adequate resources and support for Burkinabè judges and judicial personnel empowered to investigate suspected armed Islamists and allegations of abuse by security force personnel, notably the anti-terrorism cell and the military prosecutor’s office.

To Armed Islamist Groups in Burkina Faso

- Cease all extrajudicial killings, abductions, looting, and other serious human rights abuses, as well as threats of violence against community members.
- Cease any attacks and threats on livelihoods notably of farmers, herders, and market people.
- Facilitate unfettered humanitarian access to aid organizations.
- Permit safe, unhampered access to national or international entities investigating grave violations by all sides.
- Cease using explosive devices in an indiscriminate manner.
- Cease any attacks and threats against civilians, notably in the education and health sectors.
- Ensure that everyone taken custody, including captured security force personnel, are treated humanely; appropriately punish Islamist group members responsible for torture and other ill-treatment.



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(front cover) Charred remains of the Dablo Church following the attack on May 12, 2019.

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