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Declaration on the Human Rights situation in northern Mali

Following the conference

"Human Rights in the Malian conflict since 2012. Stop abuses: a key to build peace"

17th of June 2013

European Parliament, Brussels

Greens/EFA (19.06.2013) - In the conference which took place at the European Parliament in Brussels, 17th of June 2013 called, "Human Rights in the Malian conflict since 2012. Stop abuses: a key to build peace", organised by François Alfonsi, Jean-Jacob Bicep and Franziska Brantner (Greens/EFA group), with the participation of Human Rights Without Frontiers, Amnesty International, Plan International, Save the Children, The International Federations of Journalist and the ARVRA (Association des Réfugiés et des Victimes de la Repression en Azawad), we expressed serious concerns regarding the evolution of the situation of human rights in Mali if a balanced political agreement is not reached very soon between the political movements of Azawad and the Malian central power.

- An appeal is being made to the international community, to the European Union and in particular to France, to promote the outcome of a long-term political solution in response to Azawad aspirations of autonomy expressed by the population in northern Mali, which would be able to solve underdevelopment problems and guarantee the respect of the rights of minorities.

- A total transparency of the information is essential and it must be taken into account that the freedom of information for all journalists, national or international, has to be guaranteed by the European Union.

-All the victims of abuses have to be taken account of and the perpetrators must be pursued and condemned. Azawad's populations have been suffering repression for 50 years. Today, there is evidence that the Malian army has carried out abuses which have been denounced by NGOs and independent observers during the French and African interventions and some of them have been committed recently.

There are still within the Malian army, even in some of its heads of executive, many elements which do not respect human rights. It also uses armed militias, called "self-defense groups".

The numerous testimonies regarding that situation are alarming. The guarantee of the respect of human rights and the bringing to justice those who committed abuses are a core question for the months and years to come. It has to end with the handing over of prisoners to the Malian authorities until we can be sure that they will be treated in accordance with international standards, and that the Malian army have been forced to break its contact with militias, called "self-defence groups".

-Like in other parts of Sahel, the practice of slavery by ancestry in northern Mali by many ethnical groups is a reality that we must fight. If the issue of slavery is not solved, there will be no long-term settlement on the issue of human rights violation, in accordance with international standards. This precise point will also have to be part of the process of negotiation for a strong and lasting peace in Mali.

-Whilst the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) was launched last March 2013, whilst the French army was militarily dominating the territory after having forced terrorists and drug-traffickers out of the territory, the responsibility of the European Union is committed each time abuses occur on Malian territory.

-The conditional help criterion of the European Union to Mali is an essential tool for the resolution of this conflict. For this help to be productive, we need a real guarantee for it to be equally distributed throughout the whole territory. It must benefit the population of north Mali: those who suffered most of the damages in recent times.

-The European Union has to finance, as quickly as possible, a mission of human rights observation in northern Mali and in neighbouring areas where Azawad refugees have been forced to move. This mission should be totally independent, with total freedom of investigation in the whole territory and should be led by international NGOs.

**François Alfonsi, Jean-Jacob Bicep, Franziska Brantner,
Members of the European Parliament
Greens/EFA Group
European Parliament**

Hearing on Mali in the European Parliament tells a sobering tale of violence and human rights abuses

By Martin Banks for *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (18.03.2013) - A hearing hosted by **MEP François Alfonsi** in the European Parliament on 17 June presented alarming evidence of widespread violence and abuse perpetrated against minority populations in northern Mali. The session included grisly and sobering video clips that documented torture and gross ill treatment of prisoners in the Malian conflict.

Claire San Filippo of Amnesty International said that there was also "credible" evidence that French troops in Mali may have handed over prisoners to armed forces or government authorities "knowing they would be tortured or ill-treated." If proven, this would constitute a violation of international law.

She also told the hearing that Amnesty had compiled evidence that children had been detained with adults in the same prisons, again a breach of international law.

"This is very worrying and gives rise to serious concern," said San Filippo, executive officer of Amnesty's EU office in Brussels.

The hearing comes amid fresh concern about recent alleged human rights violations in Mali and the upcoming planned partial withdrawal of French troops. Since January, about 4000 French troops with the help of Malian and West African soldiers have gained control of the vast desert region's main towns and cities. France will still have between 3000 and 3500 troops on the ground when nationwide elections are held at the end of July.

France plans to gradually hand over to the Malian army and a 12,600-strong UN peacekeeping force, which is due to deploy next month and incorporate the 6000 West African soldiers already in the country. France, the former colonial power of Mali, intends to keep 1000 troops in the country to work alongside the UN force to tackle further militant threats.

San Filippo said that despite the French intervention the situation in Mali remained "dire" with indiscriminate shootings and arbitrary arrests of suspects by government forces. Abuses have also been carried out by armed groups, she said, with child soldiers being sent to conflict frontlines and forced to manage checkpoints and carry weapons.

Since January 2013, Amnesty International has documented 20 cases of executions or "enforced disappearances" and has spoken to 80 detainees who have claimed to have been tortured.

The parliamentary hearing was organised by the Greens/EFA group in the Parliament in collaboration with **Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)**, a leading Brussels-based NGO.

Mark Barwick, policy advisor at HRWF, who moderated the three-hour debate, said there had recently been an "alarming descent into violence and human rights violations" in Mali. He told the meeting that the crisis in the country was "far from over" and there were "credible reports" of fresh human rights abuses.

Opening the debate, **French Greens/EFA MEP Francois Alfonsi** said that Mali had moved from a military emergency to a humanitarian and human rights crisis, one which could spread to other parts of Africa. He said, "It is very worrying because the situation is deteriorating. It is like a fire that, unless it is contained, may spread to other parts of the African continent."

"We are at a very crucial point in the Malian conflict and it is vital that the European Union is fully engaged," said Alfonsi.

The concern, he told the packed discussion, is that worsening human rights violations in Mali could inflame neighbouring regions in the coming weeks and months. "What happens in Mali can have a direct impact on other parts of the continent and can give new hope to the rest of Africa. But the continued worsening of the conflict will only give rise to a humanitarian disaster."

He also cautioned that the EU's African policy was on the line, adding, "It is clearly important that the current situation is addressed for the sake of the Malian people.

"But we in Europe should also be alarmed. The EU and donor countries have invested much in Mali and a failure of EU policy in Mali would be a disaster. We have to do all we can to protect EU's credibility in Africa."

Zakiatou Oualett Halatine of the Association of the Refugees and Victims of the Repression in Azawad (ARVRA) also spoke and showed a video tape displaying graphic scenes of torture against Malian civilians. Azawad is a term used to designate the northern territory of Mali, which had resisted inclusion into Mali since before the country's independence from France.

Halatine called for the establishment of "a governance model for the whole country," including an independent judiciary to deal with cases of human rights violations and compensation for victims.

In a session on media freedom in Mali, **Sadibou Marong**, based in the African regional office of the **International Federation of Journalists**, said there was an "absolute necessity" to guarantee the rights of journalists to operate freely in the country. He cited the example of French freelance journalist Dorothee Thienot of L'Express, who had uncovered evidence of mass graves and then subsequently subjected to "moral and psychological abuse" by the Malian military. Thienot was given 48 hours to leave the country.

French photo journalist **Benoit Schaeffer**, recently on a three-week assignment in Mali, outlined current health and educational conditions in Kidal, a large city in northern Mali. "There was no drinking water and only two hours of power a day. The school teachers are not paid and the number of students has fallen from 1500 to just 300."

Another speaker, **Kimberly Brown, advocacy adviser for Save the Children**, said that abuses suffered by children in such conflicts are often overlooked. She also highlighted the "big gap" which exists in the monitoring of such abuses, which include rape and early and forced marriages.

Didier Young of the NGO Plan International provided a synthesis of the earlier presentations and addressed the significance of next month's elections. Young, who has 30 years' experience working in Africa, said that "the elections are necessary to establish the rule of law, but it is important to stress that they are only a first step." The wider and more difficult project, he said, was to reconcile the north-south division in the country.

The lively debate that followed was concluded by **French Greens MEP Jean Jacob Bicep**, who pointed out the practice of slavery that persists in the region and undermines Mali's development. "Slavery has been abolished," he said, "but in Mali thousands of people are still being sold and trafficked. The international community, including the EU, must address this issue."

Timbuktu artifacts destroyed in Northern Mali fighting

The Huffington Post (11.06.2013) - Fighting in Mali has destroyed or damaged many religious artifacts and buildings in Timbuktu, an ancient Islamic learning center, local experts and a United Nations team have reported.

"The destruction caused to Timbuktu's heritage is even more alarming than we thought," said Lazare Eloundou Assomo of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, the cultural agency that surveyed the historic city May 28 – June 3.

The team found that 14 mausoleums, including some listed among UNESCO's World Heritage sites, were completely destroyed, while parts of the Djingareyber Mosque, built around 1327 with straw, wood and limestone, were also destroyed.

More than 4,200 historic manuscripts were lost from the Ahmed Baba Institute, named after one of Timbuktu's most revered scholars, while another 300,000 were evacuated, mostly to Bamako, and "are in urgent need of conservation," according to Eloundou Assomo.

Founded in the 5th century along the southern edge of the Sahara Desert, Timbuktu grew into a major intellectual and Islamic learning center that once had 11 universities.

"They're important because they help document a sophisticated, educated civilization that existed," said Okolo Rashid, executive director of the International Museum of Muslim Cultures in Jackson, Miss. which has a permanent collection of Timbuktu manuscripts and artifacts. "The U.N. understands the importance of preserving this history."

Al-Qaida-linked militants and their erstwhile Tuareg allies occupied Northern Mali after pushing out Malian government forces in January 2012. The conflict turned about 400,000 people into refugees, and left thousands of others dead.

Malian forces regained control of most of Mali earlier this year with the help of French forces.

U.N. officials have estimated it will take at least \$11 million dollars to help restore and preserve what has been damaged and what remains.

Soldiers torture detainees in Léré

Accelerate deployment of gendarmes in conflict zones

HRW (February 2013) - The use of torture by the very soldiers mandated to restore security in northern Mali will only make a difficult situation worse. The Malian government should promptly and impartially investigate these and other allegations of abuse or face an increasingly unaccountable military and deepening communal tensions. Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher

The government of Mali should investigate allegations that Malian soldiers tortured seven suspected supporters of Islamist armed groups in Léré, near Timbuktu, Human Rights Watch said today.

The seven men, all of whom showed visible signs of torture, described to Human Rights Watch being beaten and kicked, burned, injected with a caustic substance, and threatened with death while in army custody between February 15 and March 4, 2013. One said he was subjected to simulated drowning akin to "waterboarding."

"The use of torture by the very soldiers mandated to restore security in northern Mali will only make a difficult situation worse," said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The Malian government should promptly and impartially investigate these and other allegations of abuse or face an increasingly unaccountable military and deepening communal tensions."

All of the seven detainees were ethnic Tuareg men between the ages of 21 and 66 who said that soldiers had detained them in or near the animal market in Léré after they went there from nearby villages to sell their cows. Two were detained while hiding in a house near the animal market. All seven were taken to a house that appeared to be serving as

an ad hoc military headquarters. The Malian army had retaken Léré in late January as part of a French-led offensive to recapture northern Mali from Islamist armed groups.

The torture and other ill-treatment of the men caused lasting injuries, Human Rights Watch said. One man went blind in one eye after being clubbed in the face with a gun butt, while another had gone partially deaf after being kicked repeatedly in the head. Two of the men described being beaten until unconscious, one of whom later vomited blood and bled from his nose. Another suffered a broken or dislocated shoulder after being hurled to the ground while bound, while another said he suffered at least one broken rib. Most were hogtied – their wrists and ankles tied tightly behind the back – for hours at a time, in some cases for over 12 hours. All had scars on their wrists from the tight cords and two had lost movement and feeling in one or both arms, suggesting possible nerve damage.

The military appeared to be torturing the men as punishment for suspected support for Islamist armed groups, Human Rights Watch said. While they were not formally interrogated while in military custody, the men said that on a few occasions there were informally questioned about alleged associations with armed groups, including while being mistreated. On March 5, the men were taken from Léré to Markala, 265 kilometers away, where they were photographed with Kalashnikov assault rifles, ammunition, motorcycles, and other alleged proof of their association with armed groups. The men denied any such association and said the arms and other items were not theirs.

All described being subjected to persistent death threats. The only language most of the men spoke was Tamashek, the Tuareg language, which the soldiers did not speak, thus the death threats were communicated through gestures. The soldiers would frequently run a finger across their neck and, on a few occasions, sharpen knives in front of the room in which the men were detained.

The detainees said that after they were transferred to the custody of the Malian gendarmerie on March 5, they were well-treated and had been receiving regular medical attention. They are undergoing further interrogation and have not had access to family members or legal counsel.

Human Rights Watch has previously documented numerous incidents in which Malian soldiers had detained without basis members of Tuareg, Arab, and Peuhl ethnic groups because of their alleged support of Islamist and Tuareg armed groups. Two of the Léré detainees told Human Rights Watch that they were aware of possible targeting by Malian soldiers, but believed they could safely go to the market because French soldiers were reportedly also in the town.

“It is in the interests of every government involved in Mali to ensure that all abuses cease and those responsible are appropriately punished,” Dufka said. “Doing nothing in the face of reports of torture should not be an option.”

A 31-year-old detainee told Human Rights Watch:

We had heard about the Malian soldiers doing bad to Tuaregs and know they suspect us, but what are we to do? We live in camps (*campements*) far from any towns and had no other choice but to sell our animals to survive. That day I felt confident both because I have proper identification papers and my brother in Timbuktu told me the French are always with the Malians.... That’s why I took the risk to come to Léré that day.

The abuses in Léré were documented during a Human Rights Watch research trip to Mali from March 11 to March 23. Other findings of human rights abuses will be made public in the coming weeks.

"Transferring the seven men tortured in Léré to the gendarmes appears to have eased their immediate plight, but not the concerns about the lawfulness of their detention," Dufka said. "They should be released if there is no basis for holding them and compensated for their injuries."

Accounts of Torture and Other Ill-Treatment

One of the detainees told Human Rights Watch that in the middle of the night he and another co-detainee, both of whom had been hogtied, were taken out of their cell by soldiers, who hurled them onto the ground "like we were bags of rice," breaking or dislocating his shoulder. After the man was hit and threatened with death, another soldier ordered the soldiers to return the detainees to their room.

Two of the men told Human Rights Watch that on February 16 soldiers injected their wrists with an unknown caustic substance that over the next several hours produced blisters then progressively "ate through" their skin. The soldier used the same needle to inject both men. One man, 36, told Human Rights Watch:

After selling two cows for 315,000 CFA (US\$620), I headed to the market to buy provisions before returning to my village. On the way a friend warned me the soldiers were arresting Tuaregs so I ran to hide in a friend's house until they passed. But they saw me, dragged me out and immediately started kicking me with their boots and beating me with the butts of their rifles. While on the ground, one of them slammed my head with his gun, hitting my right eye. ...The pain was so severe I passed out.

I came to while being dragged along the ground after my hands had been bound with my turban. The next day near sundown a soldier came in, took my arm and injected a substance. I thought it might have been for the pain. ... I didn't speak his language so couldn't ask him. Then he injected my friend who was sharing the cell with me. It started blistering and by the next morning had eaten my skin. I felt as if I would die from the pain.... All I want is to return to my village.

A detainee whose hands were bound behind his back said soldiers placed wadded-up paper and set it alight on his back. A soldier held him down while he tried to shake off the burning paper. He told Human Rights Watch:

My hands were tied and they made me lie on the ground. I saw them twisting up paper which they put on my upper back and set on fire. ...I tried to move left and right to shake it off as it burned my skin but they held me down.

Two other detainees said they were burned on their ears with a cigarette lighter.

One man, a 30-year-old driver, said that he was subjected to a mock execution similar to "waterboarding" that simulates drowning. He said:

They told me to crouch down, slammed my head hard against a wall, pulled it back then grabbed a bucket of water and poured it down my nose and into my mouth.... While doing this they asked me, "Tell us what job you were doing with them and why you had money on you."

Four of the men described being robbed of the money from the sale of their cows. A 66-year-old trader told Human Rights Watch that he had sold 32 cows and the soldiers had taken 3,300,000 CFA (\$6,520) from him while he was in custody.

"They beat me, and kicked me in my face and back [and] one struck me in the neck," he said. "As I was passing out from the beating I was aware of them sticking their hands in my pockets, pulling off my clothes. ...The money is nowhere to be seen." Soldiers

allegedly stole another 1,440,000 CFA (\$2,845) from the other men.

Human Rights Watch urged the Malian government to:

- Investigate and prosecute in accordance with international fair trial standards members of the security forces implicated in torture and other abuses in Léré, regardless of rank, and including those liable under command responsibility for their failure to prevent or prosecute these crimes.
- Accelerate redeployment of gendarmes, the police and Justice Ministry personnel to towns and villages in northern Mali, particularly those in which there are ongoing military operations, notably in and around the towns of Gossi, Gourma-Rharous, and Bourem.
- Ensure that everyone taken into custody during military operations is treated humanely, is promptly brought before a judicial authority to ensure the legality of their detention, and is able to contact their families.
- Establish a 24-hour telephone hotline, staffed by relevant Malian authorities and personnel from the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) for victims and witnesses to report violations, including by members of the state security forces.

Malian women raped, stoned, lashed and forced to marry amid intense fighting

Alert Net (11.02.2013) - When armed Islamist fighters arrived in the northeastern Malian village of Haribomo near Timbuktu, one of the first things they did was sip sweet tea with the local imam. They then told him how they expected the village women to behave.

"The Islamists met with the imam and they said, 'Let us tell you our rules,'" said Adane Djiffiey Djallo, a coordinator at Aide et Développement au Mali, a Timbuktu-based non-governmental organisation. "They said women would no longer be allowed to go to work, to the market or wash in the river." But the imam turned to the Islamists and said: "Let me tell you my rules".

He explained many women headed up households or had jobs of their own while their husbands worked on farms. "I can't stop you forcing them to cover their heads – but I won't allow you to ban them from carrying out their daily activities'," the imam said, according to Djallo.

At first, the women of Haribomo were relieved.

Tuareg fighters from the Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL) had seized Haribomo and other parts of northern Mali following a March 2012 military coup that plunged the previously stable West African state into chaos. But better-armed and wealthier Islamist groups had chased Tuareg fighters out of town.

Under the Tuareg occupation, there were cases of gang rape and an increase in forced marriage. The Haribomo women hoped things would improve.

But the Islamists brought Sharia law, with its brutal punishments such as lashing and stoning. They forced the women of Haribomo to cover up from head to toe and they

outlawed sex before marriage – only to commit acts of sexual violence against the women themselves.

Report cites hundreds of cases

Fatoumata Cisse, a teacher from Gao, said the daughter of a friend was forced into marriage with a member of Mujao – the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, an Al-Qaida splinter and one of the five groups of Islamist fighters present in northern Mali.

“He forced her to have sex with him, and when she became pregnant, he told her she must name the baby Mujao,” Cisse told AlertNet. “Fortunately, he was gone before the baby was born.”

Cisse's story is one of hundreds of accounts of sexual violence emerging in the wake of the French and African intervention to liberate northern Mali.

There have been at least 200 cases of forced marriage and sexual violence – including against men – since March 2012, according to the Gao-based non-government organisation GREFFA, citing a report by the U.N. Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. GREFFA saw the report but it has not been made public.

Meanwhile, a joint initiative by U.N. Women and GREFFA has collected the testimonies of 52 girls and women who suffered gender-based violence in the towns of Gao and Menaka since April last year.

Tuaregs are main aggressors

But while there are credible accounts of violence carried out by Islamist fighters, most of the testimonies cite Tuareg rebels as the aggressors, said GREFFA director Fatimata Toure, who has been hearing from victims and documenting cases of sexual abuse.

“In Gao, members of the MNLA took girls as they walked along the streets, or lifted them from their own homes and drove them to the abandoned barracks of the Malian army,” said Toure.

“We heard how they were sometimes handcuffed and locked inside rooms there – for 48 or 72 hours – and raped collectively by as many as four men at a time,” she added.

Toure said the worst atrocities were committed in Menaka, a dusty town in the shadow of the Ader Douchi hills in northeastern Mali.

“We heard how a daughter was raped together with her mother, while her father was tied down and forced to watch. Girls under 12 years old were attacked, as were women over 60. One woman lost an eye when the rapist beat her,” said Toure.

Sexual violence carried out by members of the MNLA mostly targeted women and girls from the noble Songhai and slave caste Bella ethnic groups. Although wealthy Tuaregs use Bella women and girls as slaves and servants, Toure said there were few acts of sexual violence against them before March.

After the Malian army fled from the Gao area, the MNLA no longer had an enemy to fight so they turned on the local population, Toure explained.

"Many of the young men who committed these acts didn't grow up in Mali – they are Tuareg men who spent their formative years fighting in the conflicts in Chad and Libya," she added.

There have also been cases of women and girls being sexually attacked by men speaking Hausa, the predominant language of northern Nigeria. Media reports and witnesses say the Islamists have recruited Nigerians to their cause.

Islamist atrocities

While fewer cases have been reported of sexual violence carried out by Islamist groups, Toure said she had heard the testimonies of a number of women and girls who had been attacked by Islamists.

"In January, an 11-year-old girl was raped by a man fighting alongside them (the Islamists). We've heard several cases like this, usually carried out by young men recruited locally by Islamist groups."

"They imposed Sharia law, giving punishments of lashes to girls who had sex before marriage, yet their fighters got away with sexual violence. It's hypocrisy," she added.

Corinne Dufka, Human Rights Watch's Senior West Africa Researcher, said she had heard two or three credible accounts of sexual violence linked to the Islamists. "These merit further investigation," she said.

Dufka added that while forced marriage in northern Mali is not a new phenomenon, accounts of girls being forced to marry more than one man are particularly worrying.

"The rate of forced marriages increased when the MNLA came to town," said Cisse, the teacher from Gao, who told how a Tuareg man forced a neighbour's daughter to marry him. He paid a high bride price and took the woman to her new home – but four men were waiting there to rape her. "She was tricked," said Cisse.

Witnesses say the Tuaregs often paid a bride price first, perhaps as a show of power or financial clout.

Help for survivors

The Tuaregs have vowed to support the French intervention and the Malian army against Islamist groups, but with so many reports of sexual violence committed by them, rights experts and NGOs are voicing concern.

"Nobody can trust the MNLA men now," said Djallo. "How can they fight for our stability in Mali when they unleashed such chaos?" she said. "They came to our homes to drink tea, to celebrate marriages and holidays ... Then suddenly they were destroying the hospitals, raping women, carrying weapons through the streets."

Some of the survivors have said they plan to stay in Bamako, where they can more easily forget the violence. Others may return to the north if military operations bring calm.

A trauma centre for the survivors of gender-based violence and other conflict-related abuses has been set up inside the main hospital in Gao, but recovery won't be easy.

"We documented the case of a woman who gave birth to twins fathered by a rapist," Toure said. "The babies have light skin – it's obvious that they are Tuareg children. She'll have to deal with the shame inflicted by the community, and yet the children are a part of her too. What if they want to find their father one day?"

Despite the taboo associated with rape in northern Mali, some women are pursuing justice against their aggressors. Dozens have agreed to document their stories with Toure and have lodged official complaints with police in Bamako. In the midst of the French intervention, there has not yet been any response.

"We hope that will change when things are calmer," Toure said. "Still, these women are brave. Launching an official complaint carries high stakes. If the community finds out you've been raped, you risk being alone for the rest of your life."

Militant Islamists in northern Mali have publicly killed a man accused of murder

BBC News (03.10.2012) - A crowd of at least 100 people in Timbuktu watched a firing squad shoot the man, according to eyewitnesses.

Northern Mali has been overrun by Islamist and Tuareg rebels following a coup in Bamako in March.

This public killing is being seen as the latest demonstration by Islamists of their intention to impose their strict interpretation of Sharia law.

One local witness told journalists the man was a member of the ethnic Tuareg rebel group, the MNLA.

The MNLA is a former ally of the Islamist groups (including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) that have seized control of the north - but Islamists have now turned against the secular group.

They have since imposed Sharia law in many of the areas under their control, despite strong opposition from the local Muslim population.

Intervention

"He turned himself in... He was judged, condemned to death and executed this evening.

"He was shot in the same way he shot his victim. This is what Sharia says," Sanda Ould Boumana, a spokesman for the rebel group Ansar Dine which controls Timbuktu, was quoted by Reuters news agency as saying.

In recent months, the Islamists have also stoned to death a couple accused of adultery, and carried out several amputations.

The UN Security Council is to hold "preliminary" talks on Thursday over Mali's request for the UN to back military intervention in the north.

"There seems to be some understanding that the situation in Mali cannot continue as it is, something has to be done.

"But what has not been clarified is who does what, what the scale of this operation is, what it is going to look like, what are the budget implications," the Guatemalan ambassador to the UN, Gert Rosenthal, said in a statement on Tuesday.

The US has said it would support an African-led force, as long as Mali's neighbours backed the idea.

Unwed couple stoned to death by Islamists

BBC via WUNRN (30.07.2012) - A couple who allegedly had sex outside marriage have been stoned to death by Islamists in the town of Aguelhok in northern Mali, officials say.

The man and woman were buried up to their necks, then pelted with stones until they died.

The northern half of Mali has been overrun by rebels - Tuareg and Islamist - following a coup in Mali's capital.

Aguelhok in the region of Kidal was one of the first to be captured by Tuareg separatist rebels.

The Islamists in Aguelhok stoned the couple to death in front of about 200 people, officials said.

"I was there. The Islamists took the unmarried couple to the centre of Aguelhok. The couple was placed in two holes and the Islamists stoned them to death," a local government official told the AFP news agency.

"The woman fainted after the first few blows," he said, adding that the man had shouted out once and then fallen silent.

'Invaders'

A Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali triggered a military coup in March and in the ensuing chaos Islamist groups seized control of several towns in the north.

There has been international condemnation of the Islamists for destroying centuries-old shrines to saints revered by Sufi Muslims in the ancient city of Timbuktu.

Mali's interim President Dioncounda Traore on Sunday evening called for talks with the militants.

He made the call in his first national address two days after returning from two months in France, where he was treated for injuries sustained when he was beaten by supporters of March's coup.

Mr Traore said he would lead talks to form a unity government in Mali and would spearhead efforts to open dialogue with Islamists.

Malians should unite against "invaders", he said, referring to foreign jihadis who are allegedly operating in the north.

"Given the complexity of this crisis and the extent of the distress of our people from the north... we must together, I say together, clear the path ahead to free our country from these invaders, who only leave desolation, deprivation and pain in their wake," Mr Traore said.
