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Near Timbuktu, a Fragile Calm Follows Unrest

by Nancy Palus

DAKAR — Calm has returned to Goundam, in Mali's Timbuktu region, after the armed group Ansar Dine brought in reinforcements and rounded up people following demonstrations on Saturday.

Residents say their only options are to flee or to submit to the commands of Ansar Dine - which is bent on imposing a version of Islamic law far more severe than Goundam's Muslim population is accustomed to.

Following the demonstration by Goundam residents on Saturday, Ansar Dine leaders called the imam and other elders of Goundam to come to the nearby city of Timbuktu for talks.

Mali's Timbuktu region is controlled by Ansar Dine, one of the armed groups that seized the northern two-thirds of the country in late March. The region's population - nearly all lifelong Muslims - has watched in shock as Ansar Dine has destroyed ancient shrines and flogged people in public.

One Goundam resident who took part in the talks with Ansar Dine said the armed group expressed indignation at the protest in Goundam - particularly the fact that youths tore up Ansar Dine's flag.

Requesting anonymity, the Goundam native said Ansar Dine told the traditional and religious leaders to talk to residents and urge them not to rise up as they did on Saturday, during which demonstrators vandalized some buildings used by Ansar Dine and reportedly took some arms and munitions.

Residents told VOA that Ansar Dine detained and beat about 90 people following the unrest. The people were later released, after local leaders talked to Ansar Dine.

"Ansar Dine was intensely angry about the uprising," said the Goundam resident who was at the meeting in Timbuktu. "They warned that in order to avoid an even harsher crackdown, the local leaders must call for calm in Goundam and urge people to act according to the strict version of Islamic law that Ansar Dine imposes."

He said the people of Goundam have no choice in the face of Ansar Dine's orders. "We don't constitute an opposition force. We don't have an army. We don't have a state. We're pretty much defenseless."

Residents of Goundam told VOA people have two choices: submit to Ansar Dine or flee.

Aboubacar is a 19-year-old resident of Goundam. He said he knows of some young people who fled south after the latest protest. He said people are afraid and are unlikely to rise up again, having seen Ansar Dine bring in reinforcements and detain and beat people.

But a Timbuktu native now based in the capital Bamako said he does not expect everyone in Goundam to remain quiet. He said some youths from the region see this as only the beginning of a people's revolt.

A resident of the northern city of Gao, which is controlled by another armed group - MUJAO - told VOA following Saturday's uprising in Goundam: "The uprising you saw there - eventually you're going to see it everywhere in the north."

Goundam youth Aboubacar says the people want help from the outside. "We want either the Malian army or the regional bloc ECOWAS to come and liberate us. We can't take this anymore."

ECOWAS is considering military action to take back northern Mali from the Islamists. It is currently awaiting a formal request from Mali's interim government, and approval by the United Nations Security Council.