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Mali faces 'human rights chaos'

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The army continues to wield huge influence behind the scenes

Mali risks sliding into "human rights chaos", Amnesty International has warned.

The army has been involved in extra-judicial killings, torture and sexual abuse since staging a coup in March, it says, demanding an investigation.

The military has since handed power to a civilian-led interim government, but it still wields enormous influence.

Mali was split in two following the coup, with the north controlled by Islamist and Tuareg rebel forces.

Meanwhile, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has visited 79 military personnel held by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) rebel group, it said.

The visit was intended to relieve months of isolation for prisoners, ICRC Mali head Jean-Nicolas Marti is quoted by the AP news agency as saying.

'Cigarettes in ears'

In a report following a visit to Mali, Amnesty said it had met a police officer who alleged that he had been arrested and sodomised on the orders of soldiers.

"We were four. They asked us to undress completely. We were ordered to sodomise each other. Otherwise they would execute us," the officer is quoted by Amnesty as saying.

At least 21 soldiers have been missing since they were arrested for allegedly trying to stage a counter-coup in April, Amnesty said.

It added that prisoners were forced into making confessions after being tortured – their hands and feet tied were tied, a cloth was stuffed into their mouths and cigarettes were extinguished in their ears.

"These vengeful acts fly in the face of Mali's international human rights obligations and action must be taken to ensure the military junta doesn't continue to operate with impunity," Amnesty said.

The military staged the coup after accusing the government of failing to quell a rebellion in the north.

But the Tuareg rebels and militant Islamists took advantage of the chaos following the coup and captured large parts of the north.

Militant Islamists have destroyed ancient shrines in the city of Timbuktu, ignoring warnings by the UN and other groups that they were committing war crimes