

## **Mali Islamists amputate hand of suspected thief**

Thu Aug 9, 2012 By Reuters

By Adama Diarra

BAMAKO (Reuters) - Islamist rebels have cut off the hand of a suspected cattle thief in Mali, an insurgent leader said on Thursday - the first case of amputation under sharia (Islamic law) imposed by insurgents controlling the country's desert north.

Witnesses told Reuters a large crowd gathered in a square in the village of Ansongo, about 100 km (60 miles) from the regional capital Gao, pleading in vain with the MUJWA rebel group to spare the man.

"Yes, our men cut off the hand of a thief after a judgment based on supporting evidence. They did it according to sharia," Aliou Toure, a top MUJWA figure in Gao, told Reuters by telephone. The amputation took place on Wednesday.

MUJWA, which is suspected of having links with al Qaeda's North African wing, is one of several Islamist groups and separatist Tuaregs that seized control of northern Mali in April, after a coup in the capital Bamako sapped the government's ability to counter them.

Before the crisis, Mali had a reputation as a rare example of a stable democracy in a tumultuous region.

Sanda Ould Boumama, spokesman for the al Qaeda-linked Islamist group Ansar Dine, told Reuters on Thursday that imposing sharia in Mali was not negotiable.

"I can't confirm (the amputation in Ansongo) for the moment, but what could be more normal? When you steal we cut off your hand, there is nothing more normal," he said by telephone.

Abdel Moussa, a local tea vendor in Ansongo, said a large crowd of men, women and children watched Wednesday's amputation in horror after pleading with MUJWA figures to stop.

Malian youths in Gao clashed with Islamists earlier in the week over a separate plan to amputate the hand of an accused robber, forcing MUJWA to delay the punishment.

Ansar Dine publicly stoned a couple to death in the remote town of Aguelhok in late July after they were accused of engaging in extramarital affairs.

### **DESERT LAUNCHPAD FOR ISLAMISTS**

Regional and Western governments fear that desert northern Mali could become the next launchpad for international Islamist attacks, as Afghanistan was more than a decade ago, and efforts are under way to organize a joint intervention force.

Regional mediators, including Burkina Faso Foreign Minister Djibril Bassole and the president of the High Islamic Council in Mali, Mahmoud Dicko, are also trying to negotiate with the rebels to end the crisis.

Mali's interim government condemned the amputation as a "despicable act" and reiterated its support for an international force to help take back the north.

U.N. chief Ban Ki-moon warned on Wednesday that Mali was becoming a safe haven for "terrorist and criminal" groups.

The 15-nation West African bloc ECOWAS is pushing for the U.N. Security Council to back deployment of a 3,000-strong intervention force to restore stability in the capital and strengthen Mali's defeated military to help it retake the north.

ECOWAS has intervened militarily in past African conflicts such as the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Ban also wants the Security Council to consider imposing "travel and financial sanctions against individuals or groups in Mali engaged in terrorist, religious extremist or criminal activities."

The conflict in Mali has displaced more than 400,000 people and compounded a food crisis affecting millions across the Sahel region, according to the United Nations.

(Additional reporting by Tiemoko Diallo in Bamako and [Michelle Nichols](#) at the United Nations; Writing by [Richard Valdmanis](#); Editing by Tim Pearce)

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