

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, December 8 (Infosplusgabon) - Amnesty International has urged the authorities in Burkina Faso to tackle violence by local self-defence groups, investigate alleged torture by police and protect women and girls at risk of early and forced marriages.

The human rights group was making a submission to the country's UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR), according to a statement on Thursday.

The UPR report, "Burkina Faso: difficult journey towards human rights respect," assesses the country's human rights framework and calls on the government to address wide-ranging impunity for human rights abuses.

"From torture in police custody to killings of protestors, our research shows that Burkina Faso still has a long way to go in tackling impunity," said Gaetan Mootoo, Amnesty International West Africa researcher.

"If the government wants to send a clear message that it is committed to strengthen the respect of human rights in Burkina Faso, these issues must be satisfactorily addressed immediately."

Known under the local name of 'Kogleweogo', self-defence groups have been formed in many rural communities in response to growing insecurity in parts of the country.

Amnesty International said this year they have continued to commit abuses – including unlawful killings and inhuman treatment - despite a decree adopted in December 2016 regulating community policing.

It said in January, self-defence groups tortured to death a man suspected of stealing a chicken. In May, six people - including two civilians - were killed when the 'Kogleweogo' clashed with the population of the central west region of the country.

The report said over the past two years, self-defence groups have obstructed the course of justice in order to protect their members and prevented trials in at least two towns. Across 2016 and 2017, just two members were charged over killings, representing a fraction of those serious human rights abuses committed.

During the previous UPR, Burkina Faso claimed that torture and other ill-treatment do not exist in the country. However, in the past three years, Amnesty International says it has collected testimonies from more than 40 prisoners who say they have been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment by police, usually at the time of arrest or while in police custody.

One man said he had been tortured every day for a month. Others said they had been beaten to extract confessions, with some being held for up to 36 days before being charged.

During the 2013 Universal Periodic Review, Burkina Faso accepted seven recommendations to end early and forced marriage. However, rates of early and forced marriage in the country remain among the highest in the world, the report said.

Amnesty International said in the course of the last three years, dozens of women and girls have said that they were victims of early and forced marriage, including a 13-year-old girl who walked more than 160km over three days to escape being forced by her father to marry a 70-year-old man who already had five wives.

Early and forced marriages have a negative impact in women and girls' health, lives and access to employment and education, and international law requires that governments prohibit and prevent them, the report said.

In February 2016 the Burkina Faso government promised to increase the legal marriage age for girls to 18, this has not yet been implemented.

“Authorities publicly promised last year that putting an end at early and forced marriage will be a priority for the new government. It is now time for these words to be put into action by reviewing the Family Code and enshrining their commitment in law,” said Gaetan Mootoo.

“Authorities still need to make further and clear progress by undertaking information and education campaigns to raise awareness of the harm to the victims of early and forced marriage and the cost to society,” said Gaetan Mootoo.

The report said despite the removal of financial barriers to accessing maternal health services in March 2016, the latest available data indicate that there are 371 maternal deaths for every 100,000 births in Burkina Faso, and at least 2,700 women die in childbirth each year.

The previous UPR also raised concerns about violence against women in Burkina Faso, and the authorities accepted eight recommendations to adopt laws to eliminate it.

In September 2015, a law was adopted on the prevention, punishment and reparation of violence against women and girls and support for victims. This includes promising measures to establish help centres for female victims of violence, which offer legal, psychological and clinical support. However, to date only one center is in operation.

Amnesty International said Burkina Faso's human rights record was last reviewed in April 2013 with 138 recommendations accepted. These included prohibiting early and forced marriage and adopting specific legislation to combat violence against women.

A draft of a new constitution submitted for approval contains several articles which would strengthen the protection of human rights in the country, including the abolition of the death penalty. As of 31 December 2016, 12 people were on death row in the country.

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