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Ivory Coast rebels 'not informed' about discovery of mass graves

ABIDJAN, Aug 3 (AFP) - Ivory Coast's rebel New Forces said Tuesday they knew nothing about a UN report of three mass graves discovered in the north containing the bodies of 99 people, many of whom appeared to have been suffocated.

"We did not receive this report; what we know is that there were clashes on June 20 and 21, there were deaths and those victims were buried," New Forces spokesman Antoine Beugre told AFP.

"There has been no commission of inquiry convened to shed light on these events," he added. "Until now, no one has notified us of such accusations."

The UN operation in the divided west African state revealed Monday that the mass graves were discovered in the northern town of Korhogo, a stronghold of the rebels who have held Ivory Coast's north since their failed coup against President Laurent Gbagbo in September 2002 plunged the country into civil war.

The gun battles in late June between rival rebel factions had purportedly left 22 people dead, both in Korhogo and the central town of Bouake, once Ivory Coast's second city but now a desolate rebel stronghold.

The firefights began with a late-night attack on June 20 by "heavily-armed elements" on a convoy traveling from Burkina Faso to Korhogo carrying rebel leader Guillaume Soro, the leader of the New Forces and a recently-reinstated minister in Ivory Coast's unity government.

Further clashes ensued in Bouake between followers of Soro and those of coup-plotter Ibrahim Coulibaly, known as IB.

A spokesman for IB alleged from Paris on Tuesday that Soro's troops engineered the massacre in the north to dispose of any opponents to his regime.

"The existence of these mass graves prove that UN peacekeepers must be deployed rapidly around the country, both in the north and the south, to ensure the protection of all people," Vincent Rigoulet told AFP.

According to the ONUCI report, based on a recent visit to the area by a UN human rights team of inquiry, some of the victims were killed by gunshots and, "according to reliable witnesses, others were suffocated."

ONUCI insisted that the rebels had been informed of the intended mission, along with religious and traditional leaders both before and during the inquiry.

In its report it said that the investigators had "consistently collaborated" with rebel leaders in pursuing its inquiry.

Rights watchdog Amnesty International called Monday for the immediate publication of the UN team's findings, following reports that some of the victims were beheaded and that other bodies were discovered with their hands tied behind their backs.

Amnesty also charged that people had been locked into containers and suffocated before they were buried in the mass graves by supporters Soro.

Soro represented the rebels at a marathon UN-sponsored summit in Ghana last week aimed to revive a moribund French-brokered peace pact signed last year to reunite divided Ivory Coast, the world's top cocoa producer.

The accord mandated a return to government of opposition ministers and set a detailed timetable for political reform and disarmament of all paramilitary and militia forces still carrying weapons in Ivory Coast.

The 12 heads of state and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan warned of consequences for all sides should they fail to fall into line, including the threat of sanctions and prosecutions in front of international judicial bodies -- such as the International Criminal Court -- for human rights violations should they fail to comply.

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