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# Enforced disappearances as a means of repression by military authorities in West Africa

The military regimes in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger are working to silence any criticism of the authorities in power. To suppress dissenting voices, the defence and security forces regularly resort to enforced disappearances and unlawful detentions, as confirmed by Amnesty International's latest [Annual Report](#).

Since 9 July 2024, two Guinean activists from the National Front for the Defense of the Constitution (Front national pour la défense de la Constitution, FNDC), a movement calling for a return to constitutional order, have been victims of enforced disappearances. Mamadou Billo Bah and Oumar Sylla, also known as 'Foniké Menguè', were abducted from the latter's home on the eve of a day of protests against the high cost of living and advocating for a return to civilian rule. According to the testimony of Mohamed Cissé, another activist arrested with them and released two days later with serious injuries, they were taken into detention to a location somewhere on the archipelago of the Îles de Los, off the coast of Conakry by elements of the defence and security forces. The authorities deny detaining Mamadou Billo Bah and Oumar Sylla, and their fate remains unknown to this day.



**The worst can happen to victims during this out-of-control journey.**

## **Instilling fear in civil society**

The defence and security forces of West African military regimes target civil society members perceived as opposed to the powers that be through enforced disappearances and unlawful detentions. Following an identical pattern, journalists, judges, lawyers, activists, and human rights defenders are abducted off the street, from their homes, or from their places of work by armed men, who may or may not present themselves as representatives of the State. Loaded into unmarked vehicles, usually blindfolded, they are then detained and interrogated for days, weeks, or even longer.

This is done illegally, outside or in violation of any legal procedure. No arrest warrant is issued. The authorities deny any involvement or provide no information about the fate of the abductees. These people's families and lawyers do not receive any news. We sometimes end up learning that people were being held in informal detention sites, such as the offices of the security services. The worst can happen to victims during this out-of-control journey, and it is fear that the defence and security forces are seeking to instil in civil society.

## **The list of missing and unlawfully detained people continues to grow**

Among other examples, Guy Hervé Kam, a lawyer, co-founder of the political grassroots movement Le Balai Citoyen, and national coordinator of the Sens political movement was unlawfully detained in Burkina Faso for five months in 2024. In March 2025, five other members of the Sens bureau, which had denounced the civilian massacres during the armed conflict, were abducted by armed men dressed in civilian clothing whom, according to witnesses, posed as members of the security forces. The authorities have remained silent on the subject despite calls from the movement. Four journalists and columnists, Serge Oulon, Adama Bayala, Kalifara Séré, and Alain Traoré, also known as 'Alain Alain', were abducted in June and July 2024. In October 2024, the authorities, who previously had not provided any information on how they are doing, announced that they had enlisted the first three in the army on the basis of a general mobilization decree. The fate of the fourth abductee remains unknown to this day.

In Niger, the fate of journalist and blogger Samira Sabou remained unknown for a week in September 2023 following her arrest at her home. The lawyers of Moussa Tchangari, Secretary General of the Alternative Citizen Spaces (Alternatives Espaces Citoyens) organization, who was unlawfully detained, did not know where he was being held until two days after his arrest when their client was transferred into police custody.



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In Mali, Ibrahim Nabi Togola, president of the opposition party New Vision for Mali (Nouvelle vision pour le Mali, NVPM), was abducted in December 2024 by suspected state security agents and his fate remained unknown until his release 45 days later. In Guinea, journalist Habib Marouane Camara was abducted on 3 December 2024 by armed men identified by witnesses as gendarmes. His family has not heard from him since.

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## **Justice at the forefront to safeguard the rule of law**

Enforced disappearances and unlawful detentions often end with the victim being transferred to the police to initiate fabricated legal proceedings. They can take a more dramatic turn in Burkina Faso, involving the targeted enlistment of detainees into the army, sometimes to face armed groups at the front. This was the case for several civil society players and journalists, notably Guézouma Sanogo and Boukari Ouoba, president and vice-president of the Association of Journalists of Burkina Faso (Association des journalistes du Burkina Faso, AJB), who had

publicly denounced the increasing number of attacks on press freedom, and the journalist Luc Pagbelguem, of the private TV channel BF1, who had broadcast these condemnations. Their families did not hear from them for a week after their arrest on 24 March 2025, and then a video showing them in military attire was circulated on social media networks.



## **The judiciary must also continue to play its role in investigating enforced disappearances.**

Amnesty International continues to call on the authorities in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger to put an end to these enforced disappearances and unlawful detentions.

In the face of this arbitrariness and the fear of members of civil society of being next on the list of the disappeared, the judiciary must also continue to play its role in investigating enforced disappearances, putting an end to unlawful detentions, and protecting people's rights.

This is what several judges in Burkina Faso have courageously done by ordering the immediate release of lawyer Guy Hervé Kam. In July 2024, the Guinean Bar Association called for the release of Oumar Sylla and Mamadou Billo Bah, boycotting the hearings for several days. Courts have also condemned arbitrary detentions in Mali and Niger. These actions have put members of the justice system concerned in the crosshairs of the authorities. At least five Burkinabè magistrates were enlisted in the army in 2024 after working on cases involving the authorities or some of their supporters.

Despite the untenable pressure, the justice system in these countries must continue to stand up against the illegal actions and authoritarian practices of the military authorities. Increased support from the international community for the justice sector in these countries is essential. The survival of the rule of law is at stake, and possibly the survival of the many people who are still unaccounted for.

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