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Thursday, October 15, 2009

Amnesty International wants probe of JTF shootings in Rivers

From Kelvin Ebiri, Port Harcourt

AMNESTY International has urged both federal and Rivers State governments to promptly investigate all deaths and injuries resulting from the use of firearms by police and the Joint Task Force (JTF) against protesting inhabitants of Bundu waterfront, Port Harcourt, which is slated for demolition.

The international rights group advocated that security operatives suspected of excessive use of force should be prosecuted in accordance with international standards, without recourse to death penalty.

Amnesty Africa Press Officer, Eliane Drakopoulos, also urged the Federal and state governments to ensure that security agencies only use force in a manner that complies with international human rights law and standards. Amnesty pointed out that the intentional use of lethal force was only permitted where strictly unavoidable in order to protect life and not on unarmed peaceful protestors.

"Amnesty International condemns the excessive use of force by some members of the security forces in Bundu waterfront community, Port Harcourt, Rivers State on October 12. At least three people were killed and 11 seriously injured when combined troops of the Joint Task Force (JTF) and police used firearms to disperse a crowd," Drakopoulos said.

The group suggested that evictions should not be carried out until all other feasible alternatives had been explored, genuine consultations taken place with the affected communities and appropriate procedural protections put in place.

Drakopoulos said that many of those facing forced eviction claimed that the state government's consultation on the planned eviction was not adequate. The Rivers State Government had announced that it would compensate only the owners and not tenants or owners of buildings constructed without permission.

According to UN Habitat, at least 200,000 people will be affected if the state government goes ahead with demolishing all waterfronts.

Government authorities, accompanied by armed soldiers and police officers, went to Bundu community on Monday to assess the value of structures earmarked for demolition.

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Protesters confronted the soldiers and police, demonstrating against the intended demolitions and blocking their entry into the community.

In the process, two armoured vehicles drove into the crowd. The soldiers and police officers then began firing. Most fired into the air, while stray bullets reportedly struck nine persons.

About 23 persons were arrested and brought to Magistrate's Court 4 in Port Harcourt on Tuesday, according to Amnesty International, where they were charged with conspiracy, breaching the peace of the community and destruction of public property. They have since been remanded in Port Harcourt Prison.

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