

Mali asks international court to investigate alleged war crimes

By: The Los Angeles Times

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JOHANNESBURG, South Africa -- Mali's government has requested the International Criminal Court to investigate possible war crimes by Tuareg and Islamic rebels who seized the north of the country in recent months.

The International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, said Wednesday that Malian authorities had asked the court in The Hague to investigate whether people should be charged for crimes committed.

"I have instructed my office to immediately proceed with a preliminary examination of the situation," she said.

Her statement came as the International Crisis Group, an independent think tank, warned in a report Wednesday that a coup in January that deposed Malian President Amadou Toumani Toure and the capture of the north by rebels soon after posed a crisis for the country while threatening regional stability and security.

With a power vacuum in Bamako, the capital, the think tank warned that the prospects for a negotiated settlement were rapidly receding.

But it urged against military intervention by Mali's neighbors, which have put a force of about 3,000 soldiers on standby. It said military intervention would set northern tribes against one another, undermining any chance of peaceful coexistence. It would also expose West Africa to retribution and terrorist attacks by radical Islamic rebels from their bases in Mali.

Rebels who mounted an uprising in January have been accused of rapes, killings and destruction of world heritage sites, including ancient tombs.

Last week there were reports that the Al Qaeda-linked Ansar Dine rebels, who have begun imposing a strict version of sharia, or Islamic law, in the north had destroyed tombs at the famous Djingareyber mosque in Timbuktu.

The International Crisis Group report called on regional leaders to take action to ensure that terrorists didn't get a foothold in Mali, turning the region into a new front in the war on terrorism.

It said the Tuareg rebels who initially mounted the rebellion, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, had been outflanked by Ansar Dine, which has links with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a group responsible for kidnappings and killings of Westerners.

"The latter [group] is responsible for kidnapping and killing many Westerners in Mali, Niger and Mauritania, attacks against the armies of the region and involved in criminal transborder trafficking. Northern Mali could easily become a safe haven for jihadi fighters of all origins," the report warned.

"Considered for 20 years a model of democratic progress in sub-Saharan Africa, Mali is now on the brink of sheer dissolution," the report said.