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Togo; Official Inquiry Says 154 Died in Political Violence

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A much-awaited official probe into the political violence that rocked Togo earlier this year says 154 people were killed and 654 hurt, and calls on the government to punish those responsible.

"Those who carried out and ordered these acts of violence must be charged," said the 90-page report issued Thursday after a more than four-month-long inquiry in which the eight-member committee interrogated more than 1,800 people.

Set up in May on the orders of then newly-elected President Faure Gnassingbe, the National Commission of Inquiry placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the government, political leaders, the army and the police and in a series of proposals called for a sweeping overhaul of the country's institutions and practices.

Among those questioned by the commission were some of the almost 30,000 Togolese who fled to escape persecution in the wave of violence that shook the country spanning the death 5 February of its leader of 38 years, president Gnassingbe Eyadema, to the disputed April election of his son, Faure Gnassingbe.

A separate United Nations inquiry released in September estimated that 400 to 500 people had been killed when the opposition took to the streets to protest that Gnassingbe's election had been rigged. Scenes of urban warfare subsequently unfolded as armed militia and security fought the rioters.

Asked to comment on the difference in figures, the head of the National Commission of Inquiry said its work had produced a list of names while the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights had produced an estimate.

"They went over the facts but we carried out investigations, we went further to determine the figures and estimate the damages," said former prime minister Joseph Kokou Koffogoh. The probe assessed damage at almost four billion CFA francs (almost US \$7 million).

Speaking at a news conference, Koffogoh also said the commission had gathered together the names of those responsible for the violence and damage but was keeping the lists hidden in different places "in case some people are tempted to attack us."

"Those guilty must be charged and tried but it is not up to the commission to release their names," he said.

The report blamed the government "for failing to prevent and stop attacks on lives" while also noting that state-owned vehicles were used to transport armed militia telephones were cut making "it impossible for people to call for help."

Turning to acts of violence perpetrated by security forces, the report said officers had been seen breaking into private homes in reprisal against opposition members and egging on militia members to act with brutality against suspected opponents.

The commission also reprimanded electoral officials for failing to properly revise electoral rolls and hand out voting cards, whipping up the opposition's fears of electoral fraud.

But the opposition was also severely chastised for what the commission described as "a strategy of conquering power by deliberate violence disregarding the disastrous consequences."

While the members of the panel placed some of the onus for the unrest on years of poverty and growing unemployment in this country of almost five million people, it proposed sweeping change to favour a climate of national reconciliation.

The government needed to disarm militia groups and keep political parties free of arms while the army needed to open up and ensure that it represented all of Togo's 40-odd ethnic groups while placing more emphasis on peace-keeping and human rights.

The report also called for new electoral lists and cards to fight fears of election fraud and shore up confidence in the democratic process.

It was released as the Rome-based Saint'Egidio Community this week hosts talks between the ruling Rally of the Togolese People (RPT) and the main opposition party, the Union of Forces for Change (UFC).

Increased national dialogue is one of the preconditions for the return of European donors to Togo.

[This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations]

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